

**An interview with Dr. Lynn Meskell,  
PhD Candidate Lindsay Weiss, and Dr. Martin Hall**  
Columbia University in the City of New York  
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LM: Let me start by asking some general questions about the state of the Iron Age studies in South Africa? Where do you think we are now and can you recap some of the major debates in archaeology in South Africa?

MH: Let's talk about the Iron Age. We need to track it back to probably about 20, 30, 40 years. South African archaeology, in common with most colonial archaeology started off by using the European typological sequence. So, the assumption was that the series of ages that had been established in Northern Europe would automatically apply anywhere in Africa. You are probably already familiar with that concept. So, the initial assumption was that there must be a Stone Age, a Neolithic, a Bronze Age and an Iron Age. Then, there turned out to be no Bronze and no real true Neolithic. So, the classic Danish sequence was adjusted so that we had a sequence that had a Stone Age followed by an Iron Age. And of course, that was prior to radio carbon dating. So there were typological sequences, and even though they were built up in an Iron Age in fact, they were built up around pottery sequences in a classic manner. So, it was all a little bit confusing, in that sense. Then, there was a subsequent differentiation between the early Iron Age and the late Iron Age, which is also initially based on ceramic sequences. Then, around about 1960, the first radio carbon dates begin to become to be available and a lot of the ceramic sequences turn out to be inverted or the wrong way around. Because of course, a lot of the nature of archaeology in Sub-Saharan Africa is in fact single horizon surface sites because they are village sites and fairly mobile economy. So you are not getting an easy classic stratigraphic sequence, so quite understandably, you get a situation where the sequences turn out to be wrong, when you get the radio carbon dating. So, probably around about the early 1970s, when the first radio carbon dates had become clearly available, people began to sort that kind of thing out and people then went back to the notion of the Iron Age - abandoning if you like, the primary organizing concept of the ceramics and began to try and look, I think, a little more intelligently at the underlying socio-economic base behind this and said, 'Ok, now what is distinctive about iron?'. Well, what is distinctive about iron is that it marks the onset of the agriculture so the key differentiator is between the Stone Age which is a hunter-gatherer sort of economy and the Iron Age which is the farming-agricultural base of economy. And of course the main drive for iron is in fact agriculture production particularly hoes for turning the ground. Without that, you can't actually have an agricultural society. So, the old concept of the Iron Age has evolved into a primary socio-economic distinction between hunter-gatherer societies on the one hand and farming societies on the other. Now, that works quite well as a sort of organizing concept. What I think it has done in Southern African archaeological studies is that it has moved the tension away

from the very interesting interface between hunter-gatherer economies and farming economies and in fact has rather solidified an assumption that farming economies come in as a straight forward migration of new communities moving south. Now, to some extent in African archaeology, that is reinforced by some of the linguistic models, because of course the language families are different. So, the Stone Age communities are hunter-gatherer communities, are generally speaking the Khoisan languages, where the farmers are generally associated with the languages of the Bantu language family. But that also as we know from linguistic extrapolations in other parts of the world, that that is inherently dangerous because of course, chronological sequences that are constructed from languages are themselves have no absolute dating systems and there are assumptions so that there is a huge danger that the whole argument becomes circular - the linguistic historians are actually using the archaeological evidence and the archaeologists are using the linguistic data. And I think what has probably happened, is that there is not nearly enough attention given to that very interesting interface between hunter-gatherers and farming communities - and that remains understudied. So, that is the sort of background of the sequence. The general pattern, I think, still that we began to see still in the sort of early 1970s, the radio carbon dates began to become apparent in what we then called the Early Iron Age and we were beginning to get dates from 200 – 300 AD, south of the Limpopo. That pattern has held up over the years, there have been a few sort of rogue dates that have been somewhat earlier, but basically what it looks like is the onset of agriculture south of the Limpopo sometime between 200 and 300AD, and it is undoubtedly groups of communities that are moving steadily south. The ecological conditions of Southern Africa don't allow for intense residential communities cultivating the same land over many generations. You have to move on or you will exhaust the soil. So, its people probably moving steadily southwards, in probably more complicated ways than are apparent. So that's the overall frame of what we have. So, to capture what it is now, the Southern African sequence consists basically of hunter-gatherer communities making tools out of stone, obviously living in Southern Africa for very significantly over a million years with a classic series of typological sequences - early, middle and late Stone Age, which are actually based on the technology of tool production in the classic manner. Then, those hunter-gatherer communities continue in some parts of the country where their direct descendents are the Khoisan and the San speaking communities still in Namibia and the Kalahari. Then, in around 200 AD, you've got farming communities probably speaking the Bantu languages, moving steadily southwards down the east African coast and literal, making quite distinctive pottery and living in small village settlements probably choosing mostly lowland soils along the rivers, mostly agriculturalists. The question of cattle probably undetermined but if they have livestock relatively small numbers of livestock and they establish settlement throughout the summer rainfall regions of Southern Africa. So, they get really far south, as far as Transkei and establish themselves - and then you get a natural sort of evolution of communities there, through to the more complex societies and that leads into

to Mapungubwe, Thulamela and the Greater Zimbabwe and the development of sort of state economies.

LM: Do you think you might be able to talk about that because Great Zimbabwe, obviously that cultural region does actually move right into northern South Africa, given that those borders are really arbitrary. Can you talk about the state of studies of those particular sites? And then also how they are used today more politically too?

MH: Again, there was a long debate about the origins of complex societies in Southern Africa and initially it was thought that the only real complex society was Great Zimbabwe because of obvious sites and very spectacular stone ruins. And there were various theories - quite wild theories, about what caused Great Zimbabwe to be established. Of course, the primary ones were that it wasn't an indigenous development but that it was due to the stimulus of trade and of course, the interpretation of Great Zimbabwe was another story altogether and goes back to the 1870s....and we're into, you know the Queen of Sheba and wandering Arabs and all sorts of peculiarities there... But in terms of mainstream archaeology there has long been debate about that and what has subsequently been realized is which has only really been freed up with radio carbon dating. What of course you have to realize that is radio carbon dating has really been revolutionary in South African archaeology because we don't have those easy stratigraphic sequences. So, the first major impact of radio carbon dating was in Great Zimbabwe itself because the first radio carbon dates actually settled the controversy about whether or not in fact it was scientific dating to whether it was a thousand years old or three or four thousand years. It killed the biblical argument pretty well stone dead, but then radio carbon dating helped with other more complex sites. And what is now very apparent is that building on that foundation of initial settlement around 200 AD small scale farming communities...you know, you've got the development of complex societies in Southern Africa and in my view they develop autonomously irrespective of external trade. And I mean they are examples of the sorts of fascinating parallel processes of state formation that we see all over the world. And one of the big unresolved issues is - I think if you step back from all of this is and look at global archaeological questions is 'Why do we seem to have these parallel developments of complex state societies that seem to happen in relative isolation from each other at roughly the same sorts of broad periods? I mean it's the sort of classic first year essay question, I suppose... but it's the sort of thing that's not really being answered. So that's happening in Southern Africa like its happening elsewhere. So, the first moves towards complex society formation don't in fact happen in Great Zimbabwe, they happen slightly to the south on the Limpopo, on the complex sites that eventually become Mapungubwe. It starts off with a couple of other sites, Shroeder is one, then K2, .... Mapungubwe is very complicated because it was discovered in the 1920s and the early interpretations were simply crazy. There were some very complicated naming conventions and so it was very confusing. It's also about the most over-dated site in Southern Africa simply

because the University of Pretoria that was running at the time, simply could not believe that an indigenous African site had those sorts of dates. And they just kept re-dating it and they never published the data, they dated over and over again, so there are very strong radio carbon sets. But what happens is Mapungubwe by about 10 or 11 hundred AD, is beginning to develop as a complex place. It doesn't have the spectacular stone architecture that Great Zimbabwe has in fact has but if you begin to look at the way the landscape is used, you know you've got the hill at Mapungubwe, and you've obviously got an elite living on the hill and a population of let's say five to ten thousand people living all over the place, so you've got social differentiation. On the top of the hill you've got a number of burials, obviously of important people and rich grave goods, so you have an elite sort of social differentiation. Clearly something as complex as that has a complex economy, lots of cattle and critically of course, you've got a lot of trade. Because what you also find in Great Zimbabwe are indigenous trade goods, I mean there are specialist crafts people there, probably working ivory for some sort of local production networks. But you're also getting trade beads and clear evidence that this site is now locked into the east-coast trade, which is undoubtedly a sort of Arab dominated trade up the east coast and around the Indian Ocean. So, Mapungubwe is the first of these complex sites. Then, Mapungubwe goes the way of all complex sites and one doesn't really know why, again there have been these wild theories...Bubonic plagues and other sorts for example, probably overgrazed. This is a very fragile environment, not a natural place to choose to live if you're a cattle keeper but very good for communication if you are a trader. I would guess probably that they just hammer the environment. But what does happen is that a market develops for gold. And Mapungubwe is not the natural place for trading gold because the open stoke gold is available up on the Zimbabwe plateau, you don't have to mine for it. It is basically lying around on the fields. And Great Zimbabwe probably starts off as an outrider of Mapungubwe and then rises into prominence by itself. But then of course, Great Zimbabwe is itself only one of about thirty or forty Zimbabwe type sites, which a lot of people don't realize – it's just that very much bigger and that becomes a sort of complex site of its own. And that is really the archaeological evidence of that indigenous state formation.

LM: Do you have a sense of how Tulamela which has dates of 1250 to 1750 roughly - and how that would fit into the Great Zimbabwe cultural pattern? Because it demonstrates the same sorts of things as contact, trade beads or gold smelting...

MH: Look, we have to wait for Tulamela to be properly written up, and in the absence of a proper publication from Tulamela it is very difficult to get precise interpretations, I mean one needs to allow the usual craft of archaeology, to work those artifacts in detail. I mean, one needs to see the sequence, you need to see the dates, you need to see the artifact collections, making the detailed comparisons, to see what is coming out of Great Zimbabwe...and look in detail at that. So, in the absence of a full report on that, it's actually difficult to say ... but

one has to remember that Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe are just major centers in what is obviously a very widespread complex of settlements. You know, we know that Mapungubwe relates to a whole series of quite complex sites in Eastern Botswana for example, which are very large scale cattle-keeping sites. Now, those are only marked today by quite subtle changes in vegetation, but it is clear that you had a whole series of hill-top sites there with very significant populations that have got to be locked into these complex set of economic networks. So, I don't have any problem with the notion of Thulamela fitting into a sort of complex Southern African sequence. So, it's not surprising at all that it is there - it is an important site, but it should probably be just one of a few such sites and it just so happens that it is one that has been preserved. And of course it is in Kruger National Park, and it's an area that hasn't been subject to intense subsistence settlement by local farming communities. That area has been reserved for well over half a century and it has protected its archaeology.

LM: Could you speak about how Tulamela has been incorporated into an African renaissance narrative by people like Mbeki. How has this sort of residual political force... and also its connection to the Venda community as well?

MH: Yes, this is more complicated sorts of complex issues that the politics of Tulamela and the way that Tulamela works. And I think to understand that you've got to go back a little bit and look at how the politics of archaeology in that region in general. Archaeology has always been highly politicized there. The first context of that is Great Zimbabwe itself, which was so-called 'discovered' in the 1870s, immediately assumed to be of biblical origin. This gets the attention of Cecil John Rhodes, who becomes extremely interested in the possibility that about 3000 BC there is a Mediterranean, southern European community that has actually colonized Africa. Because of course it fits into the legitimization of the British re-colonization of Africa and every sort of prejudice of the fact that Africa can't have a history of its own. There is no mechanism for understanding how change could taken place because it was assumed that societies are frozen in some sort of continual and sort of ethnographic presence. And ethnography is pretty complicit in this sort of process. So first of all, you've got this highly politicized Great Zimbabwe. That politicization continues and is particularly fuelled by the Rhodesian regime right through to the end of the 1980s to the point that archaeologists get thrown out of Rhodesia in the 1970s and of course suggesting that Great Zimbabwe is a black site. So, that becomes part of the.. right through and in fact even today there are even people who are right about Great Zimbabwe being of Indian origins or whatever. So you have a highly politicized Great Zimbabwe, then you get a politicized Mapungubwe because Mapungubwe is discovered in the 1920s. That immediately attracts the attention of young Smuts (because Cecil Rhodes is of course dead). But Smuts is the great sort of statesman, league of nations, looking to sort of establish Southern Africa's historical identity and place .... and immediately becomes excited that this is another major site of a lost civilization. So, quite extraordinarily, the state

buys the farm because basically this is essentially going to be seen as South Africa's Great Zimbabwe. So there is a hunger at that stage, for if you like, of having a history that is supported by antiquities because of course it is what the white civilized Southern African states lack in comparison to Europe, because they don't have a tangible sort of monumental architecture. But of course the enthusiasm isn't just for an African monumental architecture, but the enthusiasm is of course, for a lost civilization. And of course then Mapungubwe turns out to be highly disappointing, because they excavated it but they can't make sense of it which isn't surprising because it isn't a lost civilization - it's a black settlement. Now, then to make matters slightly more complicated, the University of Pretoria's archaeology division is actually founded for the purpose of excavating Mapungubwe. From making that sort of point and that's what they do - and they dig, and they dig, and they dig, and they date, and they date, and they date, and they don't publish because they can't get the sorts of results that they are wanting. So you've got a highly politicized Mapungubwe. Then, you've got a further complication and that is the implication of archaeology in the apartheid project in general and particularly concepts of ethnic identity. Because what the apartheid government is very anxious to do right through the '70s and the '80s is to legitimize its homeland policy by proving through the use of archaeology and anthropology that the communities who live in these artificial areas have always lived there, so ethnography is implicated, through ethnographic studies. Archaeology in the Afrikaans medium universities, particularly at Pretoria, is implicated through trying to use archaeology to establish tribal origins. And what happens to the University of Pretoria, is that the University of Pretoria gets essentially sole rights to excavate anything that is in the Kruger National Park. And archaeologists in English medium universities, in the 1970s and 1980s trying to get permission to get rights to excavate in Kruger National Park are simply denied any access to the site. So, it becomes basically a playground for the University of Pretoria which is desperately trying to prove all these communities like the Venda and Shona and the whatever, have always lived in these homelands - which is of course a lot of nonsense because the homelands are arbitrary divisions. Now, the other side of the fence is that those of us who were working in the English medium universities and people like me start writing critical stuff about how discredited the notion of ethnicity is and how politically unacceptable notions of ethnic identity are because they are seen as notions of tribalism. So, that's the political background prior to 1994. In 1990, Nelson Mandela walks out of Pollsmoor Prison and everything changes in ways that only subsequently begin to become apparent. So, we're then if you like, left with the situation where people in my tradition of writing archaeology have written stuff criticizing concepts of ethnicity. Generally, in international scholarship people start to discover ethnicity at that particular time and it becomes basically quite a good thing to write about. So, everybody discovers an ethnic identity and archaeologists begin to get excited about ethnicity. And people like me find this very difficult to take because it's been a concept that we've always seen as politically dangerous. And of course more interestingly black communities now beginning to explore with issues of identity, also seize on this notion of ethnicity

and ethnic identity, which is very troublesome for a lot of us working in that area. So, Thulamela emerges in the middle of this mix and gets discovered at a very interesting early formative stage in the early 1990s when people are desperately looking for these sorts of new identities. And of course, then attracts a particular sort of ethnic community who 'adopt' it and begin to identify with it. And of course as with all the dangers of popularization we begin to write a whole lot of nonsense about it. You know, the assumptions of what the burials mean and the assumptions of the historical continuities that can't be demonstrated... and those communities begin to claim a form of historical identity which would have brought joy to the hearts of the apartheid engineers who were trying to prove that ten or fifteen years earlier. So, archaeologists who have had some political sense previously of what was going on, were caught in a trap - because the trap is that one has identified the political problems of ethnic identity because of the apartheid project. The popularization, the popular discourse that develops around sites like Thulamela has all the problems of populism, it makes a whole series of assumptions of what that archaeology means - a lot of them are really unfounded. But of course to criticize that - because that is the new voice of people looking for identity - makes one look like a white reactionary. So, a lot of archaeology in that sense just gets silenced. The sort of liberal tradition of a critique gets silenced because there isn't a voice that you can have, because the person who is white writing about these things after 1994, what can you say? You can't start criticizing black people who identify in community and start saying to them, "Well, they are using the old language of apartheid". So, in a really ironic way, you know, the old project gets vindicated in this new construction. It is particularly problematic that the archaeologists involved have been so slow to do a full analysis and publication of this data. Because of course, the way that one wants to deal with this as an archaeologist and as an intellectual is you want to step back from this and you want to say that we've got re-inform this discourse with a careful consideration of actually what the evidence says. Because we are way that past that form of relativism that says the evidence means nothing, I mean we all surely believe that the evidence means something, but we need to see what that evidence is. We need to make considered judgments about whether there is continuity or not. And that's a repetitive problem in all sorts of archaeology and it is happening in Cape Town right now around burials for example. And it's because archaeologists have so isolated themselves from the community. Archaeology in South Africa is so much a white profession and it hasn't made the efforts to change itself as a discipline. There are so few black archaeologists. And archaeologists haven't made the effort to establish a popular discourse to really communicate that - to actually enter the heritage discourse in that way. There's no popular consciousness of what this sort of stuff is about and archaeology is a very sort of alienating profession in that sense, and that's the problem that the discipline sits with. Now, the other player of course, and no mean player is the South African government in the form of Thabo Mbeki looking for these sorts of Renaissance origins. That, I think is fuelled as much by a very justified realization that the early fossilized hominid sites of that part of the world are truly a sort of global international resource. All

of those of sites at first need to be declared world heritage sites. And of course, world heritage sites come with politics all of their own. But I think as part of that, the whole notion of Renaissance begins to come into play and it's a quite legitimate search for historical depth. I mean, the South African government has particular interests in other sites. They have sponsored work in Timbuktu for example, looking at early origins of cultural material there. So, I think there is that wish to re-discover that heritage. But the problem for archaeology is that archaeology hasn't really engaged with that in a systematic way.

LM: Thulamela is very proud of the fact that it is the first co-managed excavation in South Africa. What are we talking about a couple of hundred years difference between the Venda community that are there and the sort of parallels with the burial or whatever ...so, a little more about the stakeholder, multi-vocality – you know what we can do without falling into that sort of trap of tribalism because I am sure that the Venda and the Shangan, and all these people who ...I mean, the Venda seem to have got the 'lion's share' so to speak and obviously those are all arbitrary distinctions ...I mean, were the Venda and Shangan at 1550 or 1750 those separate entities? No, probably not. I mean they are probably the product of apartheid itself...

MH : Well, these are all invented traditions....

LM: Right.

MH: But all countries invent traditions.

LM: Of course, but this is an example where archaeology is quite empowering for all those sorts of communities and also very empowering in terms of land claims. The Makuleke is one, but there is another that is coming up in Parfuri triangle as well. So there are going to be more and more of these at Kruger to face. A park ranger that I know who does a lot of rock art, reckoned that there are about a thousand sites of rock art. Last week the scientific office said that there are well over a thousand.

MH: Sure, when I first started work in Falaza game reserve in the early 1970's they told me that there were no sites there at all because no one ever lived there. We found 200 early Iron Age sites all plotted by pottery scatters and stuff like that. No Kruger is packed and the Pretoria department was very weak, so they never really did anything. They had a wonderful opportunity and they went off and did what boys do... they set up camp and sat around and drank beers and they told stories of the bush and dug up a bit here and there, and had a bit of fun and made a few radio carbon dates, but didn't really do anything very much...

LM: There is also a site that I have been asked if I am interesting in doing, which is Mekahanne, which they say is more impressive than Thulamela and is just sitting there. It has got standing stone sand walls and no one has done anything.



MH: I am sure there is stuff everywhere.

LM: Then, there is this hideous sort of Masserini site which is badly reconstructed. But they are actually wanting to do things properly and to have visitors come for the cultural heritage night, not just for the big five.... It's a very interesting time to be there, its transitioning ...

MH: Let's start with the heritage issue. I think the starting point is to consider what is heritage. To me heritage is history with a point and it has always got a point. There's an interesting case as to whether or not there is anything other than heritage in that sense because history always has a point. But heritage for me is history with a point. And the point is obviously in the present. And it's to do with how people want to see themselves and what they want to see themselves as, and there's nothing particularly South African about that at all. The only thing about South Africa is it's a new democracy that is only about 10 years old, when everything is still being written when its still immature and that's the main distinguishing thing. But I look for example at the way that European archaeology gets written and rewritten, I mean I can see quite a precise correlation between particular viewpoints on the European Union. I mean, the interest in establishing the early British origins has become very sharp with a possibility of loss of national identity and sovereignty as the realization of the union becomes apparent. So, I mean this drives the heritage movement everywhere, so South Africa is no different in that respect but I think just immature. Also the archaeology community is alienated, which is a crucial factor because archaeology is overwhelmingly a white profession. And archaeologists have seen themselves as scientists and as scientists, have no truck with politics which they see as somehow polluting science. Therefore, there has really been little effort to really understand the politics - the serious politics of heritage. I wouldn't want to be misunderstood on that point because I am not making some retrogressive claim for some sort of crude relativism. I think that the interplay between the analysis of data and if you like, the politics of heritage is a crucial role that archeology plays. And only archaeologists can play it because only we as archaeologists can actually understand how that data properly. So in a way, I am also making a claim for a new form of empiricism, behind this, a strong empiricism based on the best possible techniques, then really testing out possibilities and then discounting some. Archaeology needs to reconnect...it needs to reconnect that strong science tradition because of international isolation because during the apartheid years of course, the social scientists wouldn't talk to the South African archaeologists but the scientists would because they didn't believe in politics. The immaturity of the heritage debate is not helped by the alienation of archaeology from any sort of popular basis. I mean you can stop and talk to smart intelligent people in the new black middle class and ask what archaeology is and they probably won't really know because there's no connection. It's not taught in the schools, it's not widely disseminated in the magazines and news media...it's not part of dinner table discussions. It's not

there, it's not upfront, it's not part of the debate. I mean the obvious comparison is with the Middle East where everybody in some respects is an amateur archaeologist. So, that's the current situation. Within that framework, I think the survival of archaeology as a discipline actually depends on partnerships with local communities that will establish that hunger for identity and heritage. Without that there's going to be very little claim on the sorts of resources that archaeology needs in order to survive. Unless, of course archaeologists in South Africa continue to access international funds because it is a very competitive environment. Archaeology is a very expensive discipline and without making that connection, archaeology is going to become little more than rescue work on the basis of C.R.M. type work. So, I think there's a huge potential for that and I think that Tiulamela is an early example of that and a very important one in the sense that those local communities became involved. Now, of course, the secondary and more complicated problem happens from the communities side, local communities are claiming to be Shona or Venda or whatever. But, those are all the old managed identities of colonialism and apartheid. I mean, we all know those stories...if you like the first definitions of these so-called entities came about by missionaries writing these in the English-Zulu dictionary. They had to define a thing called 'Zulu', or a thing called Shona, or a thing called Venda because they had to write the dictionaries to translate the Bible. So, these are all invented traditions. There is no problem with them being invented traditions because most of these traditions are invented too...the average New York Italian family doesn't necessarily have all that many connections with Italy in that sense. So, these are invented traditions and there is no problem in them. But what you've really got to do is to develop that archaeology of heritage, taking heritage as history with a point within the context of a public intellectual life. That begins to re-assert debates about what this identity actually means in terms of cultural practices and in terms of assumed historical continuities, in terms of language, in terms of the use of language and in terms of tangible material culture, such as the archaeology that actually comes out of the ground.

LM: So the sorts of parallels that we see between Venda, architectural context and material culture, as well as only several hundreds of years that the Vendor Kingdom which has a similar hilltop structure with Thulamela plus proximity. You seem to be saying that there are problems with buying into that and yet cultural necessity or political necessity... I mean how do we weigh those sorts of things up? I mean our project is trying to do this digitally and I am wondering if there are any other ways that we can think about getting the multiplicity of histories across? How can we tackle that?

MH: I think you need to develop quite a sort of subtle approach to how that is dealt with. I mean, the crude immature approach wants to find direct continuities. So, you are playing that game of cultural snap which is the classic problem of using ethnography and archaeology in that situation. Of course the ethnography is problematic in that sense as well because a lot of the ethnographies that will be used to establish what 'Vendaness' is, sort of go back to the late 1800s or

1900s and actually were written overwhelmingly in that British tradition of the ethnographic presence. So they are wonderfully timeless if you look at them. They are the Venda life and customs. They are the tradition of Evans-Pritchard. You know, Venda material culture. Venda marriage customs. What they do, how they craft, all those sorts of things - without any historical sense of change. But of course these communities have been changing, well, first of all they have always been changing, but there hasn't been a stable sort of Southern African community since the Portuguese starting beating the hell out of everybody since the 1600s. The real colonial impact starts to happen with the Portuguese settlements off the eastern coast. It accelerates after 1652 with the Dutch from the other side, then the Brits come in from Natal. From the 1870s, you've got migrant labor, so everybody is off to the mines and new identities are being formed there among men. Which are also assumed identities of Zuluness and manliness and manhood and all those sorts of things with complicated customs. So the whole thing is an incredible mix of cultural identity and invented traditions, for at least four hundred years. So, the myth of a static cultural identity is a classic one that has got to be unraveled. So, I think the first danger in this sort of a history with a point business is the sort of assumption that we are going to play cultural snap here. Because one community now likes to live on hill-tops and the archaeology says that people like to live on hilltops three hundred years earlier, that therefore there is direct continuity, that therefore have lived here all the time. Now, that of course becomes complicated when it becomes tangled up with land issues and we all know that from the Australian/North American situation and those are very complex things for archaeologists to deal with. What does it mean if you establish that continuity to get radio carbon dates, you know, but that's a classic archaeological problem. I would like to think that one would move towards a more sophisticated sense of what heritage is, which is where people see themselves as part of a polyglot changing Southern African community. Of at least sort of 400 years depth where there has been a complex linguistic formation, a complex genetic history going right back. You've got a complex mixed gene pool from 1600s onwards, where people actually take a pride and an interest in that association irrespective of how they identify themselves in the present. One can see that in other contexts and a good analysis would be with Afrikaans speakers for example, because what most people outside of South Africa don't realize is that Afrikaans is a black language much more than a white language. And it's a sort of classic, classic Creole in that sense case that has been in formation since the 1650s. It has got wonderful linguistic and cultural forms that mark the creolization of indigenous Khoisan traditions, Portuguese and Arabic traditions, and Dutch and European traditions in a particular unique form that is expressed in language, in culture, in cuisine and all sorts of other forms of expression. Now, in a way you want to try and create the same sort of sense of a heritage where people get that sort of rich **palimpsest** of traditions without finding the necessity to drive for the particular identity strand that goes back. And again, archaeologists need to get a more subtle position because a lot of Southern African Iron Age archaeology has been the classic use of the ethnographic analogy for interpretation. Some of it is productive but if you take a

particular example, the interpretation Great Zimbabwe that Tom Hoffman has used, for example using the Venda initiations school. Now for me, the fact that there are female initiation practices that uses spaces in similar ways today with the Venda, is very instructive and very useful but it is just a story. It doesn't prove that Great Zimbabwe was used in that way or that it was Venda because there is no demonstrable sort of connection. There is certainly more likelihood of a continuity because it comes from the same region. But we know that stuff and people have been writing that critique of the use of the ethnographic analogy for the past 50 years now or so don't lets fall into that trap in the way that we develop the heritage thing.

LW: I am curious to What extent you see **S.A.R.A.H.**, the South African heritage resource agency and its legislative mandate has come to not only reify ethnic categories that were established during the colonial period but actually to do that in a differential manner that in rural heritage sites, as opposed to in cities? And as an archaeologist, do you see the potential for a problematic implementation of heritage sites in rural areas where communities will be more likely to face antagonisms with other ethnic communities in those areas as opposed to in the metropolises where it seems to be more easy to have that truly rainbow nation heritage site and what would you advise in terms of tourism...that idea of money...

MH: I don't think that heritage issues are any easier in the cities than they are in the countryside in that respect. The first thing to look at and if we go to that idea of heritage being history with a point, is you've got to ask, 'What is at stake?' Now, if what is at stake is a broad sense of identity with a past, then people can be quite relaxed about those heritage issues. But if what is at stake, are for instance land claims, or the right to profit from particularly spectacular heritage sites in terms of tourist development or land claim related compensation, we don't really have minimal claims to all that extent in Southern Africa, although there are some, then of course the issue is much more dangerous and very different. I think that the situation is potentially as complicated in the cities as in the rural areas and we've got a long way to go before the debate about that is mature. For example, when the stakes are high, what automatically becomes an issue is 'Who has the right to speak for the community? And which community are they claiming?' Now, that for me has been most apparent in claims around Khoisan identity issues. Because since 1990 and 1994, there have been numerous claimants of people to speak for Khoisan communities. When we held the World Archaeological Congress in Cape Town in 1999 and because it was the World Archaeological Congress, we needed to get community participation. We perhaps foolishly had this theme on Khoisan identity - and it was an absolute nightmare to organize because the people who came forward and claimed to be the spokespeople of the community... I mean, it was almost impossible to establish those claims. I mean, they were because they said they were, and behind it were complicated ambitions around access to resources. So, I think the

heritage thing - it's a complicated politics. It's a very real politics and it has got to be dealt with in an understanding way, whatever is at stake.

LW: Out of curiosity, do you think that the new legislation that SARA has implemented – is that going to have to be revamped? Because it is not really working in provincial areas from what I hear.

MH: There is no political will you see, and this goes back to the point about archaeology not really having a political base in the community. I mean if you go and talk to the average person in the street about SARA and the SARA issues, they would not know what you are talking about. And the reason why that hasn't been enacted at the provincial level is that it is just not on the agenda. There are other issues that dominate...it's just not there. For example, we are gearing up for elections next year....I'd be very surprised if these issues figure in any politician's election stumps, you know. In a way, what is happening is a relatively small group of people with particular perceptions are driving that legislative debate. The danger is that they are not in fact, allowing the space for more sophisticated discussions around heritage and are driving in fact a quite a narrow sort of ethnographic identity agenda and that will prove to be problematic. The biggest danger, I think, is that no one will particularly care and of course there are huge interests that really benefit that are not being effective legislation. You've got to remember that seventy percent of the South African population lives in the cities. The urban areas are undergoing massive regeneration. You know, if you are in the development industry, you do not want to know about these issues and the more confusion there is the better. I mean, the land issue in South Africa for many people is a time bomb. That is why the South African government has such a complex position with regard to Zimbabwe because there is a real danger of populism around land claims. Remember, only seven percent of the South African population is actually involved in agriculture. South African agriculture is very heavily commercialized. So, you have got large reservoirs of underemployed or unemployed people in rural peripheral areas who don't have access to the land and don't have access to the agricultural employment. You are dealing very complicated particular land claim issues. The last thing people want complicating *that* are heritage claims around burial sites and ethnic identity issues. So, there are quite a lot of vested interests in legislative circles, I think, in not pushing this one and that is what you are seeing. It is not high on people's agenda, the ANC's agenda and not high on the provincial governments agendas. They want a much more fuzzy tourist oriented notion of heritage than a genuine democratic notion of heritage.

LW: This is a sort of really basic level question, but perhaps useful for these purposes. What is the difference - I know we don't really use these terms anymore - between Early Iron Age smelting cosmologies and how they change in later Iron Age times? Around the smelting of iron as opposed to its forging?

MH: It's an interesting area. What seems to happen in the early Iron Age is that a lot of forging is going on in the sites themselves. So, the classic way in which an Iron Age is marked for example, is what marks a small village site. It could be a small scattering of pottery, possibly some animal bones and if it is near the coast, possibly some shell. You find residues of smelting of low-grade ore on the sites and that marks most of the sites and is very characteristic of early Iron Age pattern. When you go into late Iron Age, you begin to find more remote specialized sites that are apart from the villages. So, I worked at one stage at the Schlischule Reserve. They are classic, where you get these concentrated smelting sites set some distance apart. And of course, that does feed into the historical record and the ethnography of iron smelting work, where smelting work where there is a great deal of mythology and tradition based around that which sets the smelting site from the community. It has got a lot to do with gender identity issues and along with masculinity, male and female notions and things like that. I think that what is happening is that you are getting a sort of specialized craft communities. To me, that is a part of a cluster of things that differentiate the Early Iron Age from the Late Iron Age. It is slightly intangible but when you put them together, the sort of pattern that emerges to my mind - is the thing that distinguishes the so-called Early Iron Age, let's say from 200 AD to around 1,000, is that these are really fairly genuine sort of subsistence communities. For those communities, the distinction between the hunter-gatherer and farming way of life has been overblown. And because we have been forced to think in a particular way by the typology, people have not concentrated on the very interesting question as to whether or not these hunter-gatherer subsistence farming communities are really that separate. Or whether in fact, you have not got quite complicated client relationships going because we know about those from other ethnographic situations. You've also got things at some stage or other and it has got to be back then. When you look at the Southern African Bantu languages, quite a lot of the distinctive words and clicks clearly come in from the Khoisan languages. So, I think the early Iron Age has a lot going on there but it is about syncretism. It's about creolization in fact, of small scale subsistence farmers moving into a hunter-gatherer environment. What I think marks the change between the Early Iron Age and the Late Iron Age, is actually the beginning of the creation of more complex small societies which leads to state formation in Great Zimbabwe. I think what the thing about Iron smelting tells us alongside a number of other indicators is that you are beginning to get local forms of trade. Certainly barter because the other thing that happens that marks that transition is a far greater emphasis on cattle-keeping. Now cattle, as opposed to grain crops of course can be accumulated. I mean they are a form of capital. I mean you can accumulate grain crops but it is more complicated because you've got to have more storage mechanisms. Cattle-keepers can become the original entrepreneurs in that sense. You can build up livestock, you can move them around and you can trade them. Simultaneously, the archaeology shows you that you are getting more cattle-keeping. That shifts the settlement patterns because the settlement patterns are the Iron Age and you get occupations of the highveld grasslands for the first

time, which is of course very good for grazing. So, people shift away from that adherence to the low lying areas. Cattle is accumulated wealth, then you are getting specialized iron production way beyond the needs of the immediate local community. That in fact in the areas where it happens has a significant ecological impact because the main thing about iron smelting of course, is it consumes very large amounts of wood. So you are getting an ecological impact. You are getting clearance vegetation change and a whole bunch of things begin to change around 1000 AD. I think it's the beginning of complex societies with trade and barter systems going on. That to me is the point where you begin to get the development of the indigenous complex state formation, which eventually we see about 500-600 years later in Schroeder, K2 on the Limpopo, then Mapungubwe and then Great Zimbabwe. And of course a society which for 500 or 600 years, has been experimenting with trade and barter, very easily locks into the Indian Ocean trade networks. The great virtue of beads as opposed to cattle, for accumulating, is that you don't have to feed them and they don't die of drought. So, what happens with Mapungubwe, I think, is you get the next shift, which is the shift to the form of an almost symbolic currency because cattle have also simultaneously consumed. So, I see it as a sort of three way shift. About 1,000 AD, trade, barter but inconsumable goods in form, so perhaps grain but certainly cattle and iron and things like that. Complex societies developing. The second major shift which really marks Schroeder, K2 and Mapungubwe, say 800-900 AD is a symbolic shift towards a symbolic sort of currency. That in turn allows the accumulation of wealth, then you get far more marked elites because elites need to differentiate themselves, in terms of things that they wear, so you begin to see specialized burials and grave goods. People up on the top of Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe then takes that even further because of course, the stone work at Great Zimbabwe isn't functional, it's all symbolic. I mean, not one of those stone walls (maybe just one that I can think of) but the vast majority of those stone walls at Great Zimbabwe, don't actually hold anything up, they are marking status for the people living behind them. That is the logical development that you've got. That to me is what it is all about.

MH: We'll speculate on that together. The stone wall analysis begins with Great Zimbabwe before the radio carbon dates become available. So again, as with in Southern African archaeology and the difficulty of having very **[limited]** stratigraphic sequences. So, people get quite xxx about it and in the case of Great Zimbabwe, Anthony Whittey got involved with a team and Roger, you know worked there in the late '70s...just as **[an absolute chronology]** was becoming available with the dating of the site. But you had these differences, but in fact, it is a very nice study because they have...typological study. They identified three or four and they worked out the sequence of which walls were butted against which, because clearly, you know if you've got two walls butting against each other, one is certainly much later...so they logically worked it out. It's an abstract logic and it works and it has held up very well. It maps the emergence of Great Zimbabwe through a phase of quite primitive walling through to quite

sophisticated through to decline. And that has held up very well. ...to establish that interest in walls, and then when we 30-40-50 much smaller stone built sites, we can observe the walling then. The second **[point of investigation]** is the decorations and patterns in the walls in the sort of herring-bone patterns in the other style. Again, this is very much an extension of ceramic analysis and distinctive pattern analysis and they are similar. The assumption was that and that is simply a straight forward analysis of ceramic pattern. It's the assumption that if people are making things in the same style, they are since the celebration of time. That of course, is testable with radiocarbon chronology and that has also helped quite well. So, that's the whole thing about wall decoration entered into the archaeological record. Now subsequent to that there has been a history of trying to interpret **[?]** and one of those of course, it to try and use it to build these ethnographic analogies. So the observation... so people use it.... of patterns in contemporary communities to make the argument of historical continuity. Now, that's a little more of a leap because a lot of these are fairly standard designs. You could go through the exercise, I am quite sure, of looking at middle Danube pottery or something like that and finding similar designs and arguing that Thulamela or Great Zimbabwe was settled by sort of 'Early Austrians' moving south through Africa. So, that stuff is always dangerous to make those sorts of assumptions. The thing that is actually less **[clear]** is what those patterns actually mean. There is a sort of naive assumption that you can ask a person who identifies themselves as Venda and show them a picture and somehow by magic, that person is going to tell you what those mean, in some sort of old history of...so they are going to look and this thing and say, 'So this is a snake and the snake means this, and the snake means this.... tradition'. That kind of assumes that they retain All these traditions in their head, which of course they don't. So, its quite a dangerous thing to do, to be able to interpret it in that way. So, the only way that it really works, and this is one of the distinguishing features of archaeology of Great Zimbabwe, is that if you've got the classic Levis Straussian structuralism, classic structuralism, then you can argue that the mind is organized in a series of... You can then come up with a model, that kind of offers that interpretation irrespective of what people want. Now to me, Great Zimbabwe and the interpretations of Great Zimbabwe over the last twenty or thirty years, are one of the classic examples of structuralist interpretations. One of the problems of being really ahistorical, and in fact being very deterministic is, because you know, it is how you must see the world in this way because it is part of the classic structural opposition and that, I think, is a complication in all of that. Now, behind what the decoration means, is a very interesting question and I would say that quite frankly we don't know and we don't have any easy way of knowing. One of the things that we should always be willing to do as archaeologists is to recognize the limitations of our discipline. There are certain things in archaeology - I mean that is why I became a historical archaeologist - is that if you look at pre-history and pre-historic interpretations, you often find that archaeologists push the boat out so far in their interpretations is that actually become stories rather than empirical interpretations. One has to face up to the fact that where you do not have coterminous written documentary evidence,



there are certain things that you are actually not going to be able to tell about the in the past. Particularly so in South Africa where you've had four hundred years or so of disruption with colonialism. There are not these direct lines of continuity back through the generations and they are complicated enough to interpret anyway. So, you can't go and find a few elders who are going to sit down and tell you that this has been around for generations and tell you that this is a snake or that this is a pot, because how would they know? I mean, they don't have that line of continuity. So, I think that is beyond the reach of interpretation. Where it becomes very interesting to do that, is I think to do that, is in moving from history to heritage. One of the ways that is really effective is to engage communities in the meaning of material objects is to actually use the material objects to form stories and to tell stories. So, I don't mean to be misunderstood here. So, what I am saying on the one hand, is that I don't think you can develop strong empirical interpretations of these meanings because there is not that strong sort of connection to the ethnography. I'm not meaning that they are not useful. I think that where they are very useful is particularly in engaging people with material culture in stories around heritage. And that can be done because you can show people a pot or a decoration, who haven't ...and say, 'what does that mean for me?' I mean, 'what does this mean for you and what do you see here?' What do I see here? And you can actually demonstrate how we can actually form our identities around those sorts of material culture. So, I would use them in those sorts of ways. But there are very few easy interpretations about what those decorations mean.

LW: Can I ask another quick question about material culture? In terms of repatriation of cultural property and especially with the Sarah Baartman burial in South Africa. To what extent do you feel that material culture itself, particularly cultural property as it is construed as being cultural, or symbolizing something cultural. What does that promise for people?

MH: It offers historical depth. You know, it's somewhat ironic to be talking about the repatriation of material culture sitting in New York. Only in New York could you have an entire Egyptian Temple sitting under glass, in a treasure house of looted artifacts from around the world...