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Geological and cultural landscapes of the ancient Mapungubwe and Thulamela citadels

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Mapungubwe and Thulamela are isolated, resistant, Clarens sandstone mesas situated on the northern borders of South Africa in the Limpopo Valley. They are the sites of a complex society that dominated the trade route that extended from the Indian Ocean coast well into the interior of Africa, and along which trade flourished between about 1000 and 1300 CE.

Mapungubwe is situated on the south side of the Limpopo River, at a locality close to where it is joined by the Shashe River from the north, the latter forming the border between Botswana and Zimbabwe. It forms a 30m high, flat topped mesa within a mini-canyon land formed by the erosion into an ancient (post-African) land surface by small southern tributaries of the Limpopo river. Numerous cliff faces formed by light yellow to orange and brown weathering sandstone dominate the landscape. Dark, often columnar-jointed dolerite dykes form a dominantly east-west trending swarm, with remnant sills and lava flows giving rise to distinctive dark features. Between 1220-1300 CE, a prosperous city with an estimated population of 5000 arose around Mapungubwe hill. The royal class moved to the hilltop citadel with the lower class practicing agriculture on the surrounding flats. Mapungubwe is known for its well-crafted gold artefacts including the gold rhino.

The stone-walled citadel of the Thulamela archaeological site overlooks the Luvuvhu River in northern Kruger National Park. The site is situated on an up-faulted (horst) block of Clarens sandstone. Prominent sub-vertical faces occur on the north and south side of the hill, and display classical fault-induced slickensides and breccias. The site was first occupied around 1200 CE with the living area occupying the entire crest of the hill. Numerous artefacts were found, including gold beads and potshards used in the smelting of gold. Blue and white Chinese porcelain trading beads suggest trading with the east.

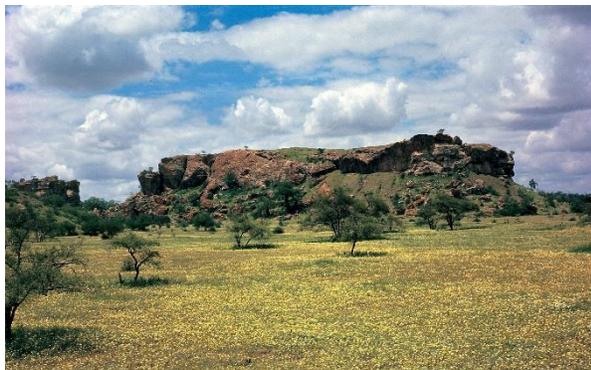


Figure 1: Clarens sandstone outlier forming the Mapungubwe hill mesa. Gold Rhino found at the site.



Figure 2: The stone-walled citadel of Thulamela, on a fault-bounded block of Clarens sandstone overlooking the Luvuvhu River of northern Kruger Park.

