Southern African Humanities **32**: 1–22 February 2019 KwaZulu-Natal Museum

# Mapungubwe's hinterland: excavations, ceramics and other material culture from Mutamba in the Soutpansberg

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ABSTRACT

Mutamba is a 13th-century Iron Age settlement located in the Soutpansberg of South Africa and is contemporary with Mapungubwe, southern Africa's earliest socially complex polity. This article presents information on excavations conducted in 2010 and 2011. The ceramic assemblage is considered in detail since it has implications for understanding the regional ceramic sequence and interactions at the site. The ceramic assemblage is dominated by vessels typologically attributable to the Mapungubwe facies, but also contains several vessels from the Eiland and Mutamba facies. This material is discussed in the context of the social and political backdrop of 13th-century South Africa, which shows that Mutamba formed part of the Mapungubwe polity's dynamic hinterland.

KEY WORDS: Mapungubwe, Mutamba, ceramics, Middle Iron Age, hinterland, interaction, Soutpansberg.

Mutamba is a 13th-century settlement located on the northern slopes of the Soutpansberg range in South Africa's Limpopo Province (Fig. 1). The site represents one of the southernmost settlements with ceramics attributable to the Mapungubwe facies. This style is widely associated with the Mapungubwe polity centred on the eponymously named site located at the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo Rivers (Fouche 1937; Gardner 1963). In addition to the prevalence of Mapungubwe ceramics, several vessels from the Mutamba and Eiland facies—both stylistically distinct from the Mapungubwe material—were present in the assemblage. This assemblage therefore offers an opportunity to investigate interactions between different stylistic communities that comprised the 13th-century social landscape. Mutamba's location, material culture and clear links to Mapungubwe also make it an important site from which to study trade and more general patterns of interaction during this important period of South African history. As a result, this paper provides data on material culture such as shell, glass and metal beads (including a single gold bead), copper and iron objects, marine shells and faunal remains. This repertoire of objects not only elucidates the broader aspects of life at settlements in the Mapungubwe hinterland but also illustrates how hinterland communities actively participated in the regional economy through the production and consumption of local and long-distance trade goods.

The heartland of the Mapungubwe polity, as used here, is the larger Shashe-Limpopo confluence area. Heartlands are typically those areas that are characterised by concentrated "communal social energy and interaction" and so form regional nexus for "political, economic, demographic, or devotional" activities (Duff & Schachner 2007: 185; also Trigger 1972). In contrast, hinterlands such as the northern Soutpansberg are "areas that are socially or spatially peripheral" to the heartland (Duff & Schachner 2007: 185), but display clear links of participation in the regionally expansive polity. Despite their 'peripheral' status, hinterlands were not secluded backwaters, populated by an undifferentiated and isolated peasantry (Lightfoot & Martinez 1995; Stein 2002; Duff & Schachner 2007). Instead—as the evidence from Mutamba shows—our understanding

ISSN 2305-2791 (online); 1681-5564 (print)

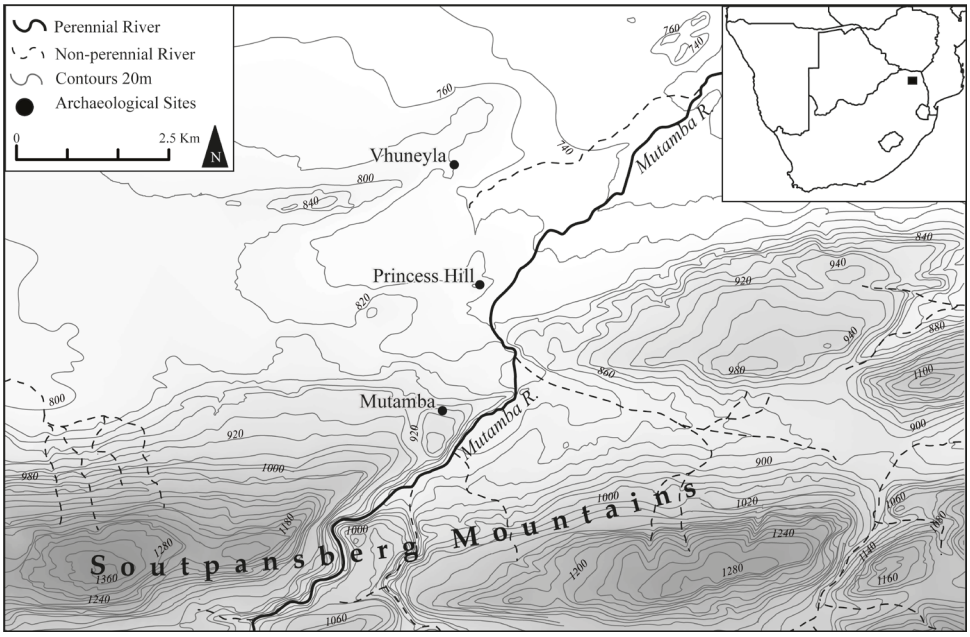


Fig. 1. Regional map indicating the location of Mutamba and other northern Soutpansberg sites mentioned in the text.

of heartlands like that of the Mapungubwe polity must be contextualised within its wider social network, which included far-flung hinterland communities (cf. McIntosh & McIntosh 1984).

## BACKGROUND

The Mutamba settlement, approximately 1.2 ha in size, lies on a saddle of an east–west running ridge on the southern portion of the farm Prince's Hill 704MS (Fig. 2). The site was initially identified and excavated by Loubser (1991) in the 1980s, with more substantial excavations carried out between 2010 and 2011 as part of research on social and political interaction during the 13th century (Antonites 2012).

The ridge on which the site is located is rocky, with pockets of poorly developed shallow sand derived from weathering of the surrounding sandstone and quartzite. Beds of fine-grained, deep-red aeolian Kalahari sand occur on the ridge's northern base. Directly to the south of the site, the ridge drops down steeply to the Mutamba River (c. 250 m away), with the massif of the Soutpansberg 5 km beyond. To the north, the site overlooks the plains that stretch between the Soutpansberg and the Limpopo River, roughly 80 km away.

Portions of the site's surface are overgrown with buffalo grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*)—a common feature of archaeological deposits in the region (Denbow 1979: 197). The vegetation around the site is mainly *Adansonia digitate-Acacia nigrescens* of the Soutpansberg Arid Northern Bushveld (Acocks 1975). Several large baobabs (*Adansonia digitata*) grow on the boulders around the site. Drought is the main driving force behind the composition of plant species in this vegetation type, as most species are adapted to water scarcity and unpredictable rainfall patterns (Mostert et al. 2009).

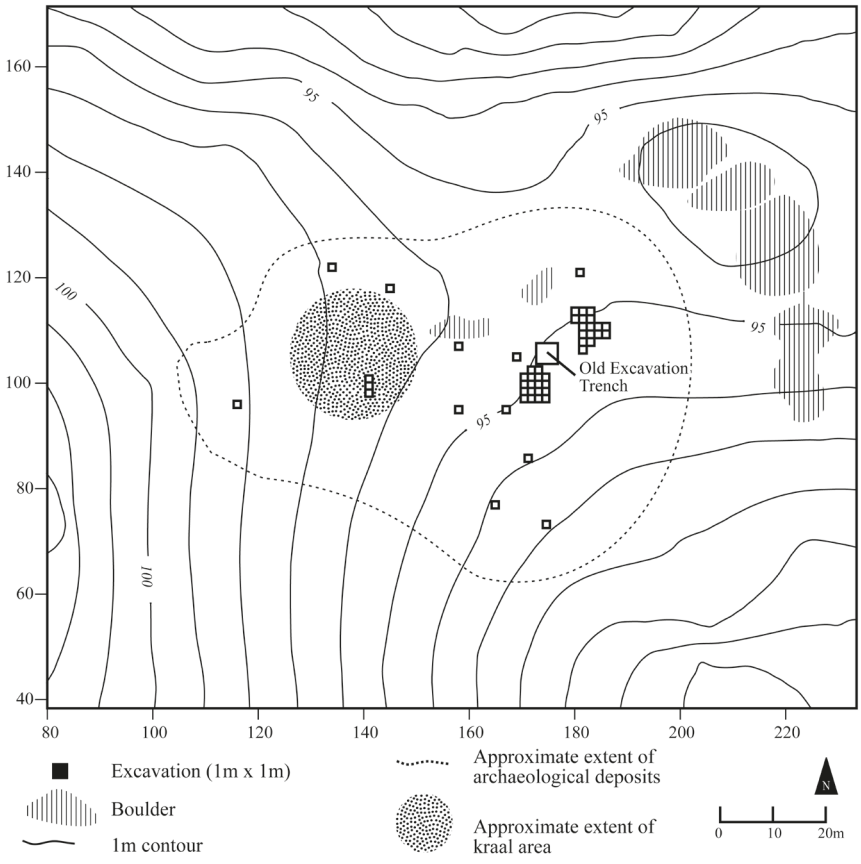


Fig. 2. Site map of Mutamba indicating site layout and excavated areas.

*Previous research*

Loubser's (1991) initial excavations consisted of a single 3×3 m square in the central area of the site. Loubser also conducted interviews and consulted with local communities, but failed to link the settlement to any known ancestors or existing oral traditions. There are a few roughly built, low walls to the east of Mutamba, suggestive of a small post-1700 settlement (cf. Loubser 1991). Material associated with this occupation was confined to the surface levels. Although no radiocarbon dates were submitted from these initial excavations, Loubser did identify five strata associated with four ceramic horizons. The earliest occupation was associated with 13th-century Mapungubwe ceramics, followed by an occupation with Mutamba/Eiland ceramics, a 15th-century Moloko layer, and finally the most recent layer with post-18th century Letaba ceramics.

## 2010–2011 EXCAVATIONS

During 2010 and 2011, Mutamba was re-excavated as part of my PhD research. Initial excavations concentrated on exploring the site's stratigraphy and spatial context by means of fourteen randomly distributed 1×1 m test units (see Antonites 2012 for

TABLE 1
Radiocarbon dates from Mutamba Dates calibrated against 2013 southern hemisphere curve (Hogg et al. 2013)

| Feature | Layer | Lab. number | $^{14}$C age BP | Context description | 1σ calibration AD | 2σ calibration AD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | III | AA-96452 | 692±35 | Midden | 1296–1386 | 1287–1393 |
| | IV | AA-96451 | 834±35 | Fill | 1222–1270 | 1187–1283 |
| | V | AA-96455 | 862±35 | Clay floor | 1202–1266 | 1161–1275 |
| | V | AA-96457 | 803±35 | Courtyard floor | 1230–1281 | 1212–1296 |
| 2 | III | AA-96458 | 842±35 | General midden-like fill | 1218–1269 | 1182–1280 |
| | IV | AA-96454 | 832±38 | Burnt hut remains | 1222–1271 | 1184–1285 |
| 3 | III | AA-96460 | 873±35 | Layer of burnt dung and ash | 1181–1263 | 1155–1274 |

details). A second phase of excavations focused on exposing architectural and other spatial features through larger aerial exposure of deposits. These larger excavation areas were referred to as Features 1, 2 and 3, and were excavated as contiguous 1×1 m squares. Deposits were excavated as individual loci, which were combined into distinguishable depositional events or layers. All items of material culture were collected and recorded *in situ* where possible. All excavated deposits were screened through 5 mm sieves. Ten-litre bulk flotation samples were collected from the centre of each locus, bagged separately, and floated off-site in a modified SMAP (Shell Mound Archaeological Project) flotation machine (Watson 1976). In instances where the matrix was especially ashy and/or rich in carbonised material, the entire locus was collected for flotation. All units were referenced to their coordinates on a local site grid, which was orientated to magnetic north with a centrally located datum as its reference point (N100; E100; Z100).

Wood-charcoal samples from Features 1, 2 and 3 were submitted for radiocarbon dating to the Arizona Accelerator Mass Spectrometry Laboratory (USA) (Table 1). The assays were analysed and calibrated using the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit's radiocarbon software, Oxcal version 4.3 (Bronk Ramsey 2009, 2013), and plotted against the 2013 southern hemisphere calibration curve (Hogg et al. 2013).

*Feature 1*

Feature 1 was a series of hut floors interspersed with midden deposits and excavated as a contiguous 18 m$^2$ area (Fig. 3). The northern extent of this excavated area was separated from Loubser's 1970s excavation by a one-meter baulk. Five layers were defined, which confirmed the stratigraphy Loubser initially described for this area of the site (Table 2).

The earliest deposits related to a household area that contained the remains of a mostly intact circular clay floor (Floor 1.4), an outside courtyard surface (Floor 1.5) and a small hearth. These features rested on sterile soil around 1.2 m below the surface. The

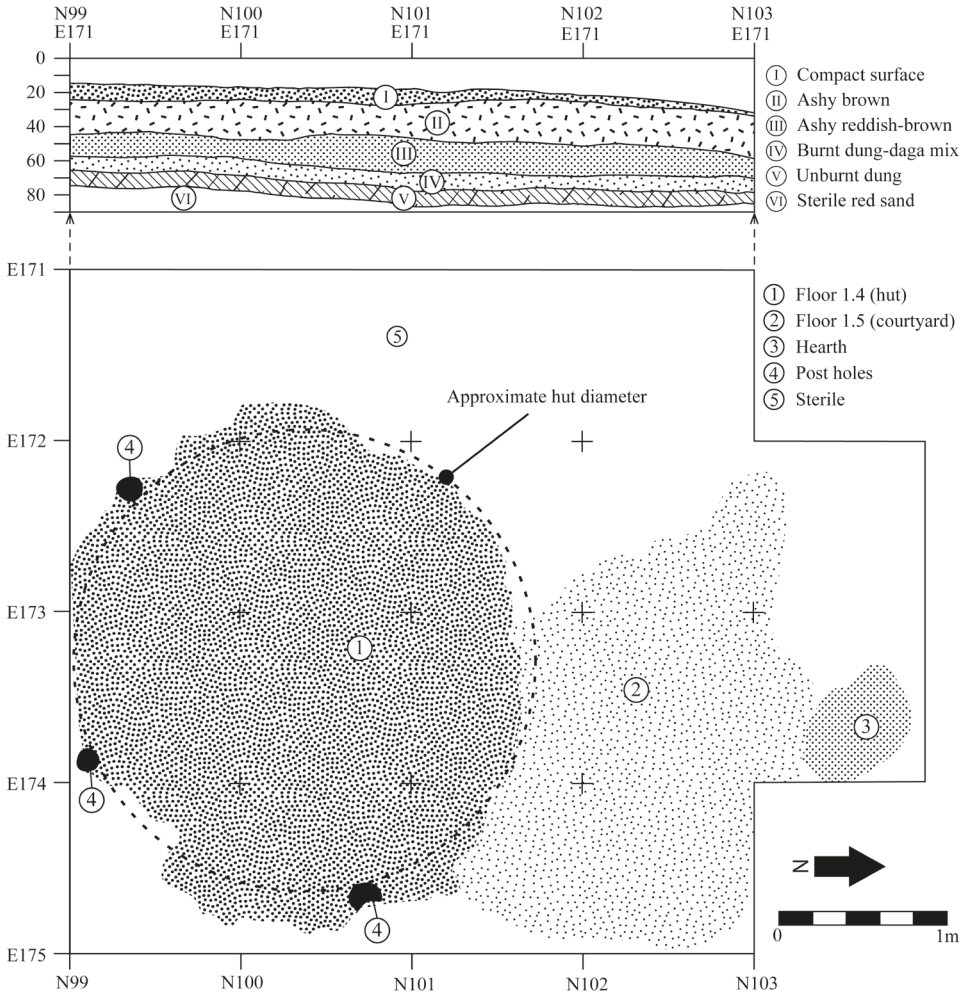


Fig. 3. Stratigraphy of Feature 1 and plan of Floors 1.4 and 1.5.

hut floor (Floor 1.4) was formed by compacted orange clay and was located directly adjacent to a thinly smeared clay-dung surface (Floor 1.5). This was likely a courtyard floor similar to ethnographic and historic examples of the region (Stayt 1968: 30; Van der Waal 1977: 90). Charcoal samples from the hut dated to cal. AD 1161–1275 (AA-96455) and the courtyard to cal. AD 1211–1280 (AA-96457). A small-stock enclosure (kraal) was erected over the remains of this initial hut. This event is visible as a single c. 5 cm-thick layer of brown dung (Layer V) in which desiccated dung pellets were still discernible. The shape and size of the pellets indicated that either goats or sheep were penned here.

The overlap in radiocarbon dates, deposit depth and lack of any accumulation of artefacts suggest that this small kraal was likely not in use for very long. Subsequently, a new hut (associated with Floor 1.3) was constructed in the same location. A radiocarbon date from this structure is calibrated to AD 1187–1283 (AA-96451).

TABLE 2
Summary of Feature 1 stratigraphy.

| | |
|---|---|
| Layer I | Surface layer; hard, compact ashy sand |
| Layer II | Dark-brown, ashy layer with several large rocks |
| Floor 1.1 | Fragmented clay floor |
| Layer III | Soft, loosely compact midden |
| Floor 1.2 | Fragmented gravel floor |
| Layer IV | Ashy, loosely compact matrix, pockets of burnt dung and burnt daga pieces |
| Floor 1.3 | Hard, orange clay floor |
| Layer V | Unburnt dung layer (small stock) |
| Floor 1.4 and 1.5 | Hard, orange clay floor |
| Floor 1.5 | Clay-dung courtyard floor |

The two subsequent strata (Layers III and IV) were both midden deposits with the interface separated in places by a gravel surface. Accurate dating of Layer III is difficult since the calibrated range for date AA-96452 covers roughly 100 years (AD 1287–1393). However, analysis of the ceramic styles does not suggest any major changes between Layer III and the earlier layers (Antonites 2012). Therefore, Layer III probably dates to the late 13$^{th}$ to early 14$^{th}$ centuries AD. The two most recent layers showed clear signs of disturbance and admixture with lower levels. No material from these layers was submitted for radiocarbon dating.

*Feature 2*

Feature 2 was a 17 m$^2$ excavation area that exposed the remains of a single hut on sterile soil, roughly 90 cm below the surface (Fig. 4). The original hut was set between boulders that formed part of the underlying bedrock (Table 3). The hut was visible only as the remains of a fragmented clay floor (Floor 2.1) covered by daga overburden and a thin layer of loamy clay (Layer IV), likely derived from the decomposition of the daga. The overburden and floor showed clear signs of burning.

Artefacts found in the soil close to the floor include two wound glass beads, pieces of wound iron bangle, shell beads and a single gold bead. It is unclear whether these items were directly associated with the occupation of the hut or formed part of later depositional processes. A radiocarbon date calibrated to AD 1184–1285 (AA-96454), together with the ceramics and glass beads, points to a 13$^{th}$-century date for the hut. This feature was covered by a uniform midden deposit (Layer III) and dated to cal. AD 1182–1280 (AA-96458). The two most recent layers were disturbed surface contexts and were not dated.

TABLE 3
Summary of Feature 2 stratigraphy.

| | |
|---|---|
| Layer I | Compact brown sandy surface |
| Layer II | Rocky layer with ill-defined gravel lenses and minor quantities of daga |
| Layer III | Soft brown loam with an ashy consistency mixed with some daga inclusions |
| Layer IV | Thin, loam layer covering Floor 2.1 and associated daga |
| Floor 2.1 | Floor surface daga overburden |

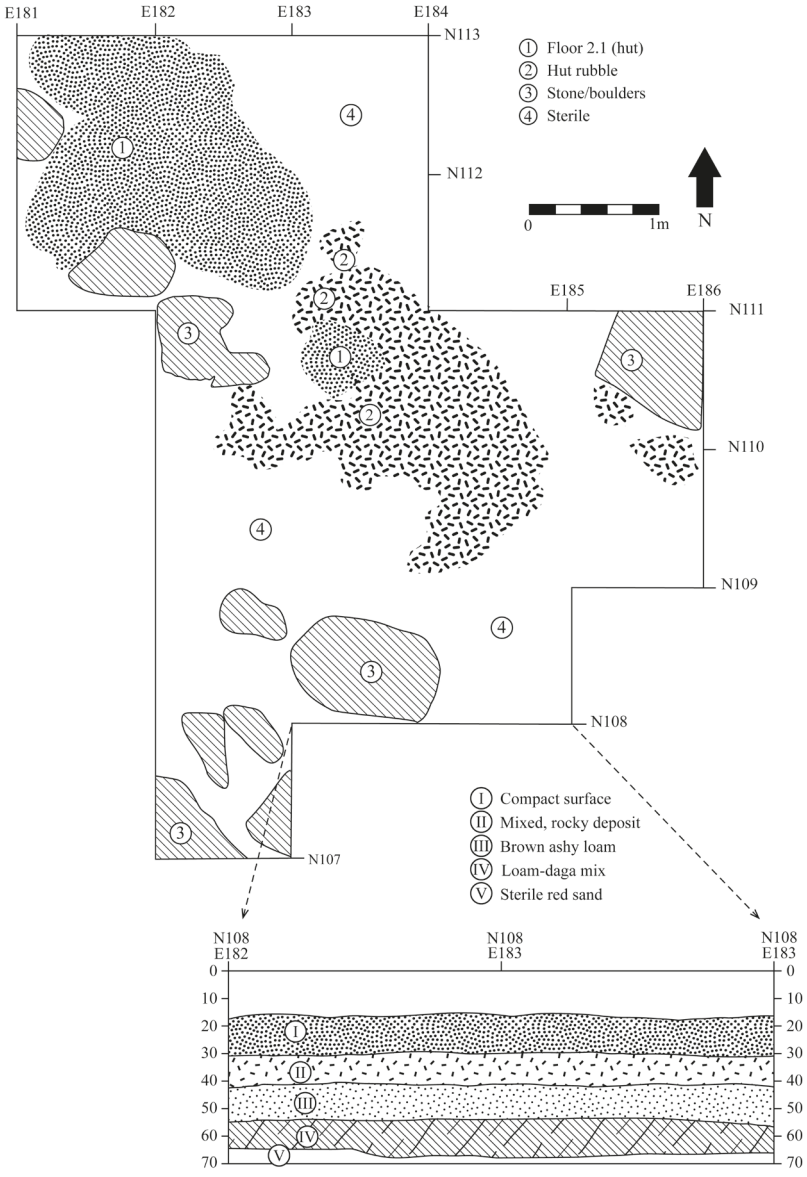


Fig. 4. Stratigraphy of Feature 2 and plan of Floor 2.1.

*Feature 3*

A 3×1 m excavation was placed over an area associated with a layer of burnt cattle dung in the centre of the site (Fig. 2; Table 4). In places, burnt dung pats were visible as pockets of consolidated grey ash. This dung layer lies on the original rocky surface and therefore likely dates to the earliest occupation of the site. A radiocarbon date on a single piece of charcoal (AA-96460) in the lower layers of the dung deposit was calibrated to AD 1155–1274.

TABLE 4
Summary of Feature 3 stratigraphy.

| | |
|---|---|
| Layer I | Dark-brown surface layer |
| Layer II | Dark-brown sand with relatively loose consistency |
| Layer III | Burnt cow dung |
| Feature 3.1 | Burial cut unto the shallow soil on top of bedrock. The pit is associated with Layer III |

A shallow grave was found in this unit, but the only remains from the interred body were a skull fragment and a finger bone identified in the subsequent faunal analysis. The grave was a shallow depression into the underlying sterile rocky surface, with no burial shaft visible in the stratigraphy. The poor preservation probably resulted from the shallow depth and from trampling by cattle during use of the kraal. The disturbed nature means that very little information regarding the burial itself could be determined, but it likely dates to when the kraal was in use, in the 13th century.

## METALS AND SMALL FINDS

Several categories of material culture were recovered from Mutamba. Detailed analyses of glass beads and spindle whorls appear elsewhere (Antonites 2014, 2019, and the following section provides a brief report on other items.

### *Artefacts related to metal production*

Material related to metalworking includes two small tuyere pieces and slag. In total, 214 individual pieces of slag were found with a combined weight of 1.8 kg. The slag was mostly small fragments with around 50% of the pieces weighing less than 10 g. The relatively small quantity of slag and high degree of fragmentation, and the fact that most fragments were from general midden contexts, suggests that these were more likely from smithing than from on-site smelting of ores.

### *Finished metal items*

The most common finished metal items on Mutamba were helixes (309 fragments). Helixes are spirally wound wire, originally twisted around a fibre core and worn as adornment around the ankle, wrist or neck (Miller 1996: 23). The majority were made from iron ($n = 195$)—all fragments with signs of heavy corrosion (Fig. 5). The base metals from the remaining objects are yet to be identified, but visually resemble cuprous material given their green corrosion.

Fourteen iron beads were also found (Fig. 5). These displayed a wide range of variability, with 95% of the sample varying between 3.6 and 5.5 mm in diameter, and with a width of between 2 and 3.8 mm. The joins of eight beads were annealed shut, four were closed with ends touching and two were indeterminate due to corrosion.

Other finished metal items included two flat iron bars with their ends turned over to form an eyelet. These objects resemble the top portions of items elsewhere identified as sweat scrapers (Miller 1996). A single piece of arced iron bar, 40 mm long, was likely a piece of a bangle. While several additional pieces of flat iron plate and bars were found, these proved too corroded to determine the shape or function of the original items.

*Gold bead*

A single gold bead was associated with the fill that covered Floor 2.1 (Fig. 5). The item was recovered from the heavy fraction of a flotation sample, has a diameter of 1.7 mm, and weighs 0.026 g. Miller (2001: 84) distinguished three types of gold beads at Mapungubwe: flat pieces of gold with a hole punched through, beads formed by a single strip of wire wrapped around to form an open join, and beads that had been ornamented by scoring or indenting grooves into the outside edges. The bead from Mutamba is of the second type—that is, formed by wire wrapped around a core. Gold items in southern Africa are rare, and during the 13th century were associated with Mapungubwe elites. For example, burials on the high-status hilltop area at Mapungubwe were discovered with thousands of gold beads visually similar to the Mutamba sample.

*Glass beads*

In total, 348 glass beads were excavated at Mutamba, and these are discussed in detail elsewhere (Antonites 2014). Most of the beads form part of the late 12th to mid-13th century Mapungubwe Oblate Series. The assemblage also includes four wound beads—a bead type comparatively rare in the region. Outside of Mapungubwe itself, the only other examples of wound beads are from hinterland sites beyond the Shashe-Limpopo heartland (Wood 2009; Antonites 2014).

*Shell beads*

Disc beads ($n = 556$) made from ostrich egg, freshwater mussel (Unionidae) and giant land snail (*Achatina* sp.) shells occurred throughout the deposits (Fig. 5). Of these, 550 were of ostrich egg, with one *Achatina* and two freshwater mussel-shell beads (the raw material of three beads could not be determined). The shell beads cover a wide range of diameter sizes (2.7–21.3 mm). Beads were produced by drilling a hole into a shell fragment and smoothing the edges. A typically reliable indicator of on-site bead manufacture is shell fragments with incomplete perforation. Angular edges may also suggest incomplete beads, but while most excavated beads are typically smoother and rounded, some with only slightly rounded edges have been found as finished products elsewhere (Wilmsen 2015). This does caution that the smoothness of a bead's edge is not necessarily reliable evidence of an unfinished product.

At Mutamba, beads that are likely still unfinished are rare ($n = 11$, a negligible quantity when compared to the number of finished beads). However, there is a comparatively large number of shell fragments in the faunal assemblage. While these show no clear signs of working, they could feasibly have been bead blanks. At best, current evidence suggests that shell bead production at Mutamba was a small-scale endeavour in contrast to large sites such as Schroda in the Limpopo Valley, where several grooved bead-grinding stones were found, as well as thousands of ostrich-eggshell bead blanks, drilled, strung, and ready for final rounding (Hall & Smith 2000: 36; Hanisch 1981). At Mutamba and most other sites, the evidence for shell bead production is much less pronounced.

*Marine shell*

Three types of marine shells were found. They include three cowries (*Cypraea* sp.)—from Features 1 (Layer IV), 2 (Layer III) and 3 (Layer III)—and two *Polinices mammilla*, associated with Feature 1 (Layer III and IV). The backs of the *Cypraea* shells were all


Fig. 5. Small finds from Mutamba. 1: Ostrich eggshell beads; 2: Ostrich eggshell fragments and potential bead blanks; 3: Corroded iron beads; 4–5: metal helixes; 6: Gold bead.

removed, a pattern typical of the cowries found elsewhere in the region (Gardner 1963; Tiley 2001; Raath 2014; Moffett 2017). Both the *P. mammilla* shells were perforated through the basal surface, which suggests that they had been strung. A single *Nassarius kraussianus* shell was also recovered from a test unit close to Feature 1. This shell had a smoothed dorsal surface, which suggests that it had been strung and worn.

All the marine mollusc species encountered occur naturally in coastal waters along the southern African and larger Indian Ocean coastlines. However, their occurrence 450 km from the nearest coastline clearly indicates the diverse range of objects in circulation during the 13th century (cf. Moffett & Chirikure 2016). The secondary depositional context hampers the interpretation of the shells but does provide additional information on the participation in long-distance trade.

*Spindle whorls*

Excavation recovered 178 spindle whorls—a number far higher than at any other site for this period (Antonites 2012). The density of whorls from Mutamba clearly points to intensive spinning of plant fibres at the site (Antonites 2019).

## FAUNAL ASSEMBLAGE

Parts of the faunal assemblage have been analysed as a student paper (Grody 2012) and ongoing PhD research (by C. Abatino, University of Salento, Italy). As a result, only preliminary results regarding the faunal record are discussed here.

Like many other Middle Iron Age (MIA) sites, the number of identified specimens (NISP) from the Mutamba faunal assemblage suggests that cattle (*Bos taurus*), sheep (*Ovis aries*) and goat (*Capra hircus*) were the most prominent contributors to the diet. Mutamba's occupants also utilised a diverse complement of wild species, most of which are also found at contemporaneous sites in the region (Voigt 1983; Plug 1989, 2000). Of these, zebra (*Equus quagga*) and impala (*Aepyceros melampus*) were the most numerous. Other bovid remains include red hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus)*, common duiker (*Sylvicapra grimmia*), klipspringer (*Oreotragus oreotragus*), steenbok (*Raphicerus campestris*), grey rhebuck (*Pelea capreolus*) and reedbuck (*Redunca* sp.). Other notable animals include tortoise (Testudinidae), porcupine (*Hystrix africaeaustralis*), several large to small bird species and hares (*Lepus* sp.). Large and medium carnivore species were also found and include cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*), mongoose (Viverridae), and dog (*Canis familiaris*). Primate bones—vervet monkey (*Chlorocebus pygerythrus*) and baboon (*Papio ursinus*)—were also found. The riverine resources of the Mutamba River were also utilised, as is evident in fish bones, and freshwater mussel and crab remains. A single ivory fragment (likely elephant tusk) hints at the potential exploitation of ivory resources for trade.

## CERAMIC TYPOLOGY

Creating the Mutamba ceramic typology was approached as a dialectic feedback between the individual vessel and previously defined types from the region (cf. Adams & Adams 1991: 60). The aim with this typology was to define descriptive types to communicate stylistic variation accurately, and to maximise the potential for comparison with extant regional typologies. The types presented here are therefore central tendencies based on internal variation within the type description. Types were created by the intersection of the attributes of shape, decoration placement and decoration motif—a standard method for southern African ceramic classification (see Huffman 1980).

Using the attributes from previously defined facies for the MIA, the assemblage was further classed into three separate facies: Mapungubwe, Mutamba and Eiland. As a result, emphasis is on diagnostically characteristic types, and is therefore primarily restricted to decorated jars. The exceptions included here are the shouldered bowls attributed to the Mapungubwe facies, and distinctive Eiland bowls decorated with herringbone and ochre-graphite combinations (see Antonites (2012) for a detailed presentation of the assemblage at the design-element level and its classification criteria).

### *Mapungubwe facies*

Vessels from the Mapungubwe facies were identified through comparisons with types from the Shashe-Limpopo confluence area, southern Zimbabwe and the Soutpansberg. Five types were identified from a total of 155 diagnostic fragments (Fig. 6). The most dominant vessel shape was recurved jars—necked vessels, with a spherical body and a height greater than their mouth diameter. Less frequent were bellied jars—vessels with a globular body and vertical neck profile. Decorations on these vessels show a significant degree of similarity in decorative motif, with the majority being either downturned

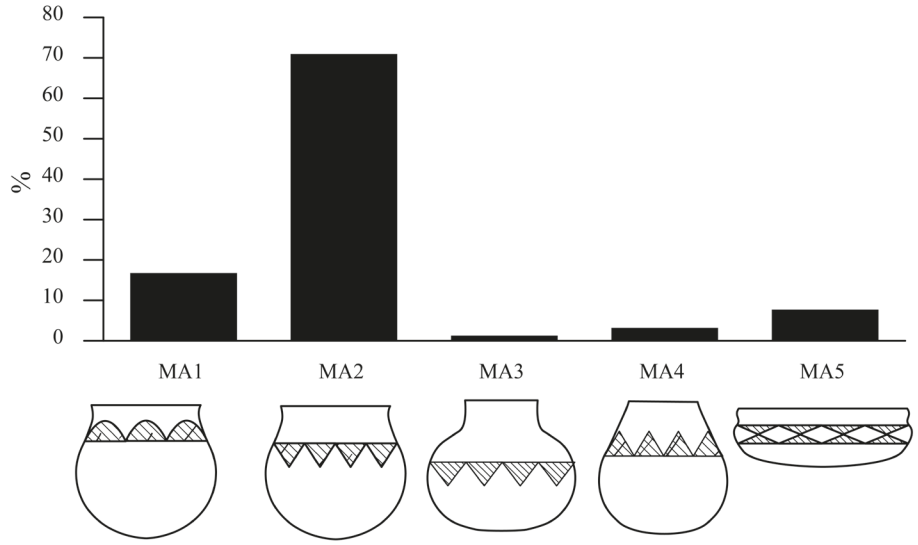


Fig. 6. Proportion of Mapungubwe ceramic types as percentage of facies.

triangles or diagonal hatching in the lower neck/shoulder area (Figs 9–10). Arcades and bands of crosshatching were also common decorative themes (Antonites 2012).

Mapungubwe Type 1: Recurved jar, with a band of incised decoration on the neck area.
Mapungubwe Type 2: Recurved jar, with incised decoration on the shoulder area.
Mapungubwe Type 3: Bellied jar, with a band of decoration on the body.
Mapungubwe Type 4: Long-necked jar, with an incised band of arcades or triangles in the neck.
Mapungubwe Type 5: Shouldered bowl, with decorations on the shoulder.

*Mutamba facies*

The Mutamba facies comprised vessels that conformed to the attribute combinations previously identified by Loubser (1991: 259). Five types presented here were created from 63 vessels (Fig. 7). Long-necked jars were the most prevalent shape and decorations included bands of punctates and/or incisions, typically executed on either the rim or shoulder, or combinations thereof (Fig. 11).

A significant problem in defining the Mutamba facies is the lack of published assemblages. Loubser (1991) has, to date, provided the most detailed study of the attributes and characteristics of Mutamba assemblages. He noted the predominance of long-necked jars and decoration on the rim as characteristic attributes. More recently, Huffman (2007: 273) indicated the use of graphite paint as a defining attribute of Mutamba vessels. My analysis did not use graphite as a single defining characteristic, and instead used a combination of shape, decoration (including graphite) and placement of stylistic elements. While there is some overlap with Mapungubwe design elements (e.g. the use of recurved jars, triangle motifs, placement on the shoulder), there are clear differences in the use and dominance of long-necked vessels, the frequent use of punctate decorations and the placement of decorations in the rim area—all elements that clearly distinguish it from Mapungubwe. Given the absence of a clear, single-

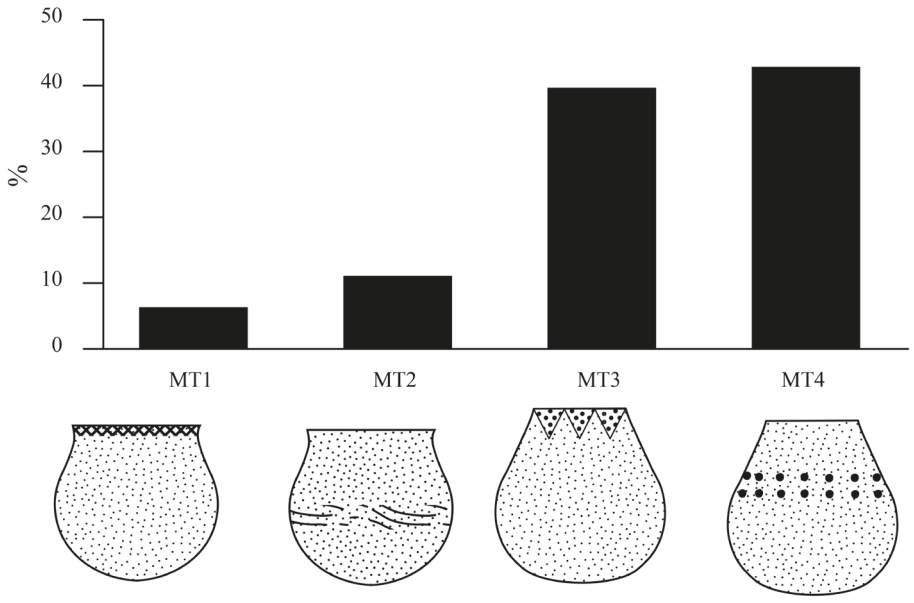


Fig. 7. Proportion of Mutamba ceramic types as percentage of facies.

occupation Mutamba assemblage (see discussion below), the stylistic range of this facies is likely much wider than is presented here. Graphite was an important decorative element though: 25% of diagnostic vessels identified as Mutamba in this study were decorated with it. Its application is likely much more common since the assemblage contains a large amount of non-diagnostic fragments with a graphite finish.

Mutamba Type 1: Recurved jar, bands of decoration (punctate and/or incision) on the rim (with or without graphite finish).
Mutamba Type 2: Recurved jar, band of diagonal loose incised hatching on the lower neck/shoulder.
Mutamba Type 3: Long-necked jar, band of decoration (punctate and/or incision) on the rim (with or without graphite finish).
Mutamba Type 4: Long-necked jar, band of decoration (punctate and/or incision) in the neck (with or without graphite finish).

*Eiland facies*

Typologically, Eiland ceramics are characterised by finely executed herringbone and arcade motifs, crosshatching, graphite and ochre burnish on the rims and necks of slightly necked jars (Evers 1981; Loubser 1981, 1991; Evers & Van der Merwe 1987). The assemblage included 31 vessels, which were classed into four types (Fig. 8). The most common shapes were long-necked vessels and open bowls—typical of Eiland assemblages elsewhere—as well as the very distinctive incised herringbone and painted graphite and ochre panels (Fig. 12).

Eiland Type 1: Long-necked jar, bands of herringbone on the rim.
Eiland Type 2: Long-necked jar, decorated with complex bands of herringbone, arcades, decoration and/or punctates in the neck.

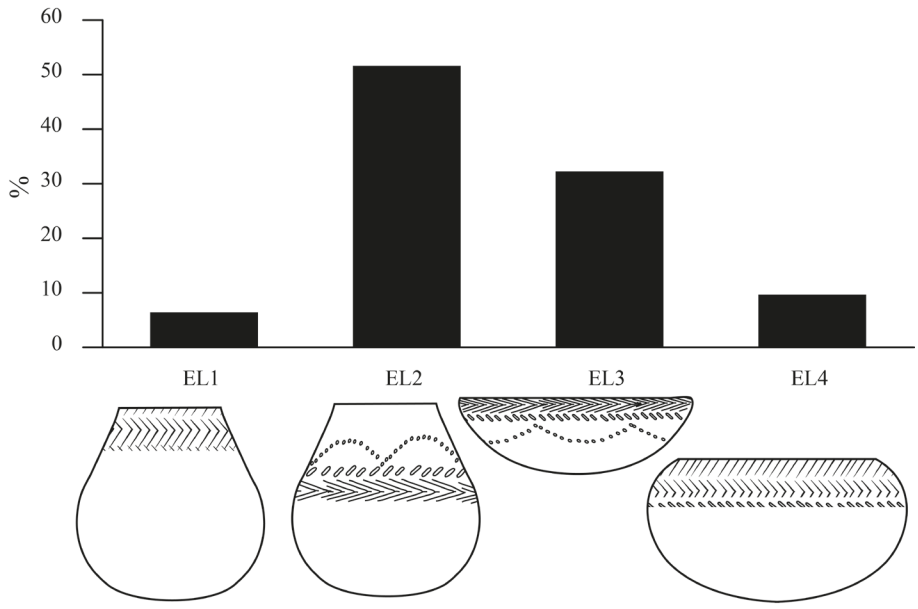


Fig. 8. Proportion of Eiland ceramic types as percentage of facies.

Eiland Type 3: Open bowl, decorated on the rim and/or down the body with herringbone incisions, with/without punctuate combinations on the rim.
Eiland Type 4: Constricted bowl, with a band of herringbone on the rim and/or body.

*Ceramics and the occupation of Mutamba*

The stylistic analysis shows that Mapungubwe vessels dominate all stratigraphic levels at the site except for the admixed top-most layers where vessel proportions are equal (Antonites 2012) (Fig. 13). The combined average proportion of Mapungubwe vessels to other facies across all levels for Features 1 and 2 is 66%. There are fluctuations between the proportions of Eiland and Mutamba ceramics per layer, with neither significantly dominating a stratigraphic layer.

Viewed together, the two features are largely consistent in terms of their associated ceramic style. While variations exist, these do not equate to significant differences in terms of facies proportions between layers or excavation areas. Mutamba is therefore best described as a Mapungubwe settlement with a noteworthy proportion of ceramics from the Eiland and Mutamba facies.

## THE SPATIO-TEMPORAL CONTEXT OF THE MUTAMBA CERAMIC FACIES

The recent excavations at Mutamba offer resolution of the spatio-temporal characteristics of the eponymous facies. To date, Vhuneyla is regarded as the only published site with a distinguishable Mutamba occupation (Loubser 1991). In all other examples where the facies has been identified, Mutamba vessels occur as lower frequency numbers at sites associated with either Eiland or Mapungubwe ceramics (Loubser 1991). Although Vhuneyla also had Eiland and Mapungubwe ceramics, Loubser (1991: 223–4) considered these as being from separate stratigraphic and spatial contexts. This

means that there remains a degree of uncertainty about the temporal range of the style. A single radiocarbon date exists for the Mutamba facies at Vhuneyla: 1130±50 BP (Wits-1590), 2σ calibration AD 780–1036. In addition, the sample came from beneath a Mapungubwe floor (13th century) and therefore predates it. Consequently, Loubser concluded that Mutamba ceramics represented autochthonous communities that lived in the northern Soutpansberg prior to the establishment of Mapungubwe as a regional centre in the Shashe-Limpopo confluence area. (Note that Loubser (1989, 1991: 230, 245) also gives the Wits-1590 laboratory code to a date from Princess Hill (770±80 BP), associated with Mapunguwbe material. My concern here is with the Vhuneyla date.)

However, the Vhuneyla date for the Mutamba ceramic facies seems anomalous, since at sites such as Tavhatshena, Mutamba and Tshitaka-tsha-Makoleni, both Mutamba and Mapungubwe ceramics co-occur in layers dating to the 13th century (Loubser 1991: 198, 254, 281). More recently, Huffman (2007: 270) proposed that the temporal range of Mutamba ceramics falls between the early 13th and 15th centuries. He also reclassified Mutamba ceramics as stylistically related to the Mapungubwe and Gumanye facies, rather than Eiland (as proposed by Loubser (1991)). Spatially, this facies is associated with the region to the northeast of the central Soutpansberg (Huffman 2007: 270). Thorp's (2009) recent reassessment of the Vhuneyla ceramics indicates that Loubser's Mutamba types are very similar to types found in partly contemporaneous Gumanye assemblages from southeastern Zimbabwe. Accordingly, Huffman (2007: 270; Thorp 2009: 207) proposes that Zimbabwe Phase III and Mutamba ceramics both developed from 11th to mid-13th century Gumanye ceramics, with stylistic differences due to interaction with Mapungubwe groups. This 13th-to-15th-century reading of the ceramic data is at odds with the 10th-century date (1130±50 BP, Wits-1590) from Vhuneyla and Loubser's (1991) interpretation. It is therefore possible that the Mutamba occupation of Vhuneyla could date to the 13th century. Regardless, the new excavations from Mutamba confirm the pattern of Mutamba vessels co-occurring with Mapungubwe and Eiland strata, and therefore align with the later temporal range (i.e. 13th–15th centuries), as proposed by Huffman.

## DISCUSSION

In addition to clarifying the spatio-temporal and stylistic range of Mutamba ceramics, excavations of the site also contribute to our general understanding of the material culture and site layout of 13th-century settlements on the Mapungubwe hinterland. Domestic architecture at Mutamba includes huts that were made from daga (daub). These were probably cone-and-cylinder structures roughly two metres in diameter. These huts were, until recently, common throughout much of the region. Although there is some evidence for double-walled huts at other 13th-century sites (Meyer 1998: 120, 2000; Meyer & Cloete 2010), the configuration of hut postholes from Floor 1.4 suggests that it was a single-walled structure made from daga. In most instances, hut floors were made by compacting clay to a thickness of 2–3 cm (cf. Van der Waal 1977: 88–9); however, one floor had a grey gravel base. Both floor types likely had a smeared clay surface during their use. Huts were connected to courtyards smeared with clay dung, where most daily household activities would take place (cf. Van der Waal 1977).

The new excavations at Mutamba also confirmed Loubser's (1991) earlier interpretation that the site conforms to a Central Cattle Pattern settlement layout. The

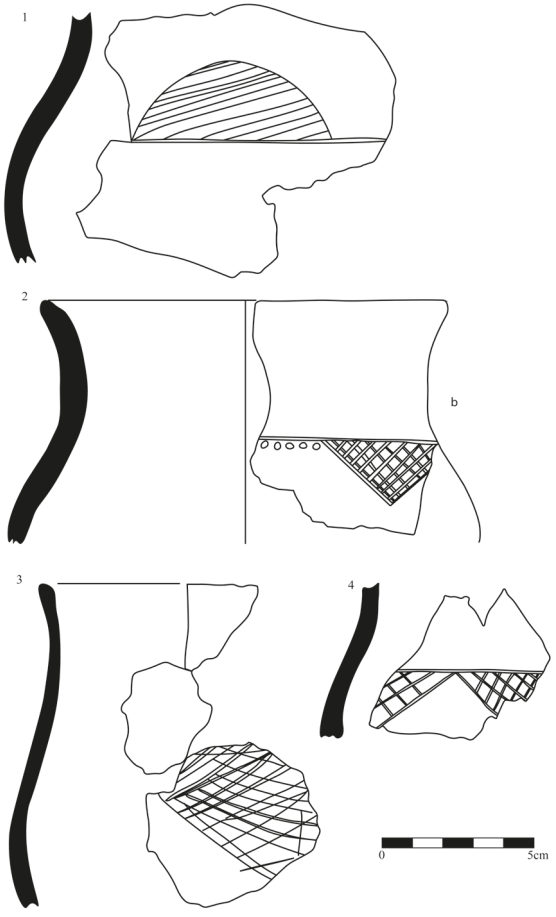


Fig. 9. Examples of Mapungubwe types. 1: Type 1; 2–4: Type 2 (b = polished black finish).

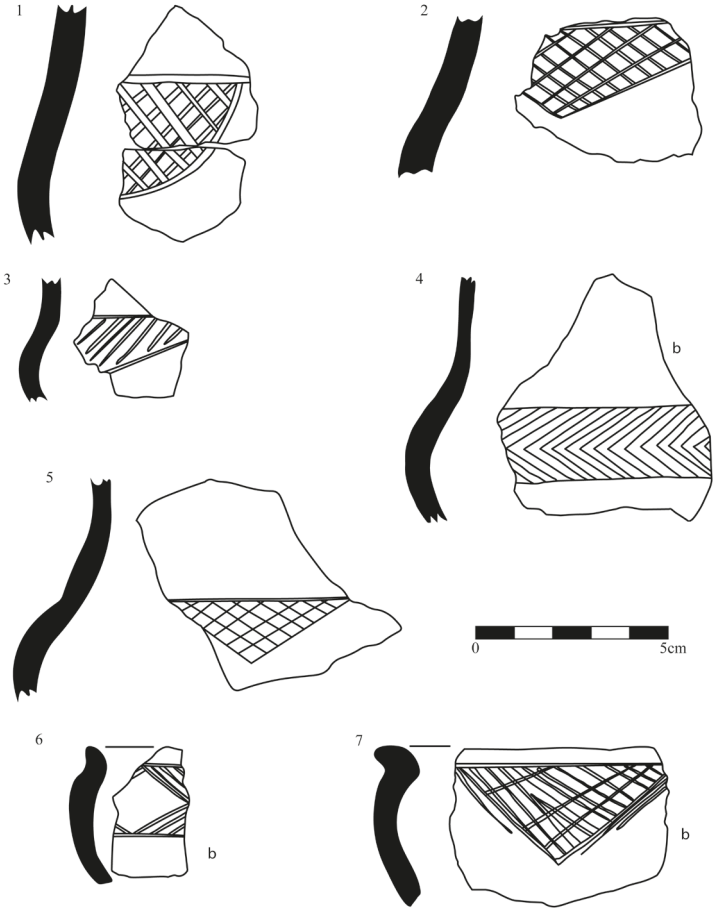


Fig. 10. Examples of Mapungubwe ceramic types. 1–2: Type 3; 3–5: Type 4; 6–7: Type 5 (b = polished black finish).

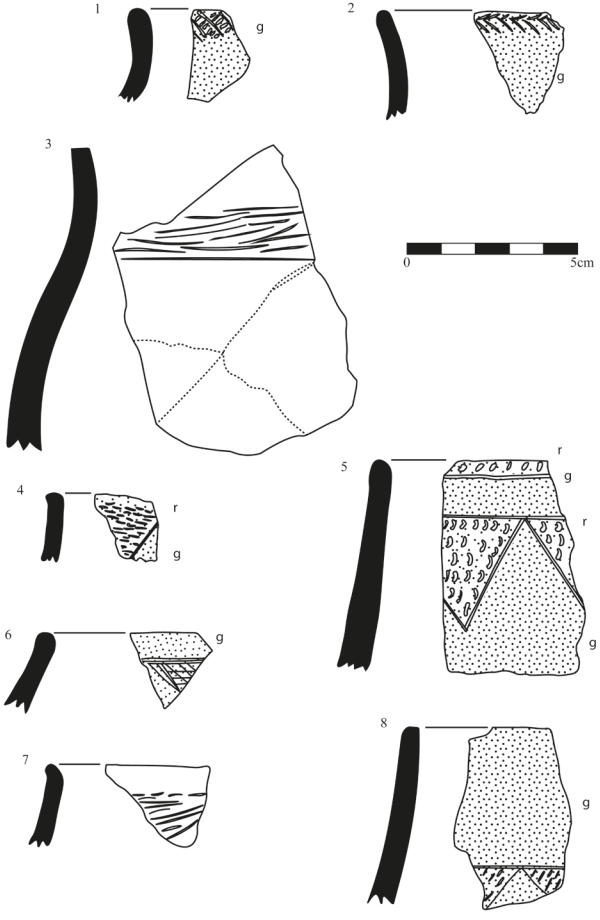


Fig. 11. Examples of Mutamba ceramic types. 1–2: Type 1; 3: Type 2; 4–7: Type 3; 8: Type 4 (g = graphite; r = red finish).

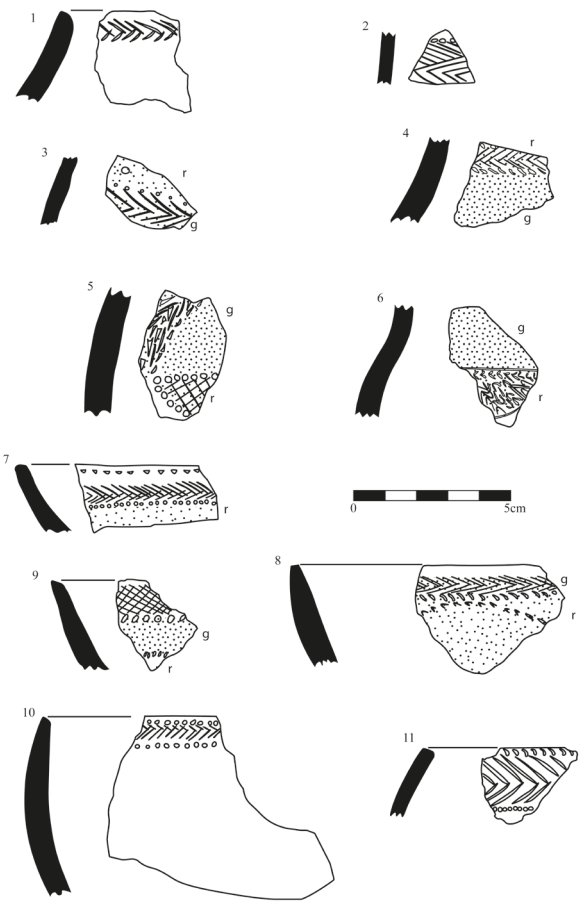


Fig. 12. Examples of Eiland ceramic types. 1: Type 1; 2–6: Type 2; 7–9: Type 3; 10–11: Type 4. g = graphite; r = red finish).

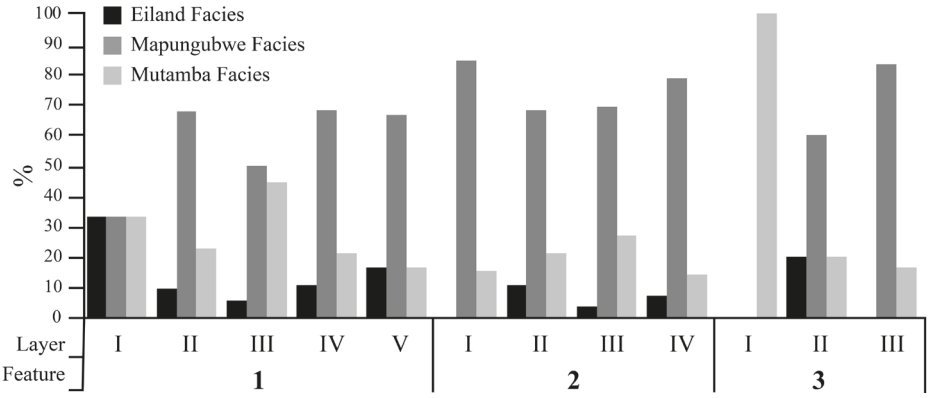


Fig. 13. Distribution of facies across Features as percentage of ceramics per stratigraphic unit.

main evidence for this is the position of a residential area around a centrally located kraal with a burial. Regionally, this pattern is associated with non-elite settlements (Loubser 1991; Calabrese 2007; Huffman 2007). In contrast, the neighbouring 13th-century site of Princess Hill[1] (located 5 km to the north), displays a pattern typical of higher-status settlements. Here, there is a higher-status area on a hill summit, and lower-status area and kraal at the base. However, the variety of trade goods and items associated with social status at Mutamba belie the uncomplicated non-elite status suggested by the site layout. Instead, it points to a potentially complex hierarchy of power and diverse access to trade goods at a local scale (cf. Moffett & Chirikure 2016).

Although one date from Floor 2.1 (Feature 2) suggests a 12th-century occupation, all material culture associated with this hut points to an occupation closer to the mid-13th century. Excavation of the nearby hut in Feature 1, also built on a virgin soil horizon, suggests that initial occupation of the site was probably around the early 13th century. Crucially, the absence of K2 (11th–12th centuries) or Transitional K2 (early 13th century) ceramics in the assemblage suggests that the occupation of Mutamba likely did not predate the 13th century. In the Limpopo Valley, there is a clear development of the Mapungubwe style from preceding K2 and Transitional K2 styles. The absence of earlier styles suggests a rather abrupt change in the Soutpansberg that coincides with the regional rise of Mapungubwe. The shared ceramic style suggests either a movement of people making Mapungubwe ceramics into the region and/or the emulation of this style by local communities. The abruptness of this regional stylistic change, the large-scale stylistic similarity, and the fact that at both Princess Hill and Mutamba the lowest strata were associated with Mapungubwe ceramics, suggest that communities from the Limpopo Valley actively settled in the Soutpansberg region.

The sudden appearance of Mapungubwe communities in the southern hinterland therefore implies kinship ties to communities in the Shashe-Limpopo confluence area, as suggested by the reproduction of Mapungubwe material culture in terms of ceramics. These peripheral communities often acted as magnets for outcasts from neighbouring societies—a process that may account for the Mutamba and Eiland ceramics in the assemblage. While Kopytoff (1987) indicates that metropolises sometimes regard hinterlands as threats, political power at Mapungubwe likely viewed hinterlands as

largely beneficial, contributing to economic expansion by acting as new trade contacts. This would explain the array of exotic and traded objects found at Mutamba.

Increased interaction and hinterland processes therefore explain the multiple ceramic facies present at Mutamba. The recurring patterns that make it possible to discern design styles at Mutamba clearly show the interaction of multiple producer communities. This is substantiated by chemical fingerprinting that was able to associate stylistic categories with different production regions (Jacobson et al. 1991; Peisach et al. 1991; Jacobson 2005). These chemical analyses indicate that Eiland ceramics were mostly produced south of the Soutpansberg, while Mapungubwe ceramics were produced north of the mountains. Vessels likely followed multiple pathways during their lifetime. One possible pathway is the association with wives marrying into new alliances (Loubser 1991; Jacobson 2005; Huffman 2007). Other reasons that could account for the movement are their function as containers for other trade goods. The vessel itself was also likely a tradable item. Bent (1895), for example, gives an account of villagers in southern Zimbabwe during the late 19th century trading ceramics for grain, cattle and iron. Pots could also have been curated and exchanged due to the spiritual and ritual values attributed to the vessels, since pots can act as referents to an exotic origin or link to the past (Pikirayi & Lindahl 2013).

The ubiquity of Mutamba ceramics at Mapungubwe and Eiland sites in the Soutpansberg could also be a result of their association with craft or ritual specialists. In southern Africa, ethnographic and historical examples include 18th-century Tlokwa communities within the larger Tswana-speaking grouping (Hall 2012: 317), and the Lemba group within historic Venda society (Jaques 1931; Stayt 1968; Van der Lith 1972). In each case, the specialists' craft allowed them to traverse social boundaries, often moving into and marrying within other groups (see also Maceachern 1994: 217). The distinct social identities were predicated on the specialist skills that set members apart from the larger social groupings in which they were nested, while at the same time maintaining strong links to compatriots in neighbouring communities. Although this scenario cannot be proven for Mutamba from the current evidence, it remains a potential factor to consider given the complex overlap that suggests interaction of diverse social groups in the larger Mapungubwe cultural landscape.

## CONCLUSION

The recent excavation at Mutamba has produced evidence that indicates wide-ranging production activities such as metalworking, shell-bead manufacture and fibre spinning. The presence of glass beads and marine shells implies that Mutamba had access to a repertoire of artefacts often labelled as prestige goods (e.g. Calabrese 2000; Huffman 2009; Wilmsen 2009; Wood 2012). These items (e.g. glass beads, finished metals, sea shells) were likely obtained by trading locally produced goods such as metals (potentially gold, iron and copper), shell disc beads, cloth, ivory and other animal products. The active participation of hinterland communities such as Mutamba in trade networks clearly indicates a degree of agency in shaping their participation in the larger political landscape. Through participation in networking beyond the Mapungubwe sphere of influence, hinterland communities gained access to exotic goods. At the same time, ceramic material shows local interactions and connections—not only with communities

in the Limpopo Valley, but also with communities to the south and east—that are visible in Mutamba and Eiland ceramic styles.

The ceramic data therefore suggest that styles overlapped in complex ways in the Mapungubwe hinterland. Limiting discussions of social complexity to large centres ignores the fact that these communities formed part of a larger society that included heterogeneous hinterland communities that used and made ceramics in a variety of styles. The MIA was therefore a period of intensification of interaction in which hinterlands played a dynamic part.

## NOTE

[1] The site name (Princess Hill) is a misspelling of the farm name by Loubser. Locals refer to the farm as both Prince's and Princess (since phonetically they are so close). Changing the site name now would lead to confusion, so I have retained 'Princess Hill'.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and Annie Antonites for their comments and suggestions. The fieldwork would not have been possible without the support of Hector, Hazel, Dane and Jessica Kincaid-Smith. Claudia Abatino, Evin Grody and Karen Scott conducted the faunal analysis. Excavation proceeded with the help of Neels Kruger, Chriselle Bruwer, and student volunteers from Yale and the University of Pretoria. The research was supported by the National Science Foundation (Grant No. 1058306).

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