

SMALL CITIES THAT NEVER WERE

The semi-arid hinterland of South Africa has time and again seen budding cities rise and disappear into dust. Nicholas Clarke investigates the demise of a few examples.

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Mapungubwe needs little introduction. It flourished between approximately 1075 CE and 1300 CE. It remains unclear why the city was abandoned – the pastoralists finding greener pastures northwards and in so doing founding Great Zimbabwe – but climate change is now thought to be the main culprit.

The capital of the BaTlhaping at Dithakong was first described by Europeans Borchers and Sommerville in 1801–3 (Somerville, Bradlow, & Bradlow, 1979). They estimated that the city contained 1 500 dwellings and between 8 000 and 25 000 inhabitants. This was of similar size to Cape Town of the day (Beaumont, 1983: 1). Dithakong itself was located on the site of an earlier city, hence its name which means ‘the place of the ruins’.

The Difaane/Mfecane brought an end to this great city. Upheavals in the interior of the country were fuelled by a number of factors, climate change – the end of the Little Ice Age – being one of them. Tribes were pitted against each other for dwindling resources and, to add insult to injury, colonial expansion, possibly spurred by the same circumstances, added fuel to the fire. Colonists took advantage of the instability. When the BaTlhaping and the Korana (De Kock, W. J. 1974. In *SESA*, Vol.10: 265–266) came into conflict in 1882, Boer mercenaries joined the fray on both sides. Land was granted to them as payment, which they declared the Republic of Stellaland (1882–1883), with Vryburg as their capital.

Early colonists, Voortrekkers, soon established trading

posts such as the one at Zoutpansbergdorp, founded 1848, later called Schoemansdal. The reasons for settling here permanently were mainly due to resources: ivory and salt. It later became notorious as the centre of the local illicit (by British standards) arms trade. The Voortrekkers abandoned the town in 1867, after discord over taxes brought about an armed uprising by the Venda (Bulpin, 2001: 679).

Gold, and not ivory, held the promise of fortune for the later C19. The Knysna forest was the scene of a short-lived gold rush, from 1886 to 1890, focused on a shanty town called Millwood (Bulpin, 2001: 394).

Further north, the first real gold rush centred on the highlands of the Lowveld. Barberton was thought to hold such promise that the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) Department Publieke Werken (Public Works Department), led by émigré architect Sytze Wierda, prepared many designs for the town, including a suspension foot-bridge and elaborate government offices, the latter never to be built. Other mushrooming gold towns too received ZAR Government investment. Venterskroon, located in what is today the Vredefort Dome World Heritage Site, still boasts its ZAR-period magistrate’s court building, dating to 1889, still its most prominent structure. Yet one cannot today call it a town, let alone a city.

Our last ‘forgotten city’ is Ottoshoop. Once again, gold brought an estimated 100 000 people to this inhospitable plain, all in search of fortune. The strike was made in 1887 and what followed was the largest claim-staking race in South African history (Bulpin, 2001: 837; Anon. In *SESA*, Vol. 8: 404). The ZAR foresaw the growth of a large city, and a large town was laid out to the design of a certain Gilfillan. Here it was not the lack of gold which doomed the town; it was the abundance of water. The area was situated in a flood plain and over larger aquifers. The primitive pump technologies of the times could not keep the mines dry and when news broke of a new gold strike, the miners left for the Witwatersrand.

The ZAR Government was in no mood to spend money on a new town plan for the latest boom-town and Gilfillan’s plan (Bulpin, 2001: 837), somewhat altered, was rolled out at the new diggings – today Johannesburg. ■

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