

CHAPTER II

A PLACE WHERE RIVERS AND PEOPLE MET

The SLCA in the period AD 900 to AD 1300 was a place where not only rivers met, but where people from different cultures and economic modes of production came together. Once together, complex interactions resulted in a range of responses. One of the areas of interaction was ritual. This is not a new insight. Calabrese (2005) explored the ritual interaction between Leopard's Kopje and Leokwe peoples. Ritual interaction, however, was not limited to these farming communities. I argue that interaction united K2 farmers and hunter-gatherers in complex interpretations of traditional rain-control beliefs.

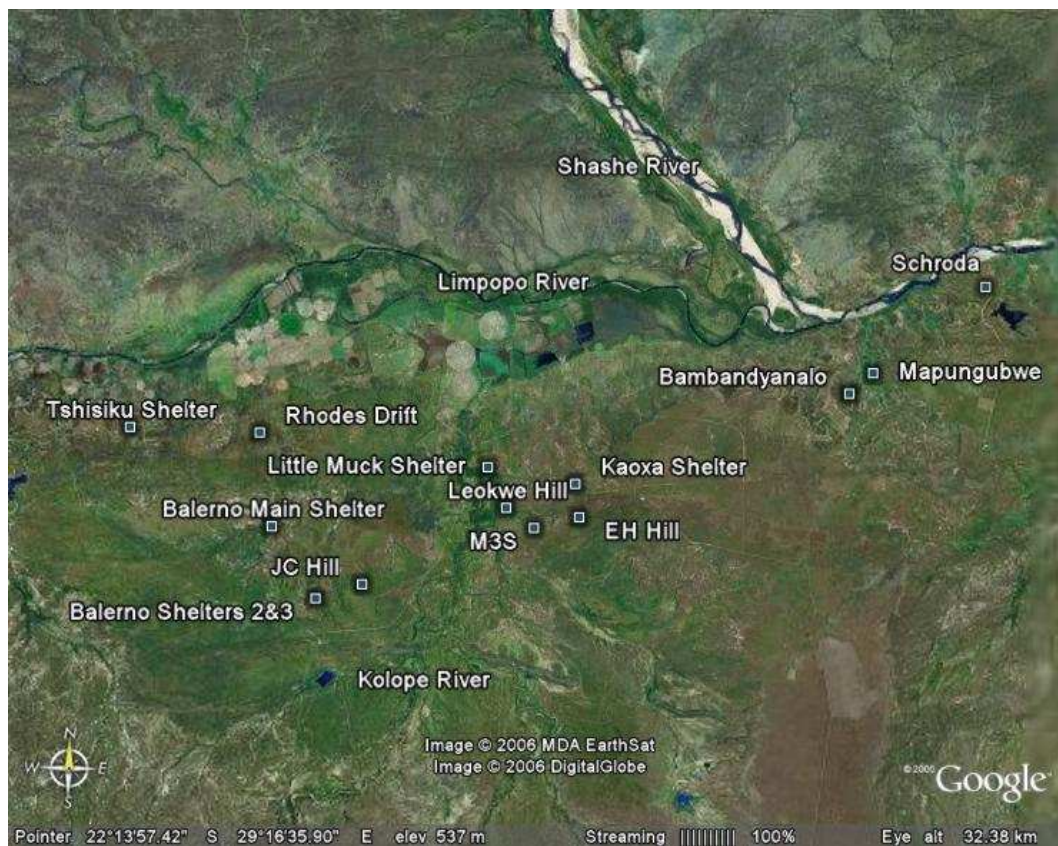


Figure II1. Google satellite image of the SLCA. The main sites discussed in the text are indicated.

The SLCA Occupation Sequence

SLCA religion developed in tandem with other aspects of the society. This close relationship requires that changes in ritual should not be studied in isolation. Consequently, I now outline the SLCA settlement sequence that provides the framework against which rain-control is interpreted.

The first group of people of importance to my project were Later Stone Age (LSA) hunter-gatherers. LSA material culture signatures occur in shelters in the valley from at least 11 120 – 10 890 BC (Van Doornum 2005). The shelters, however, were not just residential. Rock paintings testify to their ritual use (Eastwood and Cnoops 1999; Eastwood and Blundell 1999; Eastwood 2003). Hunter-gatherer activities, furthermore, were not confined to formal shelters; LSA tools erode out of boulder-shelters (S. Hall pers. comm. 2005) and hilltop sites. We do not know the group affiliation of these hunter-gatherers. It is possible that they are ancestral to either the Eastern Khoe San or the Shashi San (Fish 1998).

Farmers eventually joined the hunter-gatherers. Happy Rest and Mzonjani ceramic shards dating to AD 500 - AD 700 provide the first evidence of Eastern Bantu speaking people (Huffman 1989). These societies are patrilineal (cf. Hammond-Tooke 1993). Thus far no Happy Rest residential sites have been found in the SLCA.

In contrast, Zhizo homesteads were scattered in the valley between AD 900 and AD 1000. These farming communities established their capital at Schroda (Fig. II1), near the Limpopo River (Hanisch 1980, 1981). Towards the end of their control of the area, their capital might have moved to an as yet unexcavated site south of Leokwe hill (Fig. II1). Settlement by the Zhizo farming communities signalled the start of an SLCA economy focussed on agro-pastoralism and long distance trade.

The daga-floor houses at Schroda were arranged around a cattle kraal, and cattle were obviously important in the economy and worldview (Huffman 1996). In southern Africa, ancestors in cattle-centred worldviews play an important role in rituals (Hammond-Tooke 1985, 1993). Unfortunately, little is known about the Zhizo ritual landscape apart from initiation schools held at the Schroda capital.

Figurines found there have been interpreted as the remains of some kind of ritual, such as centralised initiation schools (Hanisch 2002). Zhizo ceramics are seldom found on hills, suggesting that they did not use hills in rituals.

The rainfall at this time was similar to the present range of between 350 and 500 mm per annum (Smith 2005). These climatic conditions suggest that the choice to move to the SLCA was not based on agricultural logic; rather it was to take advantage of the East Coast trade (Huffman 2000; Smith 2005), which presumably used the Limpopo River as a route into the interior. A key part of this trade was ivory, which like gold was a lucrative export commodity, and historical accounts record large amounts of ivory reaching Sofala from the interior (Kusimba 1999).

The low rainfall however did not preclude successful agricultural endeavours. According to Smith (2005) exploitation of wet areas amongst rocky outcrops and tributaries, and other creative farming could have contributed to some agricultural success. The population at Schroda may have been only 300 to 500 people (Huffman 2000), and this small population would not have required a large agricultural surplus.

Over time hunting for the ivory trade resulted in the displacement of elephants from the valley by AD 1000. This and other factors allowed farmers access to fertile soils of the Limpopo River flood plains (Fig. II2).

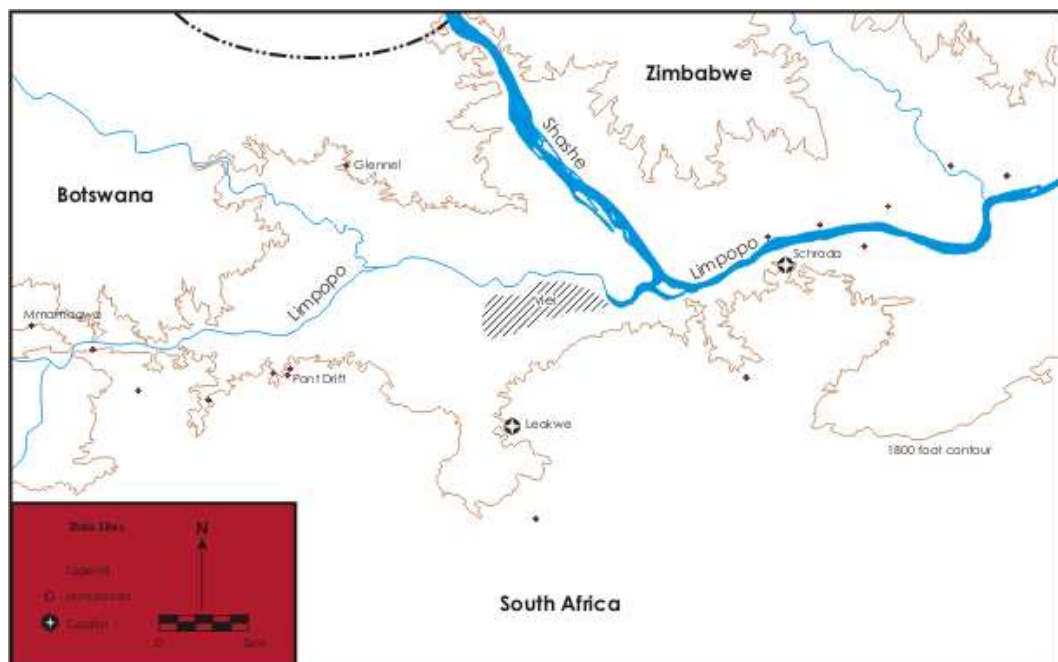


Figure II2. Distribution of Zhizo sites in the SLCA.

In general agro-pastoralists have a different relationship with the earth from hunter-gatherers. Their primary aim is to transform land and make it useful for farming. As long distance traders, their aim, however, also would have been to obtain export commodities and ensure a continued supply.

According to Van Doornum (2000, 2005), hunter-gatherers met the arrival of farmers with mixed responses. These responses are reflected in changes in LSA material culture. Whilst material culture might not reflect all the nuances of interaction, shifts in stone tool type and densities can provide valuable insights. At Tshisiku Shelter, there was no change in material culture between the pre/post-contact divide, signalling that they chose not to be affected by the arrival of the farmers. At Balerno Shelters 2 and 3 formal tools peak in the early contact period, whereas there is no real change at Balerno Main Shelter (Fig. II1), although there is a slow steady increase of material culture related to aggregation through the Zhizo period (Van Doornum 2005). This is in contrast with Little Muck Shelter (Fig. II1), where the pre-ceramic levels are ephemeral and fragmentary, but the first ceramics at the site (Happy Rest) co-occur with an intensification of hunter-gatherer material. The intense interaction peaks when Zhizo ceramics become abundant (Hall & Smith 2000). This must date to after AD 900. After this

period the hunter-gather signature almost disappears from Little Muck Shelter and is replaced with Leopard's Kopje material culture (Hall & Smith 2000). When Hall and Smith published this paper, the second Zhizo capital south of Leokwe hill had not been identified. This recent discovery strengthens Hall and Smith's argument that Little Muck Shelter was chosen for its proximity to farmer settlements. However, it also suggests a different reason for the abandonment of the shelter. It is possible that Little Muck Shelter was abandoned because the location ceased to be strategic after the second Zhizo capital was abandoned.

Leopard's Kopje ceramics (comprising both K2 and Mapungubwe facies) first appeared at about AD 1000. Once Leopard's Kopje terminated Zhizo political control over the area and coastal trade, many Zhizo people left the SLCA (Hanisch 1980, 1981; Calabrese 2005). The Zhizo centre of control shifted to Toutswe in Botswana (Huffman 1982). In the archaeological record this is indicated by the sudden and widespread decrease of Zhizo ceramics in the SLCA and the simultaneous threefold increase in Zhizo-derived ceramics at Toutswe (Denbow 1982; Huffman 1996, 2000).

After replacing the Zhizo leaders, Leopards Kopje people established their capital at K2, located at the base of Bambadyanalo hill (Fig. II1). K2 was occupied between AD 1000 and AD 1220 (Meyer 1980, 1998, 2000). K2 commoner sites were scattered in the river valleys and eventually spread into areas not previously occupied by Zhizo farming communities (Huffman 2000) (Fig. II3). The extent of the coastal trade also increased, as did the size of the polity under the control of the K2 leaders (Huffman 1986).

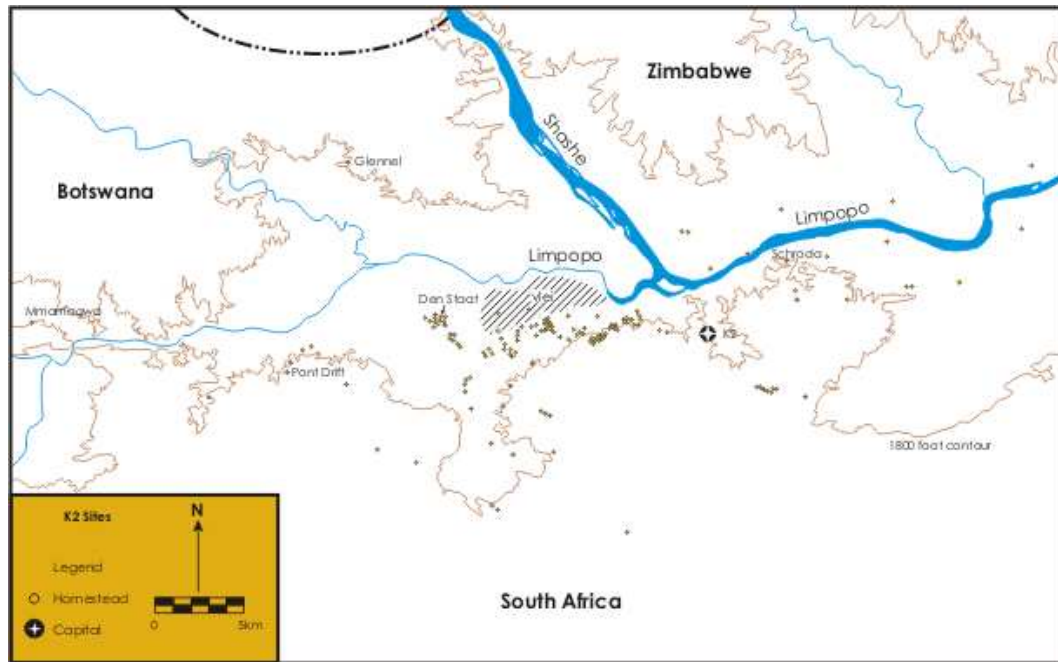


Figure II3. Distribution of K2 sites in the SLCA.

Like their Zhizo predecessors, Leopard's Kopje houses initially were arranged around a cattle kraal. This indicates that they held a similar worldview (Huffman 1986). At the capital cattle were later displaced, and the kraals relocated (Meyer 1980, 1998, 2000), indicating a change in worldview in which the sacred leader became the centre (Huffman 1986, 2000). Calabrese (2005) contends that this shift of the cattle kraal, was not simply practical, but signalled the secularisation of cattle in Leopard's Kopje society. In his view the secularisation of cattle, and associated rejection of the ancestor system, formed part of the new ideological system established by the Leopard's Kopje people. These positions were articulated before Smith (2005) demonstrated the extent of cattle transhumance. Consequently, they need further investigation.

The ritual importance of cattle at K2 is demonstrated by the 'beast burials' (Meyer 1998). A possible indicator of other ritual activities is the isolated human cranium recovered from a dense animal bone concentration at K2 (Steyn *et. al* 1998). During the K2-period, ritual probably was centrally co-ordinated, but practised at a local level, as indigenous southern African farming communities did until recently (cf. Hammond-Tooke 1993). In addition, the capital probably was the national ritual centre, as national ritual areas in most southern African communities were associated with the residences of the leaders (cf. Shaw 1974).

The K2 capital was much larger than Schroda, with about 1500 people. Such a large capital and the people living in the valley would have required the production of a large agricultural surplus. The crop farmers could no longer rely on rainfall alone to produce a large surplus. It is at this time that agricultural intensification strategies, floodplain agriculture and cattle transhumance developed (Huffman 2000; Smith 2005). This new strategy involved the movement of livestock around to offset the seasonal availability of water and vegetation (Smith 2005). These new ago-pastoral strategies, however, did not remove the need for rain.

The K2 people were not the only farmers on the landscape. Until recently it was believed that the Leopard's Kopje people had replaced the earlier (AD 900 to AD 1000) Zhizo occupation (Huffman 1986, 1996). While generally true, Calabrese (2000a, 2000b, 2005) showed that a number of Zhizo people remained behind. Surveys by the Origins of Mapungubwe Project field schools found that most of the Leokwe sites were in the valley and on the edge of the plateau and the valley (Huffman et. al. 2002, 2003) (Fig. II4). The Zhizo commoners who remained behind in the SLCA continued to produce Zhizo related ceramics, into which they incorporated K2 elements. Calabrese named this new style Leokwe (Calabrese 2000a, 2000b).

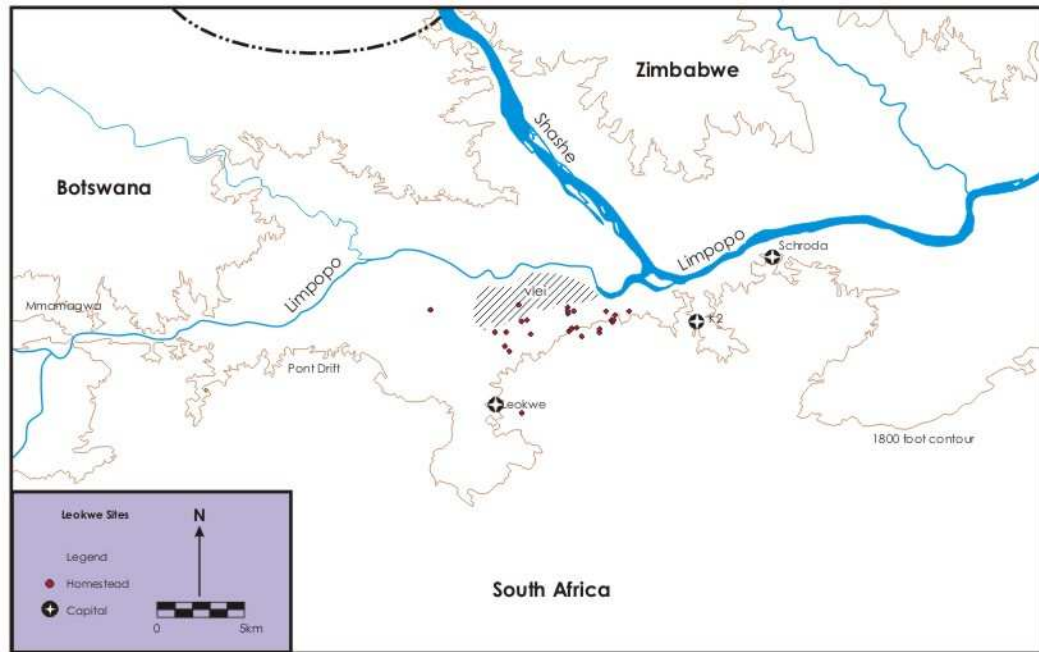


Figure II4. Distribution of Leokwe sites in the SLCA.

The Leopard's Kopje and Leokwe communities engaged with one another in both economic and ritual spheres. The relationship was hierarchical, but not all Leokwe people were confined to subaltern positions. The material culture, including trade beads, from Castle Rock shows that some Leokwe peoples held a privileged place in the SLCA. Some of this privilege might stem from specialist ritual roles. Calabrese (2005) suggests these rituals centred on initiation and metal production. His argument is partially based on the clay figurines, similar to those at Schroda, found at Castle Rock. This ritual interaction, however, was not neutral, rather it was deeply embedded in the political climate.

Hunter-gatherers were also still present. Similar to the Zhizo period, hunter-gatherer responses varied. Van Doornum (2005) contends that some hunter-gatherers left the area while others chose not to. The entrance of Leopard's Kopje farmers seemed not to have had any impact on the hunter-gatherers occupying Balerno Main Shelter, which functioned as an aggregation site. Other smaller, dispersal phase shelters (Balerno Shelters 2 & 3) were abandoned. Consequently, she argues that it is possible that some of these hunter-gatherers did not leave the SLCA, but rather spent more time at, or in the vicinity of, farmer villages.

It likely that Leopard's Kopje farmers also used sites, such as Little Muck shelter, for ritual purposes. Here farmer material culture replaces standard hunter-gatherer material culture. It is possible that the farmers displaced the original hunter-gatherer occupants (cf. Hall & Smith 2000), or that intense interaction changed the hunter-gatherer signature and their continued occupation thus became 'invisible' (cf. Van Doornum 2005).

During the two hundred year occupation, K2 society underwent political, economic and ritual changes. These changes eventually became incongruous with the settlement pattern informed by the old ideologies. The new ideology was materialised when Leopard's Kopje people abandoned K2 for Mapungubwe, less than a kilometre away (Fig. II1). There was already a K2 occupation at its base (Meyer 1998). In a dramatic materialisation of the new order, the elite now moved onto the hill itself (Huffman 1986). Excavations at Mapungubwe explored both the hilltop and the base of the hill.

The use of space on top of Mapungubwe was different from the earlier K2 capital. Excavators found no cattle kraal on the hill. Stonewalls are present at Mapungubwe, but absent at K2. Compacted gravel floors marked the hilltop occupation, with substantial compacted gravel and daga cement floors occurring at the palace.

The interpretations of who lived on top of Mapungubwe and who was buried there vary. The traditional view is that the hilltop was the residence of prominent members of the community (e.g. Meyer 1998). Following the Zimbabwe pattern, Huffman (1986, 1996) maintains that the king and ritual sister, without whom the king could not rule, and young wives should have occupied the royal residence. Beach (1998) challenges this interpretation of the Zimbabwe Pattern. According to a Portuguese document, a Zimbabwe king's enclosure had only three houses. The ruler, his queen and his servants occupied these. This suggests that both the king and his principle wife lived on the hilltop. I do not wish to engage in this debate, but to draw one key element from it. In both the Beach and Huffman scenarios a royal female lives with the royal male on the hilltop. This royal male-female combination is significant in ritual.

In addition to the residential features, a burial area was found in the centre of the hill. The remains of three adults, two male and one female, were found in association with a large amount of prestige material culture, such as gold beads, a golden sceptre, a golden bowl and golden rhino fragments (Meyer 2000). The remains of at least 29 other individuals were excavated (Steyn & Nienaber 2000).

Other ritual remains also were found on Mapungubwe hill. For example, archaeologists found a circle of upright chicken bones stuck in the ground (A. Meyer pers. comm. 2003). In keeping with the Central Cattle Pattern absence of residential remains might indicate other ritual areas on the hilltop. The eastern end of the hill was devoid of occupation debris and thus might have been an area where ritual took place (Huffman 1996).

More Mapungubwe residential remains were found at the base of the hill. These can be classed into two types: elite, and commoner (Meyer 1980, 1998, 2000; Huffman 1982, 1986, 2000). The hilltop royals were thus physically separated from both their elite and commoner subjects. The supporters in turn occupied different areas according to their positions. This physical separation signals class distinction (Huffman 1986, 2000). Mapungubwe thus had two key features indicating statehood: political centralisation and class distinction with vertical hierarchies of wealth, power and status.

These hierarchies were no longer solely created through lineage links with the leaders. Some hierarchies related to occupation specialisation. In addition to coastal trade, the economy now included specialised craft production. This included metal workers, ivory carvers, cloth makers and ceramicists (Voigt 1983), intensive flood plain agriculture (Huffman 2000) and intensive cattle transhumance (Smith 2005). The K2/ Mapungubwe farming communities thus transformed the Limpopo valley.

Huffman (2000) estimated that about 5000 people resided at the Mapungubwe capital. This denotes not just urbanisation, but also increasing centralisation. Obviously such a large urban population requires an even larger amount of food than did the K2 population. The number of river valley sites also increased (Fig. II5). A drought sometime between AD 1200 and 1250 would have made surplus production difficult (Smith 2005).

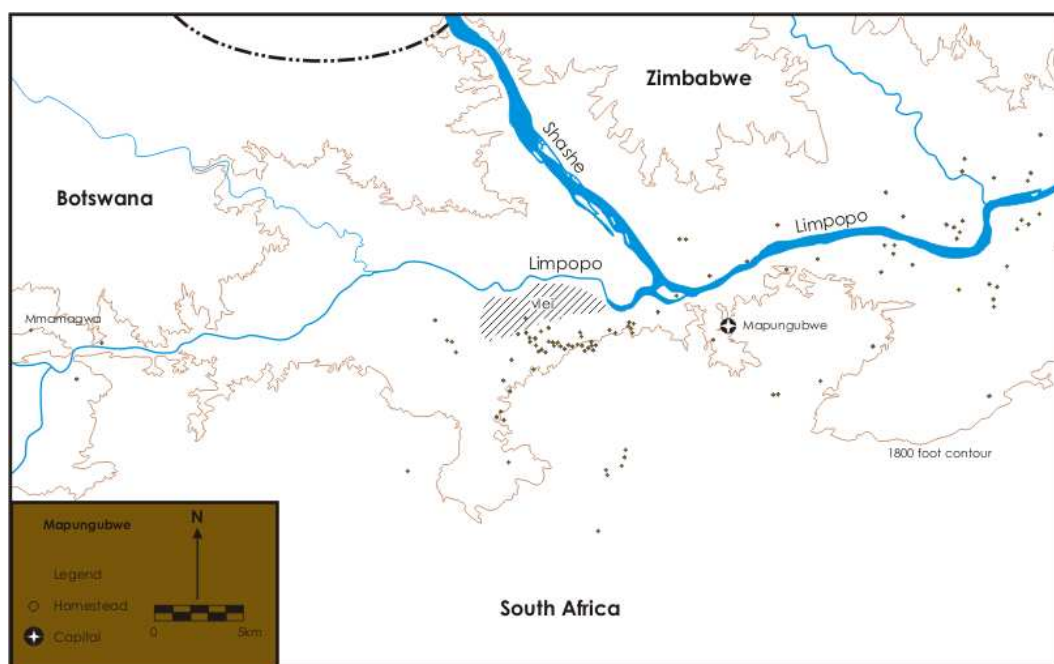


Figure II5. Distribution of Mapungubwe sites in the SLCA.

Mapungubwe hill was abandoned at the end of the thirteenth century. Huffman (2000) argues that this was due to climatic factors in particular a drop in temperature. On the other hand, Smith (2005) contends that the disintegration of the Mapungubwe state was not due to climatic factors, as rainfall was above 500 mm per annum and the temperature ranged between about 19 and 22°C. After the elite left Mapungubwe hill, the SLCA became deserted. The farmers, however, were not the only ones to leave, hunter-gatherers also departed. This simultaneous move by the hunter-gatherers suggests that they had established an enduring, mutually beneficial relationship with the farmers. Consequently, there was no reason for them to remain in the valley.

This discussion of the occupation sequence shows that after AD 1000 three different groups shared the SLCA landscape: hunter-gatherers, Leokwe farmers, and Leopard's Kopje farmers. Obviously the Leopard's Kopje people controlled

the political and economic centre. The continued expression of multiple identities, however, suggests that early in the K2 - Mapungubwe sequence the society was evolving towards the complexity and hierarchies normally associated with states (cf. Cohen 1978).

The continued presence of all three groups and their material culture until at least the end of the K2 period also suggests that they had negotiated areas of mutual benefit. Calabrese (2000a and 2005) shows that K2 and Leokwe communities engaged with one another in both economic and ritual spheres. Hall & Smith (2000) and Van Doornum (2005) show that interaction between farming and hunter-gatherer communities also extended across social, economic and political boundaries.

The interactions in the SLCA were not static; rather they transformed as economic, social and political changes took place. The dominant regional economy shifted from a hunter-gatherer system before the tenth century to a class-based state in the early thirteenth century. This clearly resulted in changes in land-use patterns and an increasingly complex social landscape. Most importantly Leopard's Kopje farming communities, completed the transformation of the Limpopo river valley, previously a place of wild animals and hunting, into an agricultural zone.