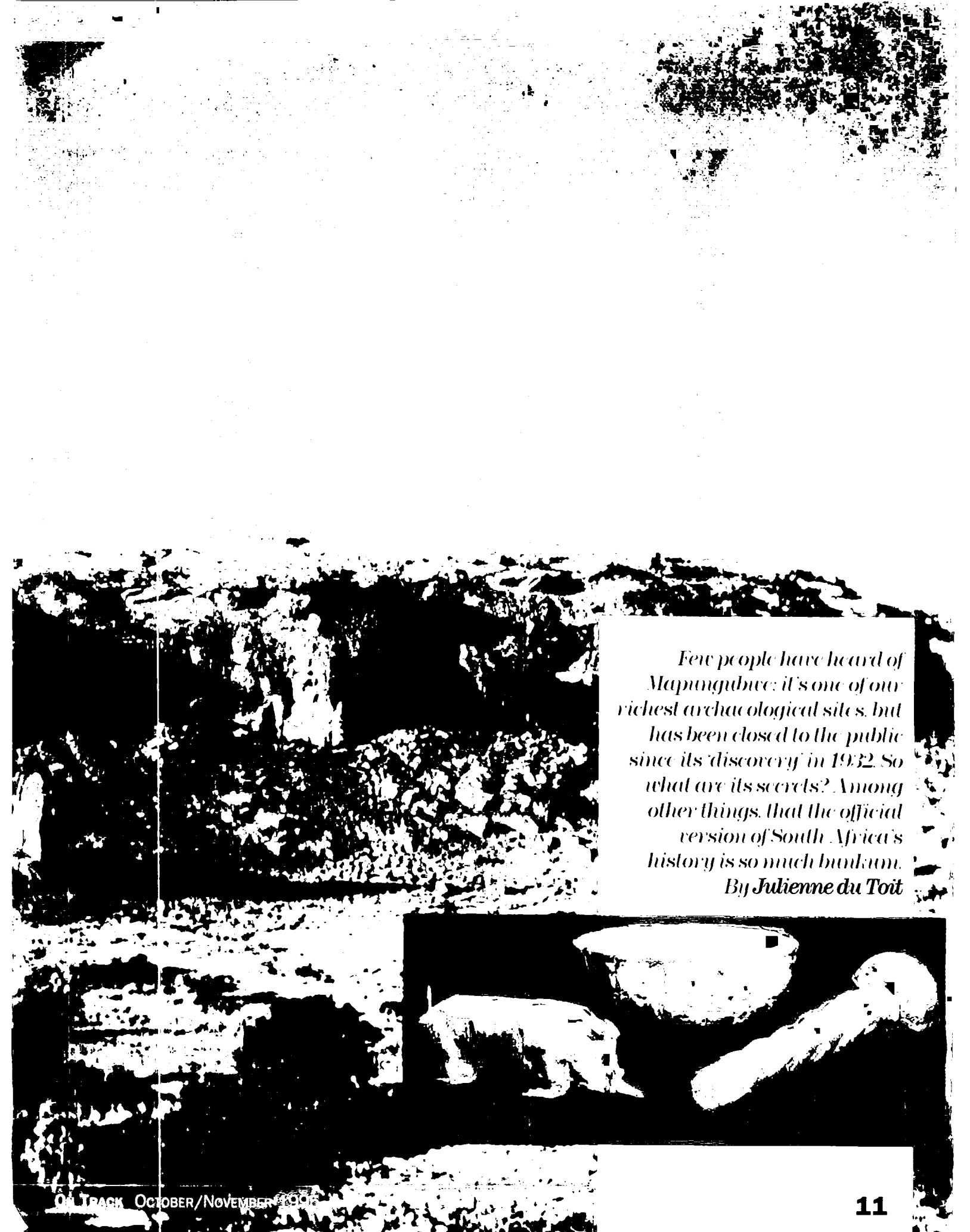


Tales of the **GOLDEN RHINO**





Few people have heard of Mapungubwe: it's one of our richest archaeological sites, but has been closed to the public since its 'discovery' in 1932. So what are its secrets? Among other things, that the official version of South Africa's history is so much bunkum.
By Julienne du Toit

Tales of the GOLDEN RHINO

When J C O van Graan was a teenager, in the depression years of the 1920s, he heard tales of the lost civilisation of Mapungubwe, told to his father by an old blind man who lived in their district. This was in the far northern Transvaal, between the Blouberg and the Botswana border.

Academics knew a golden civilisation had flourished in the area almost a millennium before – but had all but given up hope of finding its site.

Van Graan was to discover it several years later, in 1932, on a farm a few kilometres from the border town of Pontdrif, at the confluence of the Shashe River and the Limpopo River – but let him tell the story:

'The old blind man told my father that his ancestors had once had a king, and that he was buried not far from there. A number of kings were buried out there, he said, in a place on top of a hill.

'My father asked him – in Panagalo – what this place was called. But the old man said, no, he couldn't mention its name. My father wanted to know where it was. But the old man wouldn't say. Then my father asked, how did it look, this hill. But the old man wouldn't even describe it.

'He would only say it had been chosen because no one could scale it; this was so that the graves could be left alone.

'But he also said that there were five clay pots on top, filled with valuable things. My father asked what these were. And he replied: diamonds. He knew, said the old man, that there were diamonds there. But how many he didn't know.

'There was also gold, he said. Copper and

groenklip – emeralds, *smaragde, jy weet*. What else, he didn't know.'

Years later, the Van Graans' neighbours, the Van der Walts, invited Van Graan Junior to go hunting on their farm, Greefswald.

'By 11 in the morning I was hot and tired, and I couldn't find any water. Then I saw some huts, and walked over to them. I was greeted by an old black man. He was happy to give me water. *Nee, goed*, he said, and disappeared into the hut. When he came out, he was carrying an earthenware jug with two ears, filled with lovely cool water.

'Immediately I was intrigued by the container. Look, I knew the pots of the area. They were all round, or flattish. But this one was different.

'I asked the old man to give it to me. He said, *nooi!* He wouldn't sell it. In those days we still had gold coins. I had a Kruger pound in my pocket. I offered him this, but he still refused.

'I was nonplussed. Money was so scarce. It was 1932, the time of the Depression. I asked him where the jug had come from. Then he told me a "white man" had taken the pot off the koppie where kings were buried ... Who was this man, I asked him. And he told me: Lotrie. Lotrie was living somewhere on the Limpopo, he said, under the overhang of some rocks. Lotrie was on the run from the law, but why, I could never find out.'

Van Graan pestered Mowena, the old man, to show him where this hill was. Mowena resisted. 'Did they want him dead?' After much persuasion and some bullying, Mowena said his son could go with him, but did not promise he would show him where the hill was.

Mining threat to Madimbo Corridor

Further along the Limpopo River, close to the northern border of the Kruger National Park, lies the Madimbo Corridor. It has been largely untouched for centuries, except for the South African Defence Force patrolling the border during the past few decades.

No excavations have been started in the area, yet while just strolling around, the archaeologist Sidney Miller has found implements made more than a million years ago, and pottery dating back to the sixth century AD.

The area is pristine riverine bushveld, characterised by centuries-old baobabs and huge sycamore figs and fever trees.

Yet earlier this year, a company called Duo Corporate Developers were granted the rights to prospect for diamonds, and were somehow exempted from having to submit an Environmental Management Programme Report as required by law.

The National Parks Board has submitted an appeal against the permit to the director-general of Mineral and Energy Affairs. Duo has until 7 November to respond, and the director-general is expected to decide on whether prospecting can go ahead or not at the end of November.



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The Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Dr Dawie de Villiers, the Deputy Minister, Bantu Holomisa, the acting head of environmental Affairs in Northern Province,

Rufus Maruma, the chairman of the parliamentary committee on the environment, Peter Mokaba, and the director-general of Environmental Affairs have all thrown their

A party was made up, consisting of Van Graan, his father and one Du Plessis. They eventually arrived at a very steep koppie, but Mowena's son would still not say whether this was the right one. There was no way of climbing it, and Van Graan, his father and Du Plessis accused Mowena's son of lying about the place. The son retorted that even if they were to find it, they would be struck dead by *Modimo* (God).

Eventually he said: '*Morena, kyk agter die boom* (look behind the tree).'

Recounts Van Graan: "Then we saw it: a gap in the rock, its side perpendicular and running, it appeared, right to the top ... On both sides, at intervals, hollows had been chipped out of the rock-face: they were the rung seats of a ladder.'

Van Graan nearly killed himself trying to get up; at one stage, he was virtually hanging by his fingernails. He dislodged one of his boots to get a foothold, and it fell out of sight into a gap. Immediately, the air reverberated with an unearthly droning noise.

'*Modimo!* I started to panic, but my father threatened me from below - "*Klim man, klim!*" he said. So I continued climbing and made it, scrambling out of the chimney and into the blazing sun.'

At first, it seemed as if there was nothing up there, and the droning subsided. 'There was nothing! I felt completely flat.'

But then Van Graan found a beautiful little copper arrow. Just after that they discovered the cause of the unearthly noise: bats. 'Imagine our relief! We

had all been expecting something far worse ...'

And then Van Graan found a small piece of yellowish metal plate. 'I showed it to my father, who was greatly excited by it. "My son," he exclaimed, "this is gold."'

They started combing through the sandy soil, and kept finding more items. Van Graan had to transfer his load to the crook of his arm, and his father had filled half his hat with a collection of tiny golden nails and beads. The other two soon arrived, and also picked up gold until there was nothing on the surface.

'I took out my knife and started loosening the soil. More beads! Nails! Then what seemed to be a solid piece of gold. I dug deeper ... and out came a miniature buffalo, also made of gold. I held the little buffalo in the palm of my hand: a squat, intact little creature, its head lowered as if in readiness for a steamroller charge ...'

They looked further and found a rhino, a skeleton, and gold anklets. But they never found the clay pots filled with diamonds and emeralds.

Van Graan believes it might have been taken by the mysterious Lotrie. But the golden artifacts have all been preserved. Not surprisingly, given the depression, a sharp debate ensued over what to do with the valuable find. Du Plessis wanted to melt down the gold and keep it. Van Graan and his father disagreed - and they won the day.

Van Graan informed Prof Leo Fouché, then head of the department of history at the University of Pretoria, of the find, and handed over the figurines.

weight behind the objections to prospecting.

It was the Wildlife Society that first drew attention to the impending permit, but no one really reacted until it actually happened. The society also hosted a press trip to the area to demonstrate its ecological and historical importance and sensitivity.

Duo, owned in South Africa by Richard Bluett and Pepsi executive Khehla Mthembu, has gone into partnership with one of Australia's largest diamond mining companies, Moonstone Diamond Corporation, which doesn't seem to have any idea of how important the area is.

The newspaper *West Australian* has quoted Moonstone's executive director, Alan Hopkins, as saying that he had been advised that the areas was not unique, and that it was littered with shells after being used as a shooting range.

He reportedly added: "What we're looking at is an alluvial diamond mine: there's not a lot of long-term impact, and you put it back, and there's regrowth very fast. We're not going to cause any damage. It's a beautiful country, and we're going to do a sustainable development."

Says the Wildlife Society's David Lindley: "It's quite clear that either Mr Hopkins has been totally hoodwinked on the environmental importance of the Madimbo Corridor, or he is speaking with a

forked tongue. Either way, for a company owning the largest diamond mine in Australia, this seems to be very unprofessional and unbusinesslike.

"With a mean rainfall of 300 millimetres, a biological productivity of less than three tons per hectare per year, and the soil being classified by the Department of Environmental Affairs as having the second highest grading for potential erodibility, the chances of successful rehabilitation are extremely slim, regardless of what Mr Hopkins says."

And this is apart from the area harbouring who knows what archaeological treasures.

Mining has already robbed us of so much: at the end of the last century, Cecil John Rhodes saw fit to form the Ancient Ruins Company, which removed many gold objects from ancient stonewalled sites north of the Limpopo River. These were smelted down, and lost to the world forever.

RIGHT: Chief John Mutele ... the members of his 10 000-strong tribe are adamant that they do not want mining in the area; they want ecotourism.



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Fouché recognised their great importance, and began to negotiate with the owner of Greefswald for excavation rights. A year later, Greefswald was bought by the government, and the right to excavate the site was granted to the University of Pretoria. The university has been excavating at Mapungubwe and a second site close by, called K2 (or Bambandyanalo), ever since.

These sites have never been open to the public. Today, Mapungubwe and Greefswald form part of the Vembe Nature Reserve, which in turn has been earmarked as the core area of a new national park. The future of the site is under discussion, as is that of the artifacts; they may be displayed in a small museum, either at Mapungubwe or elsewhere.

The years of excavations on the virtually undisturbed sites have yielded a wealth of finds.

According to Prof André Meyer, current head of the university's department of anthropology and archaeology, discoveries at the site include ceramic objects belonging to the Chinese Song Dynasty, dating back to between 960 and 1279. The pottery must have influenced the people of K2 and Mapungubwe, because the shape of spherical pots from K2 and gold-plated bowls from Mapungubwe hill vaguely resemble the Song ware.

Researchers have found human and animal graves, solid floors and burnt huts, hearths made of stones and pottery kilns. They have also found a many portable objects, including pottery figurines of humans and domesticated animals, copper ornaments, ivory bangles, weapons and tools made of iron, glass beads, pottery vessels, and ostrich egg shell beads.

On K2, there were also two mounds of stone which the archaeologists interpreted as so-called Heitzi-Elibib cairns, used for worship.

In turn, these finds have helped scholars to construct a picture of the pre-colonial history of the subcontinent. And this differs quite radically from the officially sanctioned version of southern African history, typically taught in our schools.

Prof Tom Huffman, head of the department of archaeology of the University of the Witwatersrand, takes up this part of our story.

From about 300 AD, he says, Bantu people were living in the Limpopo area, near Louis Trichardt, near the Waterberg and even as far as Broederstroom. They lived roughly as people in rural areas live today – a chief, a kraal, cattle and goats, sorghum and millet crops.

These people had moved down from Nigeria and the Cameroons via Angola and East Africa, mostly because of population pressure. The Sahara, which was then mostly green, was drying out, and the desert was expanding. And people were always on the move to find more fertile ground and more grazing.

Until about 900 and 1000 AD, in that area, society was structured in the same way as it is today among Nguni people, with the ruling chief passing

on his chieftainship via his bloodline.

It was not an egalitarian society, but not class-based either. This involves people being stratified on the basis of material possessions.

It was a patrilineal society, where people were seen as deriving their bloodline from their fathers. There was a form of lobola, where a value was set on the bride, usually a quantity of cattle which the groom's family had to pay.

In about 900 AD, something like an economic boom occurred. First the weather became warmer and wetter, so that crops grew faster and more prolifically, and cattle prospered. And further up in Africa, the Islamic empire was growing.

Afro Muslims were interested in obtaining ivory and gold. At some point they discovered alluvial gold washing down the Limpopo river, and set up a trading centre near its banks. They started to trade in ivory with the locals.

'Trade started to move inland. We know there was some trade between the area near Mapungubwe and the coast, because on the farm now called Schroda, near to Mapungubwe, ivory chips and glass beads have been found.

'The centre of the trading area was later unimaginatively called K2. The other name is Bambandyanalo.

'Then some proto Shona-speaking people moved into K2 and took over the trade. The people that had been there before fled westwards towards what would become Botswana, and settled in the Palapye and Serowe areas.'

This may have been the first financially motivated hostile takeover in southern Africa.

K2 expanded to become quite a big centre for those days, with about 3 000 people living around a central point.

From being a subsistence-based political and economic structure, society's political power was now based on who controlled the wealth – the beginning of the South African way.

In a subsistence society, any wealth is redistributed via the chief. But now a situation was developing, because of the trade, where there was so much wealth that it could not be redistributed properly.

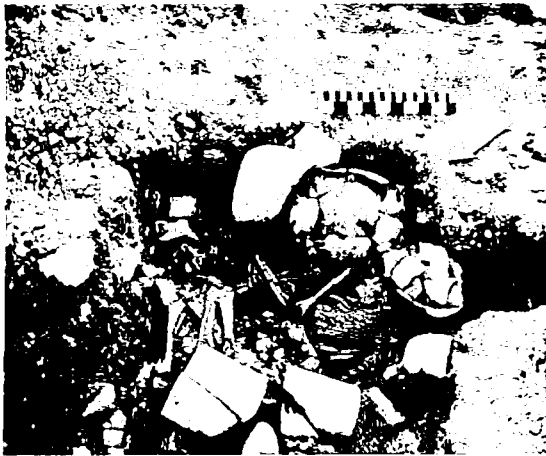
This was the start of a wealthy ruling class. The chief now became a type of king, a spiritual ruler distanced from the rest of his people. He lived in isolation.

Huffman says he estimates it took the people around Bambandyanalo a good 100 years or so to evolve into a class-based society, and possibly another 100 to realise it.

At some stage they moved the cattle kraal out of its traditional place in the middle of the settlement to the edge, and the men's court, or decision-making area, with its own waste site (middens) took its place. Priorities were changing.

And once they had realised it, in around 1220, they must have started looking for a place to live

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that echoed the way their society was developing. That place was Mapungubwe, where their leader could live in isolation, above all his people, on a virtually unscalable hill. Below lived about 5 000 people, who may not have known what the chief-king did, or even if he was alive or dead.

It was at Mapungubwe that the three golden rhinos were made out of finest gold leaf, with gold nails attaching the thin layers to the wooden carvings underneath.

The rhinos were found in graves. Huffman speculates that these were the graves of a chief, his sister, who represented the female side of the kingdom, and his brother, who would have been an adviser. The bodies in the graves were found on top of the hill and sitting upright in their graves, which indicates that the people had been of high status.

The significance of the three rhinos is harder to understand. Rhinos are unpredictable, dangerous, powerful beasts. Maybe that's why they were chosen.

Without Arab influence, and the value they attach to gold, these objects would never have been made, because at the time gold had no intrinsic value to the Bantu people. Now it had come to represent wealth, and moreover, they could afford the luxury of using the gold for ceremonial objects, such as the gold bowl and sceptre, instead of trading it.

But the golden age of Mapungubwe didn't last long – only until 1290, when a little ice age descended upon the world, and the climate became colder and drier. With less rain, there were fewer crops and fewer cattle. Mapungubwe was abandoned. Palapye was also abandoned, and people retreated to good grazing areas.

One of these areas was Great Zimbabwe, also known as the Zimbabwe ruins. The stone walling here is better and bigger. The trade was carried on by the new people. Maybe some had come from the old Mapungubwe – maybe only the leader. Others went into the Venda mountains. The people who live there now are the direct descendants of these people.

Meanwhile, Great Zimbabwe grew in size and importance. It supported around five or six times the number people that Mapungubwe had – maybe 18 000



at its peak. But then, in about 1420, it all fell apart. Nobody knows exactly why. In his book *My People: the writings of a Zulu witchdoctor*, the historian and traditional healer Credo Mutwa speculated that it was a combination of the wrath of the Nguni people for past blood crimes, and the perversity and lewdness of the Zimbabwe leaders that brought down a once mighty civilisation.

Other historians have suggested less exciting causes, such as running out of resources like water and wood.

The people scattered again. Huffman says he thinks some of them then came back south and joined or started Thulamela, in the northern Kruger National Park. (See page 18)

And what was happening in the rest of South Africa while civilisations were rising and falling near the Limpopo? According to Huffman, this country was fairly well populated by Bantu people, who were evolving their own languages and cultures, by the 14th century.

So, in the end, part of the secret of Mapungubwe is that the generally accepted notion – as taught in our schools – that Bantu people moved down into South Africa at the same time as the whites were moving north, is so much bunkum.

It shows up this 'official' version of our history for what it is – a retrospective attempt, under the previous government, to justify white occupation of most of South Africa's land.

It is high time this history is rewritten.

• *J C O van Graan's account is based on an interview conducted by Chris van der Merwe, published in the June 1984 edition of Flying Springbok. The author would like to thank Flying Springbok for its permission to use it.*

• *Thanks also to Prof André Meyer, head of the University of Pretoria's department of anthropology and archaeology, and Prof Tom Huffman, head of the University of the Witwatersrand's department of archaeology, for their help in putting this story together.*

ABOVE LEFT: A burial site at K2, found in 1974.

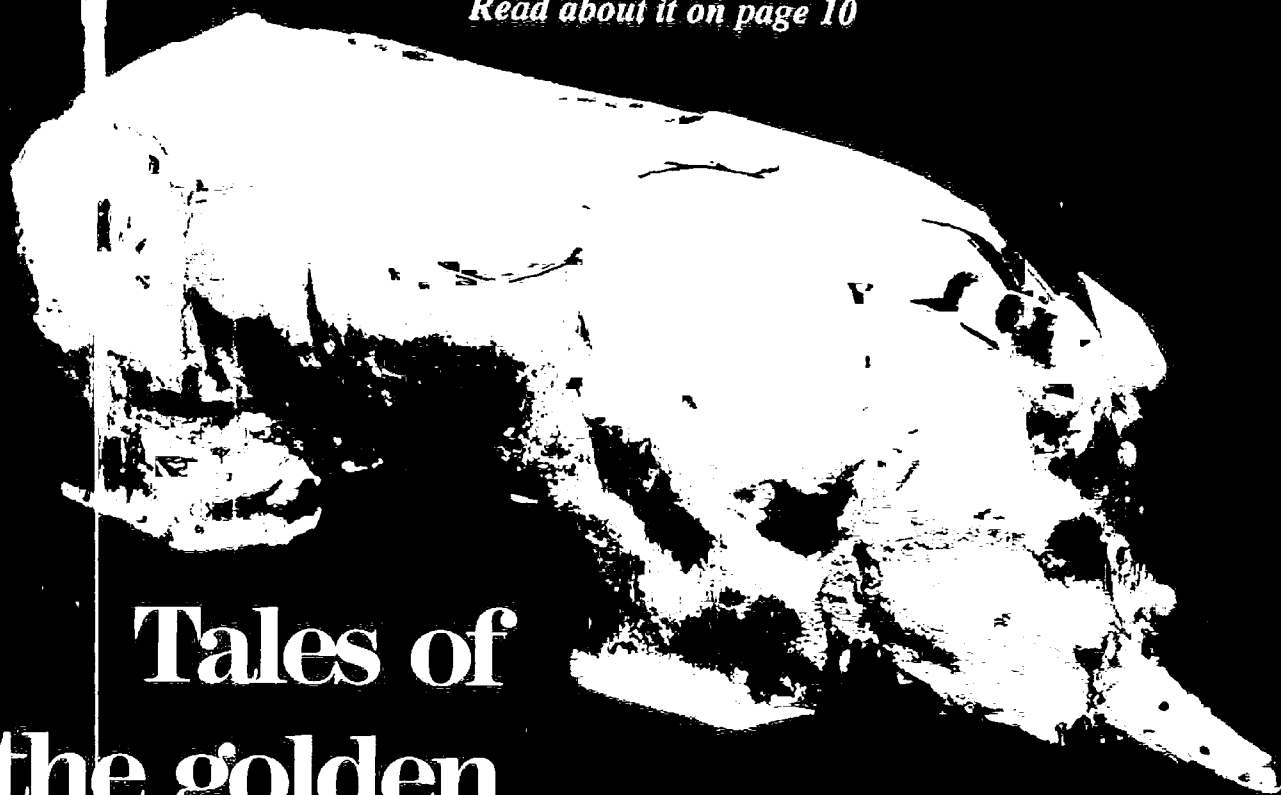
ABOVE: Excavations in progress at K2.

October/
November 1995

Track

This figurine, made of gold leaf nailed on to a wooden form, was found earlier this century at a site called Mapungubwe in the far northern Transvaal. Why has it remained largely unknown? And what does it tell us about southern African history?

Read about it on page 10



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- True confessions of a failed varmint hunter
- Ivory, rhino horn and the CCB



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