

Book Reviews

Boekresensies

Mapungubwe in a Prehistoric Nutshell

Thomas N. Huffman, *Mapungubwe: Ancient Civilisation on the Limpopo*

Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2005

64 pp

Soft cover

Full colour photographs, maps, diagrams and sketches

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R95.00

This book is recommended for the average South African or tourist who would like to know more about the importance of the Mapungubwe cultural landscape and how it fits into the puzzle of the early prehistory of southern Africa. The social, cultural and political developments at Mapungubwe, which is situated on the southern banks of the Limpopo River, led to the first complex society in southern Africa between AD 900 and 1300.

Although Mapungubwe is well-known in academic circles, few books intended for the layman exist on this fascinating subject. This book deserves merit as it summarises Mapungubwe in a prehistoric nutshell for the general public. Huffman is Head of Archaeology in the School of Archaeology, Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. He is widely recognized in the academic field for his contributions to our understanding of Great Zimbabwe, about which he has published widely during the past twenty years.

Written by a specialist, the theme of the book outlines the occupation of the Shashe-Limpopo Basin in the thirteenth century, together with explanations of the geology, climate and Iron Age

settlements of Schroda, K2 and Mapungubwe, which today is listed as World Heritage Site and one of South Africa's newest national parks.

Huffman approaches Mapungubwe's development from ceramic sequences in the Limpopo Basin and illustrates how different styles of pottery indicate that Iron Age peoples were separate from other communities as a result of social changes. These changes were brought about by trade and agriculture, which eventually led to the formal class structure with royalty residing on top of Mapungubwe Hill, whilst the commoners settled below, thus distinguishing it from other settlements. The main body of the text is devoted to the settlement of Mapungubwe, explaining the first occupation area, first king, first town, first state, trade, gold-working, stone-walling, internal trade and contacts, as well as climatic change as main reasons for the demise of this ancient civilisation.

A useful glossary of terms is provided at the end for the reader who is unfamiliar with archaeological terminology. Further reading material is also listed. However, five of the publications are considered to be *Africana* and therefore may be hard to find.

The text concludes with brief explanations of Icon and Khami occupation sites associated with Shona-speaking people from Zimbabwe, and the origins of the Venda and their occupation of the region. The importance of Mapungubwe's significance in symbolic terms of past achievements is only elucidated with a brief mention of the gold national Order of Mapungubwe, however little mention is made about the National Park or developments around its declaration as World Heritage Site.

The publication has a beautifully illustrated cover, but has been criticised for its lack of photographs of a good quality inside. However, there are a variety of visuals ranging from colour photographs of the archaeological sites, a few artefacts, simple maps, plans and sketches of settlements, as well as artists' reconstructions accompanied by short descriptions illustrating the detailed textual explanations.

By far the greatest criticism which can be directed at this publication, is the lack of information on the discovery of the site, its history and the importance of archaeological research, which in fact contributed substantially to the site's eventual recognition for national and world heritage status.

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Published by Wits University Press, it retails at R95.00 – rather pricey for the format of the book (or rather, booklet), but it is a worthy publication to add to the bookshelves of especially all schools, learners, the general public, amateurs and professionals alike. There is no doubt that this book should take its deserved place alongside other venerable topics on World Heritage Sites.

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