

Mapungubwe: The first state in southern Africa 1220–1300

We don't know what name the people themselves used for the kingdom. *Mapungubwe* is the modern name of the hill on which the ancient kings lived. It means "the place of the jackals". Today we use this name for the whole kingdom.

Kings and sacred leadership



Mapungubwe hill

Mapungubwe hill is surrounded on all sides by steep cliffs. To get to the top of the hill, you have to climb up wooden poles wedged into a crack in the cliffs. Some people say that this was to protect the people in case of war. But archaeologists do not think this is correct. Only a very few people lived on the hill, and archaeologists have found no evidence that Mapungubwe was ever attacked.

The Venda people, who live near Mapungubwe, have always known and respected Mapungubwe hill as a special place where ancient kings once lived. They believe that the chief's house should always be built in the highest place where they are closest to the spirits of the ancestors of the community.

People feared and honoured the king because they believed that the spirits of the king's ancestors looked after all the people in the kingdom. Some people believe that the spirits of the kings still live on top of Mapungubwe hill.

New words

estimate:
a guess about the size, age or cost of something

dwelling: places in which people live; another name for houses

The first stone-walled palace on the hill

The kings of Mapungubwe lived on the hill with their families and servants and were separated from the other people living in the town below. The people carried rocks to build large flat areas on top of the hill. They built large houses for their kings on these flat areas.

Archaeologists used scientific methods to find out the age of wooden poles used to build the houses. They **estimate** that the first **dwelling**s were built on top of the hill in about 1 000 AD. The hill was abandoned in about 1275 AD.

The significance of Mapungubwe hill

By living on top of Mapungubwe hill, the kings were showing their power by living close to the ancestors. They could not be seen by most ordinary people, who feared and respected them.

The town of Mapungubwe

This is the view of the valley from the top of Mapungubwe. In the time of the ancient kingdom, this valley would have been filled with the homesteads of the ordinary people of the kingdom.



Until about 1270 AD, Mapungubwe was the biggest town in the whole of southern Africa. Archaeologists have found the ruins of many smaller towns on both sides of the Limpopo river. The chiefs' homesteads were smaller than the king's, but they were also built on higher ground behind stone walls. Chiefs used the same kind of pottery and glass beads as the kings at Mapungubwe.

Historians believe that the kings of Mapungubwe ruled over a large and well-organised kingdom that traded goods from the other kingdoms as far as India and China. Lesser chiefs would hunt for skins and ivory, or mine gold, which they paid to the ruler as **tribute**. In return, the ruler rewarded them with the imported luxury goods that they wanted. Only the king could organise the trading expeditions that took African goods to the Arab traders at the coast.

The rulers at Mapungubwe owned large herds of cattle. How did they manage large herds without destroying the environment?

Historians think that royal cattle were looked after by people in the surrounding towns and villages. Perhaps young men from the villages looked after the king's cattle in many different parts of the land. The rulers could also have used the young men as soldiers to hunt for ivory and dig for gold. But only the king could trade with the Arabs at the coast.

New word

tribute: gifts given to a chief or ruler to show respect

Activity 1

Describe what living in Mapungubwe would have been like

Imagine that you lived in Mapungubwe in AD 1200. Write a story about your daily life. You can choose to be a craftsperson, an ivory hunter, a gold miner, a potter, a cattle herder or even the king. Illustrate your story and place it in your portfolio.

New words

terraces: flat areas on sloping ground made by building a wall and filling up the space behind it

ornaments: things that we have because they are beautiful, not because they are useful

symbol: a mark, sign or picture that has special meaning

Distinct social classes

We have already learnt that the king and his family lived on top of the hill, while others lived in the valley below.

When we compare what archaeologists have found on top of the hill with what they find in the valley, we can see that the people on top of the hill lived very differently from the ordinary people. Their huts were much bigger and finely decorated. They were built on large flat terraces that had been made by hundreds of people carrying stone and soil to the top of the hill for their kings. This shows that Mapungubwe was not an equal society. The king and his relatives were richer than other people and had great power over them. They were a ruling class.

Symbols of royal power and political leadership

Let us look at some of the other things that archaeologists have found to see what they tell us about how the kings at Mapungubwe lived.



The Mapungubwe gold rhinoceros

On the hill, archaeologists found the graves of some of the kings. They had been buried with lots of glass beads, imported Chinese glazed pottery, fine cloth from India, gold and copper ornaments and specially shaped clay pots and bowls.

The rhinoceros is made of wood covered in thin gold sheets. In the traditions of the Venda and Shona people who live in the region today, the black rhinoceros is a symbol of strength and power. The gold rhinoceros was a sign of the power of the king.

In the graves on the hill, they found thousands of imported glass beads of the type made in India hundreds of years ago. Nowhere else has such a collection been found. Only a very powerful king could have owned so many rare and expensive things.

The pottery used by the kings and their families on the hill was very different from that used by the ordinary people in the valley. It was finely made and finely polished, with special decorations that were only used for the king's pots. This was made by specialist potters for very important people.

The graves on the hill also contained finely carved and polished ivory bangles. Ivory is made from the tusks of elephants. When anyone killed an elephant, they had to give one tusk to the king.

Activity 2 is a formal assessment activity.

Activity 2 Write about symbols of power

- 1 Provide evidence to show the Mapungubwe had two different social classes: a rich and powerful ruling class and a class of ordinary people? [5]
- 2 What did the kings of Mapungubwe use to show off their wealth and power? [5]

Total: 10 marks



Imported glass beads found in the graves of the kings



Royal pottery from Mapungubwe



Ivory fragments from Mapungubwe

Trade across Africa and the Indian Ocean

How did the rulers of Mapungubwe get the glass beads, glazed pottery and cloth? And who wanted ivory and gold from Africa?

To answer these questions, we need to start at the other side of the Indian Ocean.

Arab traders

The people who live in North Africa and the Middle East are called Arabs. Most Arabs are Muslims. Arab traders sailed down the African coast and across the Indian Ocean to India and China in small sailing boats called dhows. They exchanged ivory and gold from Africa with the kings of India and China who paid for them with glass beads, glazed pottery and fine cotton cloth.

African groups living on the East coast of Africa absorbed the culture and Muslim religion of the Arabs. These people became known as the Swahili. The Swahili language is a mix of African languages and Arabic. It is spoken all over East Africa today.