



## Background to Declaration of the Thulamela Ruins

Thulamela, dating to the Late Iron Age period, is part of the Zimbabwe culture, which is said to have begun at Mapungubwe. The demise of Mapungubwe corresponded with the rise of Great Zimbabwe. When Great Zimbabwe was abandoned around 300 years later, several groups went south across the Limpopo River into what is today South Africa's north-eastern province of Limpopo in the north of the Kruger National Park. This led to the formation of a new state known as Thulamela, a dry stoned-walled settlement.

The site was occupied between 1250 and 1700 C.E. by the Makahane people who are of Venda origin. The Makahane, as the Nyai group, is one of the first Venda people to occupy the mountains south of the Limpopo River. These and many other indigenous people were forcefully removed from the land they had lived on for many years – making way for the establishment of the Kruger National Park. In the process, they severed their spiritual ties to the site.

There is evidence of the presence of extensive trade networks at Thulamela, which extended well beyond the continent. This evidence of the long-distance trading networks with the far east found at Thulamela include gold beads, potsherds, microscopic gold droplets, cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean, a piece of Chinese porcelain, and further gold wires. In addition to gold jewellery, the people who lived at Thulamela manufactured artifacts made of copper, iron, and bronze, displaying the creativity, technical and artistic excellence of the goldsmiths. One remarkable artifact is a double iron gong that was found near the graves of the man and woman, now thought to be a symbol of royalty.

Class division and the notion of a sacred leadership were the two most important social variables in Zimbabwean society – and it is thought such developed because of the social stratification that resulted from trading. The King was meant to be a social outcast rather than a public celebrity.

The site is further important since it provided the first evidence of a secondary burial (UP44) in South Africa. Each capital had a stone-walled palace that served as the King's ritual seclusion. The stone monolith guarding the palace's rear door was both an indicator of its inhabitants' social rank and a symbol of defence.

### Brief Statement of significance:

Thulamela, a dry stone-walled archaeological site, lies on a mountain plateau overlooking the Livuvhu river floodplains, in the Pafuri area of the Kruger National Park. Thulamela is at the centre of what was once a thriving ivory-gold trade route, as evidenced by glass beads, bronze, Chinese porcelain, ivory bracelets, gold, and textiles. The inhabitants had skilled goldsmiths – with gold being the main currency in the traded. The Royal Palace is understood to have been located at the top of the Thulamela hill while the commoners lived below it – indicating the separation between the King and his subjects on a social and spiritual level. The sacred monoliths found in and around the confinement enclosure across the landscape demonstrate religious significance of Thulamela. Thulamela was discovered in 1983 by a ranger, confirms the existence of a complex State system in a pre-colonial South Africa. The abundance of archaeological material discovered at Thulamela significantly shaped out understanding of pre-colonial political states and helped redress past injustices and misconceptions.





The Royal family of the Makahane, descendants of the occupiers of the site, visit the site for their annual rituals.

SAHRA intends to declare the site as a National Heritage Site.

