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Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe: The origin and spread of social complexity in southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

Stratified societies in southern Africa first developed in the Shashe–Limpopo Basin. As is well known, rank-based society at K2 developed into class distinction at Mapungubwe. The transfer of this new social organisation to Great Zimbabwe has received less attention. New research on rainmaking practices suggests that a Mapungubwe dynasty introduced class structures at Great Zimbabwe. Poor climatic conditions at the end of the 13th century undermined sacred leaders at Mapungubwe itself, and while vulnerable, the elite at Great Zimbabwe took over the important gold and ivory trade. Among other things, the new elite used the unique Zimbabwe birdstones to establish their legitimacy.

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Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe are of international interest because they represent the development of indigenous states in southern Africa (Fig. 1). From an anthropological perspective, they are examples of a secondary state: trade contacts with more developed societies provided new opportunities that stimulated greater social complexity. This greater complexity first developed at Mapungubwe, and then its archaeological expression was later elaborated at Great Zimbabwe. At a general level, the development of Mapungubwe is fairly well-known: surplus trade wealth and a growing population helped to transform a ranked, kin-based society with male hereditary leadership at K2 to a class-based bureaucracy with sacred leadership at Mapungubwe (e.g., Huffman, 1982; Mitchell, 2002; Pikirayi, 2000; Pwiti, 2005).

The rise of Great Zimbabwe, on the other hand, requires further consideration. The people at Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe spoke related forms of the Shona language, but they belonged to separate ethno-historical groups (Huffman, 2007a). The rise of Great Zimbabwe was therefore not a simple transfer of political power; it also involved the incorporation of a new ideology and related practices. Because the origin and development occurred relatively recently, Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe provide a case study that may contribute to a better understanding of similar processes in the more remote past.

To consider the rise of Great Zimbabwe, it is first important to understand the sequence in the Mapungubwe area. I begin with a brief outline of the physical and cultural terrains.

Cultural landscapes

The Mapungubwe landscape incorporates an extensive valley system around the Shashe–Limpopo confluence, as well as the surrounding plateaus in Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe (Fig. 2). Geologically, Mapungubwe lies within a sandstone topography interrupted by mafic intrusions. The movements of two ancient continents caused these intrusions (McCarthy and Rubidge, 2005: 108–111), and the area is still seismically active. The possible impact of earthquakes and rock falls on the Mapungubwe sequence is currently under investigation.

In terms of climate, the Basin is only about 600 m above sea level and therefore lies within a rainfall trough. The present-day average of 320–350 mm per year is insufficient for the traditional cultivation of sorghums and millets, but rainfall was adequate during the Medieval Warm Epoch, between about 1000 and 1300 AD (Smith, 2005; Tyson et al., 2000). With such adequate rainfall, flooding would have been a regular, seasonal occurrence in precolonial times.

Regardless of rainfall variation, the Mapungubwe area is capable of supporting large herds of elephants. Dry-land trees such as mopane and dry-land grasses, coupled with permanent water, create ideal conditions. In addition, an enormous vlei, fed by backwater flooding of the Limpopo, supports a huge stand of elephant

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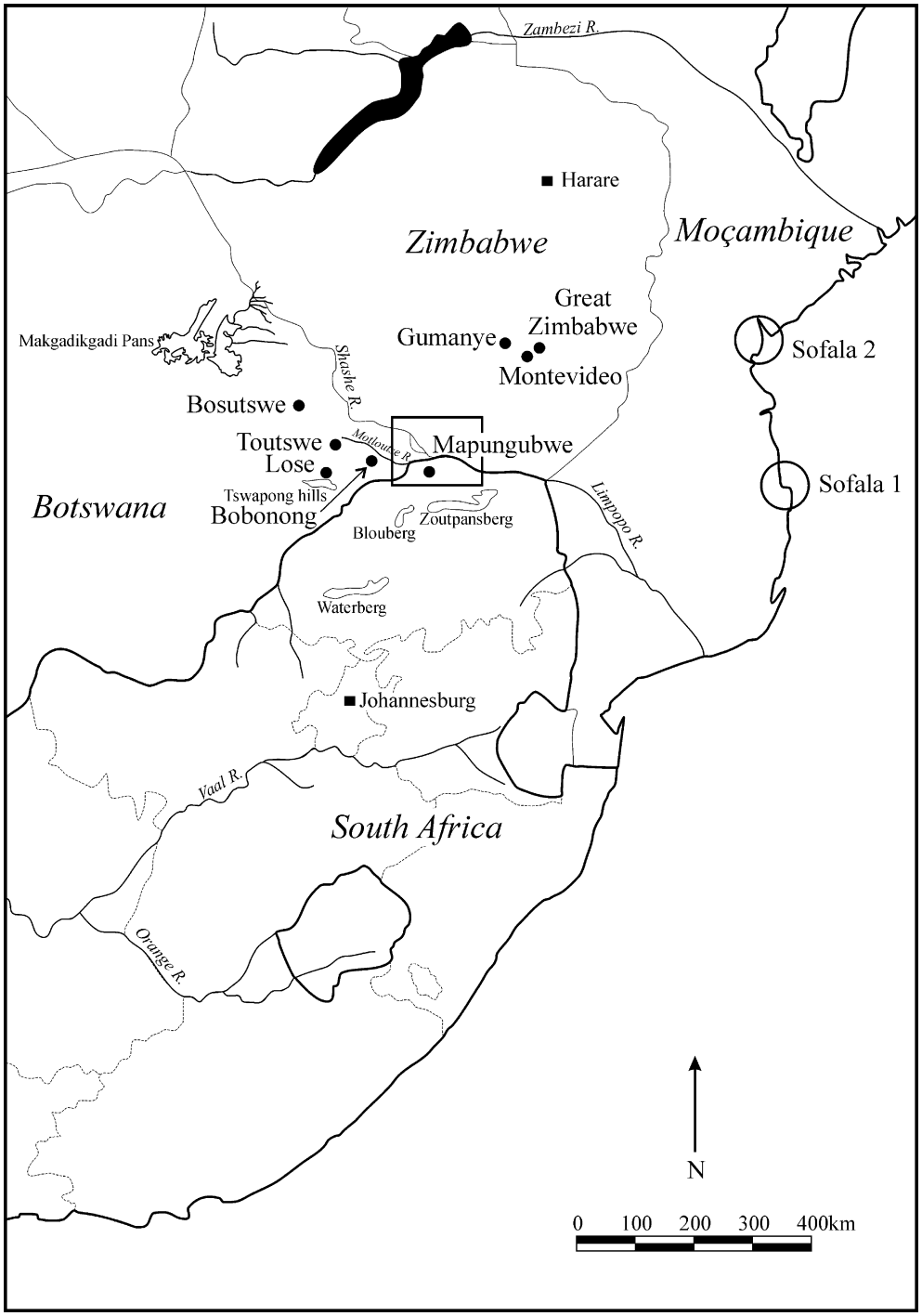

Fig. 1. The Mapungubwe region and other important sites.

grass (*Sporobolus pyramidalus*) that makes the area extraordinarily good for large herds. Once burnt, this grass also provides substantial grazing for cattle, while the loams along the vlei margins provide rich agricultural potential. These environmental conditions greatly influenced the rise of social complexity.

The transformation of ranked societies at K2 into class-based society at Mapungubwe caused changes in the organisation of settlements. Most importantly, the elite Zimbabwe Pattern at Mapungubwe grew out of the Central Cattle Pattern at K2.

The Central Cattle Pattern (hereafter the CCP) is well-known, and a brief outline will be sufficient. The centre of the settlement, the domain of men, encompasses sunken grain pits (or raised grain bins) for long-term storage, an assembly area where men resolve disputes and make political decisions, a blacksmith's area and cattle kraals where men related by blood and other important people are buried. The outer residential zone, the domain of women, incorporates the households of individual wives with their private sleeping houses, kitchens and graves. These outer households were arranged according to a system of seniority expressed through left and right locations, starting with a 'great hut' built upslope of the court and kraal. At a lower scale, the same dimension applies to the great hut itself: the central fireplace divides the hut into right-

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