

## **Pre-Colonial Mining in Mpumalanga and Limpopo, South Africa: The Evidence**

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Considerable evidence exists of pre-colonial gold mining in Zimbabwe, and of gold and iron processing and export from circa 600 CE to ca. 1600 CE, yet there is apparently little evidence for early mining in South Africa. This paper argues, to the contrary, that there is ample evidence of mining in eastern Mpumalanga and Limpopo Provinces, but that the evidence for this has so far been misinterpreted as cattle kraals, agricultural terraces, and enclosures for chiefly elites. The thousands of dry stone structures, stone walling and cairns, from <10 m to >100 m in size, were created through shallow surface mining for iron ore, ochre, and alluvial gold. I report on my unique discovery and exploration of contemporary artisanal gold mines still being worked with hammer and chisel, and present archaeological evidence of early smelting and metal working. While the dating of these structures and the ethnic/linguistic identity of the miners is still unknown, I show that the early miners were probably a specialist guild who also provided ritual and magical services, much like metalsmiths and blacksmiths have done elsewhere in Africa, Europe and Asia. Moreover, since today's traditional healers or sangomas still carry on traditions involving metals, magical protection from witches, and ritual or healing services, they are likely to be the cultural descendants of these early miners. This gives us an ethnographic model for understanding how pre-colonial mining was done, and how its products were used. Multiple lines of evidence show that mining was widespread with distinctive regional, cultural, and technical characteristics.