



McDONALD INSTITUTE CONVERSATIONS

The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

Technologies, ontologies and agents

Edited by Chris Wingfield, John Giblin & Rachel King



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with contributions from

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Published by:

McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research
University of Cambridge
Downing Street
Cambridge, UK
CB2 3ER
(0)(1223) 339327
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www.mcdonald.cam.ac.uk



McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2020

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ISBN: 978-1-913344-01-6

On the cover: Chapungu – the Return to Great Zimbabwe, 2015, by *Sethembile Msezane*,
Great Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe. Photograph courtesy and copyright the artist.

Cover design by Dora Kemp and Ben Plumridge.
Typesetting and layout by Ben Plumridge.

Edited for the Institute by James Barrett (*Series Editor*).

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Acknowledgements

This volume is the ultimate result of a conference with the same title, held on 27–29 October 2016 to mark the opening of the British Museum exhibition *South Africa: the art of a nation*. The conference was a collaboration between the British Museum, where John Giblin was Head of Africa Section at the time, and the University of Cambridge, where Chris Wingfield was a Curator at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and Rachel King was Smuts Research Fellow at the Centre of African Studies. We are each grateful to those institutions and our colleagues there for supporting us in hosting this conference.

We are also grateful for the financial support offered for the conference by the Centre of African Studies and the Smuts Memorial Fund at Cambridge, who each funded the participation of one South African scholar. We also extend our thanks to Peter Mitchell and Paul Lane for supporting our funding applications. We are especially grateful to the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, and to Cyprian Broodbank in particular, for considering our request for funding and then offering to double it, even if this offer came with the condition that at least some of the conference be held in Cambridge – which involved us attempting to lure assembled scholars onto a 7 a.m. coach for the British Museum with promises of fresh coffee and croissants, the morning after the conference dinner! Not everyone made it....

The combined funding enabled us to invite Same Mdluli, David Morris and Justine Wintjes, whose work is included in this volume, as well as Mbongiseni Buthelezi and Carolyn Hamilton to participate in the conference. We were especially honoured to hold the

very first launch of Carolyn and Nessa Leibhammer's edited volume, *Tribing and Untribing the Archive*, at the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology as part of the conference programme.

The ongoing support of the McDonald Institute in making this publication possible is deeply appreciated – especially that of James Barrett, Emma Jarman and Ben Plumridge. We are also grateful to two anonymous reviewers of the volume for their comments and support, and to Mark McGranaghan for his assistance with standardizing the diacritics for languages that were never supposed to be written down!

As editors, we are especially grateful for the forbearance of the contributors to this volume over the period of four years that has elapsed between the conference and the publication of this volume. As a mitigating circumstance, we would just note that as well as a wedding, a baby and a family relocation to Cape Town and back between us, each of us has also moved to new jobs in new cities during that period – Rachel to the Institute of Archaeology at University College London where she is now Lecturer in Cultural Heritage Studies, John to National Museums Scotland, where he is now Keeper for the Department of World Cultures, and Chris to the Sainsbury Research Unit at the University of East Anglia, where he is now Associate Professor in the Arts of Africa. We can only hope that the extended period has enabled each of the papers in this volume to develop to a fuller maturity!

Chris Wingfield
John Giblin
Rachel King

Chapter 12

Art and the everyday: gold, ceramics and meaning in thirteenth-century Mapungubwe

Ceri Ashley & Alexander Antonites

[A] remarkable discovery in the Transvaal: a grave of unknown origin, containing much gold-work, found on the summit of a natural rock stronghold in a wild region (Illustrated London News, 8 April 1933).

Towering into the sky, the Mapungubwe Gallery demands attention, bringing Africa's glorious ancient past right into today's discussion about art and heritage, art and value, and art and the human condition (University of Pretoria 2019a).

Mapungubwe – ‘discovered’¹ on the eve of 1933, is now a World Heritage Site, managed by the South African National Parks, and widely regarded as home to the first state society in southern Africa. It was here, according to site lore, that four European farmers persuaded a young boy to lead them to a fabled hill, long known and revered by the local community, and where they found gold rich burials, which we can now date to around the thirteenth century AD. Jerry van Graan, the nephew of the lead protagonist, was a student at the University of Pretoria, and informed the university of this find, leading to a series of excavations undertaken to explore this ‘remarkable discovery’ (Fouché 1937; Gardner 1963). Three of the burials stand out. The original gold burial – M1 – was found by van Graan *et al.*, and included within the spoils were the fragments of gold foil that were refitted to form the now famous gold rhino as well as a hollow gold bowl. Two other burials that contained gold were later unearthed during early excavations – M5 associated with a gold sceptre and M7 where c. 100 gold bangles and ±12,000 gold beads weighing six pounds were found (Steyn 2007). These lavish grave finds led to the assumption that the interred individuals were of high status, royalty even. This

gold, particularly the rhino, has come to stand as a symbol of indigenous history and artistic achievement (e.g. Carruthers 2006; King 2011). The government of Thabo Mbeki introduced a new national honour in 2002 – the order of Mapungubwe – with Nelson Mandela as its first platinum recipient. It’s perhaps then no surprise that when the University of Pretoria was planning the ambitious new Javett Art Centre and gallery, opened in September 2019, the decision was made to have a dedicated space for the Mapungubwe gold, valorizing the achievements of the past alongside contemporary arts. For the curators of the British Museum *South Africa: the art of a nation* exhibition (27 October 2016 to 26 February 2017), these objects are significant for their place in an emerging sculptural tradition in South Africa, and are clearly symbols of aesthetic achievement, innovation and power:

The sculptures found in the grave testify not only to the appearance in South Africa's artistic heritage of a new sculptural medium, gold, but also to a new purpose for figurative sculpture, as an indicator of royal status (Giblin & Spring 2016, 57).

Similarly, the curator responsible for the Mapungubwe gold at the University of Pretoria has described them as ‘South Africa’s crown jewels’ (Tiley 2004), and in the run-up to the British Museum exhibition, compared them with the Staffordshire gold hoard or Tutankhamun gold mask. She concluded ‘The world needs to see this rhino. The world needs to see this collection’ (Smith 2015).

However, more than just gold was found by these early visitors. One photograph of the original gold burial stands out; a depression in the soil from where the human remains have already been removed, metal bangles poking out from the cut section, and in

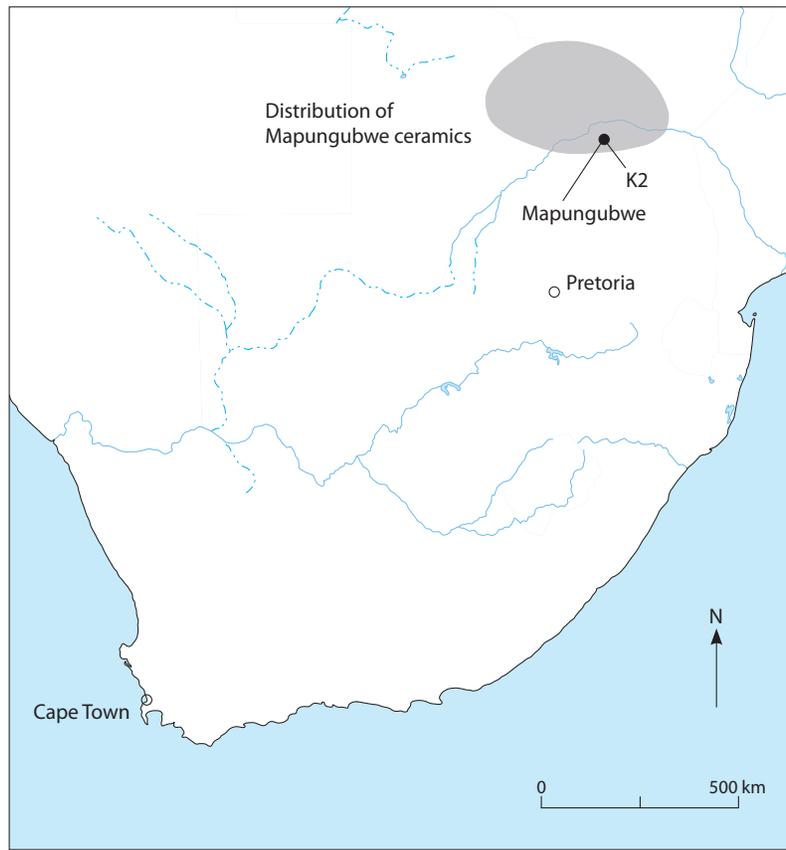


Figure 12.1. Map showing the sites mentioned in this chapter and the distribution of Mapungubwe ceramics following Huffman (2007, 285).

the foreground, the rim of a complete circular bowl (Fig. 12.2). As Fouché later described it 'Under the left arm or, as it seemed to the searchers, on the left hand, a beautiful black bowl, exquisitely made and polished, was found' (1937, 2). Photographs from the later excavation in September 1934 of M5 – the sceptre skeleton – show the excavator, Van Tonder, next to the grave, with human remains clearly visible,² as well as the gold sceptre itself (Steyn 2007, 143; Fig. 12.3). Once again a circular open bowl is clearly discernible, while another complete example was also found inverted. A number of pots were also found near the M7 burial (Steyn 2007).

Echoing Fouché, early commentators and researchers of Mapungubwe consistently remark on the finesse and beauty of the Mapungubwe ceramics. Schofield, who analysed the ceramics for the 1937 excavation report, described the characteristic ceramics which he terms M_1 as 'A fine ware of which the best examples are beautifully decorated and burnished a deep black' (Fouché 1937, 36), while an open bowl from the grave 11 is described as 'one of the most beautiful pieces of pottery discovered there' (Fouché 1937, 37). Indeed, this red burnished and elaborately decorated bowl is reproduced in one of the few colour plates in the volume, juxtaposed against the gold bowl

from the original gold burial creating a sense of equal value and symmetry between the gold/ceramic forms (Fouché 1937, Plate C).

In contrast, comments on the gold objects themselves are much more sparing in their aesthetic praise. Describing the original grave discovery, Fouché states:

They found large pieces of plate gold, some of them shaped. These were the remains of little rhinoceroses which had consisted of thin plate gold tacked by means of little gold tacks on to some core of wood or other substance which had perished. Solid gold tails and ears, beautifully made, had likewise been tacked on to these figures (Fouché 1937, 2).

Van Riet Lowe, recounting the later excavation by Van Tonder, notes the recovery of '70 ounces of finely wrought gold ornaments' (1936, 285). Whereas the craftsmanship and beauty of the ceramics is remarked on, for the gold, its volume is the primary distinguishing feature in most narratives. Fouché seems to be mainly alone in describing the 'beautifully made' ears and tail, and by and large, where a descriptive qualifier is required for the gold itself, a slightly affectionate diminutive tone emerges in the sprightly



Figure 12.2. Image showing partially excavated grave, including gold grave goods, at Mapungubwe. Note the circular rim of the ceramic bowl in the foreground. Depictions of human remains remain sensitive, especially in southern Africa (see also Note 2) and are only reproduced here as this image is already in wide circulation and clearly demonstrates the direct association of ceramics with the burial. Photograph courtesy and copyright Mapungubwe Archive, University of Pretoria.



Figure 12.3. Photograph reproduced in Fouché showing Van Tonder triumphally positioned alongside the excavation of the M5 sceptre grave at Mapungubwe. Depictions of human remains remain sensitive, especially in southern Africa (see also Note 2) and are only reproduced here as this image is already in wide circulation and clearly demonstrates the direct association of the gold and ceramics together. Photograph courtesy and copyright Mapungubwe Archive, University of Pretoria.

'little' rhinoceros. Indeed, with characteristic withering eloquence, Gertrude Caton-Thompson, clearly had no time for the little gold rhino at all, and outlines its malevolent influences (in contrast to that of the 'fine pottery'):

Potsherds lay everywhere and search in the loose soil yielded the explorers iron tools and copper wire and gold ... gold the bane of archaeology, responsible for more pitiable destruction of historical evidence than ever followed in the wake of savage armies. Here the vile metal consisted of thin gold plates beaten into sheathing for carved figurines of rhinoceros and other objects, fixed with small gold tacks; of bangles, beads. And, more important, iron and a fine pottery bowl. These lay with burial remains which, in the circumstances of the excavation, did not survive intact (Caton-Thompson 1939, 325).

The ceramics from Mapungubwe were clearly remarked on by the archaeologists of the time, and were arguably more aesthetically valued than the gold objects. And yet none of these ceramics travelled to the British Museum for the exhibition, nor, at the time of writing, are they displayed in the prestigious new art gallery at the University of Pretoria. What makes these ceramics seemingly less valuable to museum visitors? Or to ask it another way, why is the gold such an object of public desire? There is undeniably a question of rarity; ceramics are ubiquitous across the landscape, whereas gold is rare, and with a few minor exceptions, only found at Mapungubwe during this period. Gold is also an easy comparative medium – Tiley-Nel using it to translate the value of Mapungubwe to a non-Africanist audience by comparing it to the gold in the Staffordshire hoard. And it seems to be this apparently universal value that continues to draw people's attention back to the gold rhino and its kin, and away from the humble pottery.³

The value of gold for many therefore seems axiomatic; would the Illustrated London News have written about Mapungubwe if there had just been ceramics? While the importance of gold as a new commodity of social hierarchy cannot be ignored (cf. Giblin & Spring 2016), we cannot make *a priori* assumptions about past material value systems. Gold is a globally recognized resource in the contemporary world, but there is great danger in projecting contemporary values onto the past, values which are often borne out of entrenched western praxis and ideas of wealth and success. In this paper we make the case for ceramics and their social importance, arguing that they, like the gold, need to be recognized as objects of art and significance.

What is art?

Like gold, the idea that art is a universally recognized commodity has come under sustained attack. In his 1996 paper, 'Vogel's net: traps as artworks and artworks as traps', Alfred Gell lays out three different approaches to the recognition of 'art' and artistic merit. The first, and the most widespread, is the universalist approach, which asserts that aesthetic quality is an achievement that is innately recognized and shared across humanity – the beauty of art transcends context. Art is undeniably art. This approach, he argues however, may have limited utility in many non-western and historic contexts where the very idea of art as an abstracted concept may not even exist (see also Gosden 2001). A more embedded definition might be that of what Gell terms the 'interpretive' approach, in which art is recognized as art, not because of some selective idea of aesthetics or material skill, but because it is articulated within a body of art historical thought that verifies its status. Gell uses Damian Hirst's shark in a tank as an exemplar. But once again, Gell offers the trenchant critique that this approach is still reliant on western tropes, in this case the privileging of the art historical academy as an arbiter. The final option is the 'institutional' definition, which frees itself from the constrictions of western art history, and rather demands that art is something that can be triangulated within some form of conceptual and symbolic milieu. To illustrate his arguments, Gell draws on Susan Vogel's curated exhibition 'ART/artifact' in the Centre for African Art in New York, and which featured Central African material culture (Vogel 1988). The opening gallery contained a Zande fishing net and nothing else. For Gell, this is a powerful act – the traditional idioms of 'African art' as accepted by the academy are ignored, and a seemingly functional item, or 'artifact' in Vogel's parlance, is elevated to the status of art. Gell argues that this functional artefact captures and entwines meaning for the Zande, just as it entwines the fishes it is designed to catch, and as such is an object of art.

One of the other examples provided is that of the Angave eel traps from Papua New Guinea studied by Pierre Lemonnier. These objects are nominally made to catch eels, but as Lemonnier (2016) demonstrates, they are intricately connected with the mythical story of the origins of eels and masculinity. In his recent volume *Mundane Objects: Materiality and Non-verbal Communication*, Lemonnier (2016) returns to these traps, setting them alongside a series of other case studies – from garden fences to dinky car toys – to explore the valency of these seemingly mundane and functional items. As Lemonnier expounds, while the

eel trap appears to be a functional object – designed to catch eels as part of an end-of-mourning event – their construction and the level of power harnessed in the spring that closes the trap around the imprisoned eel, goes well beyond the essential mechanical requirements of the object, and instead shows the ‘extravagant precautions’ (Lemonnier 2016, 55) taken in the making of this object. Or as he summarizes in another chapter about garden fences among the nearby Baruya, the objects under study are ‘too sturdy to be mundane’ (Lemonnier 2016, 21–44). What does he mean by these statements? In essence, Lemonnier is making the case that everyday objects can be imbricated in wide-ranging and powerful social mores, and are actually often agents within these practices, creating and enabling meaning and symbolism. For the garden fences, the elaborate and extended construction is a means of cohering social groups, for the eel traps, the latent power of the trap actually *creates* the power of the eel. However, as Lemonnier notes ‘There is nothing new in the idea that objects “render tangible” or “actualise” in a performative way important aspects of social organisation, culture, systems of thoughts, or actions’ (Lemonnier 2016, 128). Introducing the idea of the perissological resonator, Lemonnier instead argues instead that these objects are also able to distil and concentrate larger norms through the repetition and reinforcement of these rules for living, acting at different registers. However, these objects cannot stand alone in creating meaning they are tied up (or ‘bundled’ as Lemonnier suggests in reference to Webb Keane’s ideas) with other ideas, memories, practices and protocols, and thus need to ‘thought together’ (Lemonnier 2016, 129).

What does this mean for the Mapungubwe gold objects and ceramics? As Gell and others have argued, there is a powerful reason to reject the universalist notion of art as aesthetic or visual, not least for the Eurocentric foundations on which aesthetics is built. Similarly, we cannot rely on a system of value that draws from tropes of modernity and privileges certain world views and cosmologies. One might argue that the focus on the Mapungubwe gold rhino, well intentioned as it has been, falls within this latter category as it presupposes the importance of gold as an axiom of success, a notion that is steeped in the brine of modern society. Instead, Gell and Lemonnier are suggesting that everyday objects, functional objects apparently far removed from abstracted notions of art, can be viewed as art for their positionality within larger a nexus of meaning and resonance (Gell), and their perissological ability to create and interpret such webs (Lemonnier). And it is here, we suggest, that we can re-examine the ceramics from Mapungubwe. In the

remainder of this paper we will use the examples of Mapungubwe ceramics to argue that these mundane objects, were, like Lemonnier’s garden fences, too beautiful to be mundane, and in fact, were reservoirs of meaning that helped create and reinforce the very idea of Mapungubwe-ness. If the gold rhino encapsulates a system of value and prestige that makes it art, then so too, do the humble ceramics.

Exploring Mapungubwe

In order to make this argument, it is necessary to explore the larger context in which these ceramics were made and used. To date, our conversation has been focused on the objects themselves, and the responses of excavators and curators to specific items. However, following Gell and Lemonnier, this approach is potentially limited, and such objects need to be appreciated through a situated understanding of the socio-political context of their creation and use.

Mapungubwe is widely regarded as the capital of the first state system in southern Africa (Huffman 2000, 2009; although see Chirikure *et al.* 2013).⁴ Occupied in the thirteenth century, it was a hub for trade networks, including objects flowing from the Indian Ocean such as glass beads that were originally produced in south Asia (Robertshaw *et al.* 2010). According to this model, such material wealth latched onto older prestige systems such as cattle ownership, and facilitated the emergence of an elite class, who occupied the hilltop in a spatial and conceptual expression of their distance from the commoner classes who lived at the base of the hill. And it was on this hilltop that the elite were buried, complete with their gold, ceramics, and imported glass beads. Crucially, this period also marks a time of expansion into distant hinterlands, as the authority of the hilltop elite was pushed further into new territories with a tiered systems of settlements spreading across the landscape of northern South Africa, southern Zimbabwe and eastern Botswana. Communities from these sites were instrumental in reinforcing the power of the central elite as they would have provided tribute in the form of crops and animals to help maintain the core economy, as well as rare goods such as gold, ivory and cotton, which were needed to barter for the Indian Ocean exotics. This integrated political economy did not appear from a pristine landscape however. From the eleventh century until around AD 1220, the nearby site of K2 was the largest community in the area, and it was here that nascent state system emerged with shifts towards increased socio-political inequality, as well as an increase in wealth driven status over older forms of gerontocratic and/or patriarchal authority. In

the early thirteenth century this build-up of seething wealth seems to have become consolidated in one lineage, and under their influence, the whole community shifted *en masse* a kilometre to the east, to occupy Mapungubwe, where the new elite formalized institutions of inequality through occupation of the hilltop and the creation of a ruling class.

Importantly, in contrast to other seismic political ruptures within this area, this shift is not attributed to the effect of incoming populations and social take-over; rather the K2 to Mapungubwe shift is one of internal political dynamics. This, it has been argued, can be seen in the pottery which shows close similarities between the K2 facies of the ceramics and the Mapungubwe facies (Huffman 2007).⁵ There is a continuation in many of the forms and shapes of the vessels and decorative continuity in patterns of incised lines and geometric motifs on the shoulders of the vessels. However, the transition is not without significant shifts, a point that was recognized by early excavators. Gardner (1959) devoted a whole paper to the ‘shallow bowls of Mapungubwe’ (albeit only two pages long!) in which he recounts how the 1939 excavation season confirmed his hunch that it was only in the later Mapungubwe period that the distinctive open bowls, mentioned at the outset of this paper, were found. This contrasts with the story of the distinctive beaker form of the K2 facies, which largely disappears in the Mapungubwe facies. Other forms that all but disappear include spouted vessels. Technologically and stylistically there are also other shifts at this time. Schofield, defined K2 ceramics as M_2 and Mapungubwe as M_1 , and notes the difference in clay and production quality: ‘The clay also varies greatly; occasionally pieces were found which equalled in finesse anything in Class M_1 ...but more often it was very coarse’ (Schofield in Fouché 1937, 38). In contrast, Mapungubwe pottery is frequently burnished to give the surface a polished sheen and shine. Decoration on both is the same in essential technique (incised decoration) and layout, with bands or triangles and lozenges located on the shoulder and neck. However, there is a subtle shift, (which provides an easy shorthand for surveying archaeologists to date sites they find!) for whereas the triangles/crescents of the K2 pottery generally point upwards, on Mapungubwe pottery there is a shift towards downward pointing motifs. These are very crude summaries of a very complex body of data, and variations occur which contradict these broad brush patterns, for example the intermediate TK2 facies (Huffman 2007, 282–3), which remains poorly understood. Nevertheless, on a macro scale, it is clear that whilst there are clear continuities in the ceramics – discernible similarities

that a user or archaeologist could identify from K2 to Mapungubwe – there are certain shifts, which we suggest may be meaningful.

How are pots being used?

Mapungubwe period pottery is ubiquitous. It has been estimated that during the height of Mapungubwe as a settlement, an area of *c.* 30,000 sq. km came under the influence of this polity; a distribution map has been built on the recovery of Mapungubwe ceramics across this region. In other words, for the archaeologist, Mapungubwe period sites are so-designated in the first instance because of the identification of their distinctive ceramics. This type of pottery then was made and used across the state. It has also been demonstrated that while ceramics conforming to the stylistic template were produced locally at the web of sites that constitutes the Mapungubwe state, some individual pots were also moving long distances within the Mapungubwe polity, and indeed, beyond. Compositional analysis of the ceramic fabric has shown how individual artefacts made at, or near, Mapungubwe travelled far to the south, to the Soutpansberg mountains, and west into what is now eastern Botswana. In the latter case, they moved beyond the area associated with Mapungubwe’s sphere of direct influence (Jacobsen *et al.* 1995; Jacobsen 2005; Wilmsen *et al.* 2009). Ceramics were thus being used across the polity on an everyday basis. Indeed, the repertoire of forms and sizes seems consistent with familial use patterns, with shapes that might be used for cooking, serving and storage. Outside of what might be described as commensal/communal use, ceramics were used in special event contexts such as the burials described above. Other examples of ceramics moving beyond the mundane include the use of sherds as crucibles in metal working at Mapungubwe itself, upsetting the traditional gender dynamics assumed for metallurgy (male) and pottery (female) (Chirikure *et al.* 2015). Another perhaps overlooked use is the frequent re-use of sherds as spindle whorls for spinning, presumably of cotton, and thus textile production (Antonites 2019). Interestingly, there appears to be little substantive difference between ceramics found at elite sites/elite areas and those which are associated with communities of lower social status. In recent work at the political hinterland, and at tiny sites which, according to the settlement hierarchy would have been at the very bottom of the model, we find the same forms re-appearing, and beautifully decorated and burnished ceramics are relatively frequent (e.g. Antonites & Ashley 2016). Mapungubwe ceramics were thus equally used by elites/commoners, in the core and periphery and in

a range of roles that goes beyond quotidian practice of food preparation, serving and storage.

Understanding Mapungubwe ceramics

The significance of ceramics within Mapungubwe society, above and beyond their functional role, has long been debated. A well established and enduring argument is that ceramics reflect ethnic and linguistic identity, an approach that has widespread application across eastern and southern Africa. Tracing patterns of similarity and divergence, pioneering archaeologists sought to piece together a family tree of ceramics as a proxy for population movement and the creation of distinct ethno-linguistic groups (e.g. Huffman 1970; Soper 1971; Phillipson 1976). For southern Africa, the work of Tom Huffman has been invaluable in fitting together the stylistic inter-relations between different ceramic branches and facies, and their concomitant producers (e.g. Huffman 2007). In a series of challenges to Huffman's approach, however, arguments have been put forward that suggest such direct one-to-one relationships are unrealistic, and assume a fixed approach to identity that is at odds with historic and modern lived experiences and ethnographies (Hall 1984a, b). Critiques have also been directed at the idea that ceramics are passive mirrors of an identity, and that this identity is imposed and then un-thinkingly repeated generation after generation by the use of the same styles of pottery. This critique chimes with more recent discourse which challenges the human/non-human binary and the notion that only humans can have affective agency and the ability to influence society (e.g. Olsen 2010; Witmore 2007). Within such an approach, ceramics and other non-human agents, are regarded as capable of influencing their surroundings through the emotional, physical or sensory effect they have.

So how can we think about the Mapungubwe ceramics, and the archaeological patterns observed? While there is clear continuity and overlap between K2 and Mapungubwe ceramics, it is perhaps worth trying to untangle the changes we do see, and the possible reasons behind these shifts. Why does the ceramic change in decoration from the upturned motif to the downturned, and why the shift in forms? The change of orientation is intriguing. It clearly refers back to a well-known and well established visual structure, but it subtly usurps it; it recalls the memory of something reassuringly familiar (upturned), but clearly signals a new iteration (downturned). This co-opting of a shared and accepted iconography would have helped create a sense of authenticity that under-wrote the new design, softening the difference, and embedding the

new ceramics within an authorized visual history. In effect, the augmented layout both heralds a changing political order of Mapungubwe, but at the same time draws legitimacy through the echoing of the earlier designs of K2.

The changes in the vessel forms is perhaps harder to untangle. Hattingh & Hall (2009) used ethnography to try and understand the role of beaker forms during the K2 period, and particularly their presence in burials. They found that beakers are most commonly found with juvenile burials, and there is some indication that the size of the vessel corresponds to the age of the deceased. Drawing on well-established ethnographic symbolism for ceramics more generally, they suggest the beaker is a metaphor for the womb and the process of procreation, and in the case of juvenile deaths, represents the incompleteness of the process with individuals that failed to reach maturity. With the shift to Mapungubwe, there is a noticeable decrease in the burial of juveniles. It is perhaps tempting to argue that this change could be attributed to a shift in political structure; Huffman (2007, 2009) has argued that the burial of juveniles with rich grave goods can be used as evidence of a focus on inherited status and wealth (children could not 'earn' such wealth in their lifetime), compared with previous gerontocratic authority structures at K2. If we shift forward, it may be that the change in burial from K2 to Mapungubwe also marks the political shift as a single lineage claimed absolute authority, with no space for competing lineages to lay claim to status through burials and hereditary rights.

As well as beakers, spouted vessels also disappear from the archaeological record at this time. Interestingly though, unlike the beakers which are frequently found in graves, these forms are recovered in domestic contexts and presumably would have been used for serving and pouring liquid. There is then perhaps a link between the disappearance of a liquid serving form (the spouted vessels) and that of a drinking vessel (the smaller beakers), which may mark a shift in certain ceremonies of consumption, be they domestic or special events (e.g. associated with burial). At around the same time, we see open bowls and plates appearing, another form whose shape strongly suggests a role within consumption and sharing, in this case solid/semi-solid foods, rather than liquid. While the precise uses of the beaker/spouted vessel versus the open bowl remains open for further investigation, they nevertheless form part of a similar continuum of food/drink consumption, and the shift from one set of practices and vessels to another marks a further example of subtle but significant disruptions in the ceramics at the twelfth/thirteenth century transition.

These shifts could be seen as part of a new world-order and political structure at the time of Mapungubwe's establishment. It is notable that this is a period of geographic expansion of influence into new areas. Ceramic use in these far flung areas might thus be regarded as part of a harmonizing strategy to forge connections between these new communities, as well as potentially providing a safety net of familiarity for new settlers in alien areas. It is also probable, that as the sphere of activity extended further and further away, new settlements would have involved those who were not directly familiar with the site of Mapungubwe and its structures, possibly even those who did not share an ethnic or linguistic heritage. Research in recent years has emphasized, for example, the continued importance and role of hunter-gatherer communities during this period, with evidence of coeval settlement on the same landscape and even co-settlements (e.g. Forssman 2013; Hall & Smith 2000; Van Doornum 2008). Ceramics in these contexts could have served as a visual and mental anchor for new settlers. It is also possible, that the emphasis on open bowls and plates – presumably designed for food serving and sharing – was a response to the need to create and reinforce new social relations and harness the emotive power of food sharing and exchange. Ceramics in this case, as Huffman (2007) has argued, may have been tools in the maintenance of identity. However, we suggest that this identity was not a primordial born-in identity of genetics and linguistic heritage, but a fabricated political identity created in a mosaic landscape of movement and new settlement and social relations. Moreover, there is no fixed nor centrally controlled identity that the ceramics passively reflect; ceramics were creatively used within the negotiation of localized dynamics, harking back to a sense of shared memory and unity, but like Lemonnier's perrissological resonators, capable of channelling and funnelling emotion to create new iterations of Mapungubwe-ness. Elsewhere we have argued that traditional understanding of the Mapungubwe state as a hierarchical top-down model fails to recognize the agency of its citizens (Antonites & Ashley 2016). Archaeology in the eastern hinterlands, for example, has demonstrated that tiny, seemingly insignificant communities, were tapping into long-distance trade networks and acting out their lives far away from the direct control and reach of those at Mapungubwe. At these sites, ceramics continued to be used, not as a sign of subjugation and suppression, but as a way to bring the distant community of Mapungubwe into local perspective, *choosing* to co-presence Mapungubwe, but yet politically and socially articulating at a local level. Ceramics were not mute vessels, pouring homogenous

symbolic meaning into their host communities; they were inchoate, bound up in a created memory, but not constrained by it.

Conclusion

In this examination of Mapungubwe ceramics we hope we have offered some thoughts on ways we might re-think the importance and significance of the ceramics made and used across the polity. We started by suggesting that the lustre of gold has unfairly put the accompanying ceramics in the shade, but by expanding our scope of understanding of what constitutes art, we can broaden our appreciation of the material realm. In closing, we offer a quotation from the introduction to Lemonnier's volume:

This book is about artefacts that aren't much to look at and yet are of crucial importance for those who make them, manipulate them, and also – but only 'also' – look at them. It is about objects that would not find their way into museum cases (Lemonnier 2016, 13).

Perhaps, in the future, we will come to appreciate these ceramics as objects that were carefully and complexly made, and were integral to the creation of the ancient polity of Mapungubwe.

Notes

1. The story of Mapungubwe's discovery is well known in popular archaeological narratives (e.g. being used by tour guides at the site) albeit with some minor variations. The term 'discovery' is however something of a misnomer as it presupposes no one was familiar with the site before Van Graan and colleagues visited. As the accompanying narrative clearly demonstrates, this was not the case, and the local community were long familiar with the locale. Indeed, there is also evidence that other European travellers had visited the site before the van Graan's, including the famous German ethnographer Leo Frobenius (Wintjes 2017) and a party of settlers from the town of Louis Trichardt in the Soutpansberg mountains (Tiley-Nel 2011; Wintjes 2017)
2. The depiction of human remains in public spaces and fora is an issue that has rightly attracted criticism and concern over the dehumanization of the individuals in question, and the legacy of colonial/apartheid regimes of oppression and othering (e.g. Rassool 2015). In the case of the Mapungubwe and K2 human remains held in Museums and Universities (including the University of Pretoria) all individuals were restituted and re-buried on site as part of reparations to descendent communities (e.g. see Schoeman & Pikirayi 2011). The photograph used here is in wide currency and freely available online, and offers an example of the attitudes of the period that

did not the same respect to buried individuals that would be offered now.

3. It should be noted that the curators of the British Museum exhibition actively included other ceramic objects from around this period in the exhibition, including anthropogenic and animal figurines from the nearby site of Schroda, as well as the Lydenburg Heads from kwa-Zulu-Natal in their narrative around the emergence of sculptural expression (Giblin & Spring 2016, 45–53). Sian Tiley-Nel from the University of Pretoria is also an advocate for the importance of archaeological ceramics from Mapungubwe, and curated an exhibition – Letsopa – in the UP Old Arts Building dedicated to these materials (University of Pretoria 2019b). However, it is notable that while the gold will travel to the new Javett Art Centre for the new display, there are no plans to include any ceramics.
4. The perspective offered here is what might be termed the standard narrative of Mapungubwe history. Recent work has challenged the primacy of the central site as the nexus of all power and authority (e.g. Antonites & Ashley 2016; Chirikure *et al.* 2013). While these perspectives add undoubted nuance, the aim of this paper is to offer a macro –perspective on larger socio-political dynamics.
5. Detailed description of ceramic typology is not included here as the intention is to examine large-scale patterns and possible meaning. For more details of typology see Huffman (2007).

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The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

In 2015, #RhodesMustFall generated the largest student protests in South Africa since the end of apartheid, subsequently inspiring protests and acts of decolonial iconoclasm across the globe. The performances that emerged in, through and around #RhodesMustFall make it clear how analytically fruitful Alfred Gell's notion that art is 'a system of social action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' can be, even when attempting to account for South Africa's very recent history.

What light can this approach shed on the region's far longer history of artistic practices? Can we use any resulting insights to explore art's role in the very long history of human life in the land now called South Africa? Can we find a common way of talking about 'art' that makes sense across South Africa's long span of human history, whether considering engraved ochre, painted rock shelters or contemporary performance art?

This collection of essays has its origins in a conference with the same title, arranged to mark the opening of the British Museum's major temporary exhibition *South Africa: the art of a nation* in October 2016. The volume represents an important step in developing a framework for engaging with South Africa's artistic traditions that begins to transcend nineteenth-century frameworks associated with colonial power.

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Published by the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research,
University of Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge, CB2 3ER, UK.

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Cover design by Dora Kemp and Ben Plumridge.

ISBN: 978-1-913344-01-6

