

Mining and metallurgy through the Ages: Mapungubwe as a case study

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Abstract

Just as any attempt to understand modern South Africa would be incomplete without the role of mining and metallurgy, any attempt to study the history of pre-colonial southern Africa at the exclusion of mining is bound to be unsuccessful. Such is the powerful role that mining and metallurgy have played in the development of southern Africa, both in the past and in the present. Whereas the history of modern mining and metalworking is fairly well understood, that of our pre-colonial past is lesser known. This is despite the fact that pre-colonial mining and metallurgy have a long history in the region. This contribution discusses the mining and metallurgical history of southern Africa with special reference to Mapungubwe. It reveals that only a limited inventory of metals – iron, copper, gold, tin, bronze and brass were worked pre-colonially. These metals were worked using indigenous techniques remarkably different from those widely in use today. The metals were exchanged locally and internationally creating wealth for those who controlled the trade thereby permitting them to maintain their position of dominance. Although some of the metals such as iron had a utilitarian function role, others such as copper and gold were largely restricted to the ornamental and expressive spheres. Therefore, any study of pre-colonial mining and metallurgy must consider both the technical and social factors.