

MPUMALANGA

an illustrated history





MuseuMAfrica, Johannes

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an illustrated history

Peter Delius and Michelle Hay





A Zulu pot; a Swazi pot;
a pot in the Tsonga/
Shangane tradition;
Swazi *Isigiki/Isicamelo*
(headrest).

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worlds – an African
settlement on a hillside
above Barberton, late
19th century.

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Ndebele Idzila
(arm rings).



Forewords

MPUMALANGA IS a newly created province, but the region it encompasses has a very rich history. In 2005 the Mpumalanga Provincial Government initiated a Heritage Project aimed at rediscovering the province's past, and using this to inform its contemporary identity and development.

Among other things, the project has resulted in the publication of *Mpumalanga: History and Heritage* (2007), a major work written by a team of researchers led by Professor Peter Delius of the University of the Witwatersrand.

When it appeared, the Mpumalanga Provincial Government committed itself to facilitating a more accessible version in terms of both content and price. I am delighted that we have been able to honour that promise.

I am confident that this lavishly illustrated book filled with exciting, moving, and thought-provoking stories and images about the past of our province will be a treasure trove for tourists, educators and scholars alike.

I would also like to acknowledge the key role played by First National Bank (FNB) and the National Heritage Council (NHC), co-funders of the wider project, whose substantial support has helped to lay the foundations for this publication.

Thabang Makwetla

Premier, Mpumalanga

October 2008



THE MPUMALANGA Heritage Project, which provided the basis of *Mpumalanga: History and Heritage* as well as this beautifully produced and highly readable volume, was initiated by Premier Thabang Makwetla. However, in recent years the project has been part of the responsibilities of my department, which has taken it forward in a variety of ways. We have organised a number of symposiums at which issues vital to the heritage of the province have been hotly debated by leading thinkers before rapt audiences. The Department has also commissioned a teachers' guide to *Mpumalanga: History and Heritage* which has been completed. It will shortly be made available to teachers and schools throughout the province, and will provide

Facing page:
The Berlin Falls on
the Mpumalanga
escarpment.



a major resource for staff and students grappling with the new history curriculum. This volume provides yet another valuable resource to help us contemplate the past of our province and to think about the sort of future we should strive for. We therefore take considerable pride in the achievement of the researchers, writers, officials and political leaders who have given so much time and energy to creating this book.

Dinah Pule

Member of the Executive Committee for Sport, Culture and Recreation
Mpumalanga Provincial Government
October 2008



THIS BOOK distils some of the most important and vivid elements contained in *Mpumalanga: History and Heritage*. It is grounded in the research and writing of the authors of that magisterial volume, and we have also benefited from the comments on and corrections to this version from many of these scholars. But our brief to create a more accessible and lively text has meant a sometimes rather radical engagement with what went before and for which we must take responsibility. This book has also benefited from a substantial amount of additional image research in which Harold Thompson has played a sterling role.

This illustrated history is also the result of an accumulation of effort since 2005, when Premier Makwetla initiated the Mpumalanga Heritage Project. The Premier and his office were committed and caring midwives. The leadership and officials of the Department of Culture, Sports and Recreation have been capable and attentive guardians, while FNB and the NHC have been generous benefactors. We have been especially fortunate that all our patrons, while quick to respond to requests for assistance, have been scrupulous in their support for the intellectual independence of the project. Finally, Riaan de Villiers and his colleagues at The Highveld Press have brought enormous flair, energy and vision to the making of both this book and its predecessor.

Peter Delius and Michelle Hay

October 2008

Facing page: A maize silo on the Mpumalanga highveld.



Acronyms and abbreviations

AD	Anno Domini – in the year of our Lord
ANC	African National Congress
APLA	Azanian People's Liberation Army
BAD	Bantu Affairs Department
BYO	Brooklyn Youth Organisation
COSATU	Confederation of South African Trade Unions
CWIU	Chemical Workers' Industrial Union
Escom	Electricity Supply Commission
ICU	Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union
IDC	Industrial Development Corporation
MK	Umkhonto we Sizwe
NP	National Party
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
PAC	Pan-Africanist Congress
SACP	South African Communist Party
Sasol	South African Coal Oil and Gas Exploration Limited
TAC	Transvaal African Congress
TGME	Transvaal Gold Mining Estates
UDF	United Democratic Front
ZAR	Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek

Glossary

Agterryer	rear rider – person providing support to Boer combatants
Apartheid	apartness, or separateness; policy of the National Party government
Askari	African collaborator with apartheid security forces
Assegai	short fighting spear used by African combatants
Baas	(White) boss
Bantu	term used to describe Africans under apartheid
Biltong	cured and dried strips of meat, usually beef
Black spot	African rural community in ‘white’ South Africa
Boer	farmer; member of white settler community of predominantly Dutch descent
Boss boy	Black team leader in the mines
Burgher	citizen (of a Boer republic)
Commando	Boer fighting unit
Hensopper	‘hands-upper’ – person who surrendered during the South African War
Ikhanda	military kraal
Impi	group of African (Zulu) combatants
Inboekeling	Booked in person – indentured labourer
Kraal	traditional African settlement
Laager	a defensive formation of ox wagons drawn up in a circle
Landdrost	magistrate; key district administrators in the ZAR
Lobola	bride wealth
Mealies	maize
Mthlembe	infiltrator
Native commissioner	ZAR official responsible for administering Africans
Rinderpest	cattle plague; an infectious viral disease of cattle and some species of wildlife
Trekboer	nomadic farmer
Veldcornet	field cornet; rank in the ZAR commando system
Volksraad	people’s assembly (legislature)
Voortrekker	pioneer; Boer who took part in the Great Trek



Swazi *Isixembe* (meat platter); Pedi headrest; Swazi *Umcenge* (milk pail).



Clockwise from top:
 Lion and buffalo in
 a Mpumalanga game
 reserve; roadside fruit
 stall near Barberton;
 banana farm near
 White River; landscape
 on the southern
 Mpumalanga highveld.





Introduction

EVERY YEAR, tens of thousands of domestic and foreign travellers set out from Gauteng and elsewhere to visit the leisure resorts on Mpumalanga's escarpment, with its breathtaking landscapes, and the world-famous game reserves on the lowveld, teeming with game. But they hurry through the intervening countryside in order to reach their destinations as rapidly as possible. Little do they know that their blurred surroundings are a historical and cultural treasure trove; that if they slowed down and stopped from time to time, took a slightly longer route, or made short detours from the main roads, their journeys would be immeasurably enriched.

The objective of this book is to encourage both the hurried and the curious to linger in this province. It is based on *Mpumalanga: History and Heritage* (UKZN Press 2007), which bulges with information. But we do not try to do justice to all the material contained in that ample volume. Instead, we offer a sleeker companion crowded with striking images, telling narratives, and turning points that provide tantalising glimpses of the region's extraordinary history.

Cradle of life

To start in the very remote past, ancient rock formations in Mpumalanga contain evidence of the earliest history of our planet some three and a half billion years ago. Particularly significant is the discovery of microscopic traces of the world's oldest life forms, which suggest that the region was a key cradle of life on earth.

Set against this time scale, human history is no more than a flicker of the eye. But within this story Mpumalanga also has many claims to distinction. Archaeological sites in the region provide evidence of the lives of humans and their predecessors going back some 1,7 million years. They reveal the presence, way of life, and interaction of Stone Age hunter-gatherer and Iron Age farming communities. A particularly evocative residue of Mpumalanga's past is the abundant rock art to be found all over the province.



Clockwise from top: Maize field and power station, eastern highveld; plantations north of Nelspruit; lowveld landmark: the Sappi paper mill at Ngodwana; logs in a timber yard at Barberton.



Accounts of the initial waves of settlement in the region have to be reconstructed from the material record. But there are rich seams of oral tradition stretching back at least to the 15th century, which enable researchers to start populating the historical landscape with the forebears of contemporary communities. It is also possible to trace the emergence of the powerful Pedi, Swazi, and Zulu kingdoms that played such vital roles in the region's history.

Bitter struggles

In 1845 a new era began with the arrival of the first Boer settlers, and the following four decades saw bitter struggles over land, labour, and political control between the Boers and their African neighbours. Proselytising by Berlin missionaries after 1860 added a major religious dimension to this contestation. These struggles left an indelible mark on the division of land and the nature of society and religious belief in the region.

Mpumalanga is dotted with the sites of crucial battles and the remnants of elaborate fortified strongholds crafted by African and mission communities from a combination of natural features and stone walling. While some of these sites have been recognised and preserved, many have not, and languish to this day in an obscurity and sometimes decay entirely inappropriate to their historical significance and evocative power.

The best-known military memorials in Mpumalanga recall bloody clashes between Boer and Briton in the South African War at the turn of the 19th century. For many years after its conclusion, this conflict was represented as 'a white man's war', thus ignoring the role played by blacks in the war, their internment in concentration camps, and the large-scale displacement of black communities. However, from the 1980s onwards historians began to cast important light on this hitherto hidden dimension of the war. Drawing on this seminal research, this book outlines the attitudes of black people in the region to the war; the roles they played, or were forced to play; the impact of the conflict on black communities; and the betrayal of their expectations in the post-war period.

For visitors to Mpumalanga the sombre reminders of war are quickly eclipsed by the region's astonishing natural beauty, and mounting excitement at the prospect of visiting one of its many nature reserves. Few realise that Mpumalanga has not only been blessed by nature's bounty, but has also long been a setting in which humans have grappled with the question of their appropriate relationship with nature. The Kruger National Park, important as it is, is only one element of the larger tale told in this book.



Clockwise from top:
 High-income housing
 estate outside Witbank;
 low-income housing in
 Mhluzi, Middelburg;
 dense rural settlement
 in the north eastern
 lowveld; high-rise
 building in Nelspruit.



Economic revolution

Even the most impatient and distracted traveller would find it hard to miss the evidence of the profound economic changes that have taken place in Mpumalanga in the last century and a half. Power stations, vast fields of maize, grain elevators, mine dumps and mining headgear, bustling towns and glittering shopping malls, sprawling industrial complexes, and malodorous fogs bear witness to some elements of this revolution. Matchbox houses marching in regimented rows along the outskirts of towns, shacks sprawling in suffocating congestion across barren landscapes, isolated huts crumbling alongside verdant fields, armies of small traders hawking indistinguishable goods, and the pervasive presence of youths eking out a living as parking attendants are also products of this economic history.

Mpumalanga has islands of affluence which ensure that it has the fourth-highest per capita income in South Africa. This heritage of wealth creation; innovative, competitive entrepreneurs; flourishing enterprises; and skilled workers is a precious resource that needs to be recognised and nurtured. But this process was also compromised and constrained by racial and gender discrimination as well as coercive labour relations that neglected the talents of the majority, and constrained African entrepreneurs. As a result, for many the dominant legacy of economic transformation was acute poverty and grinding unemployment.

As outlined in chapter 2, in the course of white settlement and colonisation Africans were steadily dispossessed of land they had occupied. But many Africans still lived in the 'white' farming areas, and maintained vestiges of agricultural independence through forms of tenancy. A few communities also bought farms in these areas before the 1913 Land Act slammed the door on African land ownership. The 20th century saw a protracted struggle by African communities to retain their hold on land, and this exploded into open resistance on a number of occasions.

After 1948 the National Party government set about implementing apartheid with a zeal that created intensifying cycles of repression and resistance. For 40 years Mpumalanga was a key site of political struggles that are not widely known beyond its boundaries. The concluding chapters of this illustrated history give a sense of the range of these confrontations, which helped to corrode the protective shell of the apartheid system.

Looking back and forward

This book confirms that Mpumalanga has a depth and distinctiveness of history that cries out for greater recognition, and also that its history vividly



Clockwise from top: Rural dwellers near Dullstroom; in Barberton; Barberton's main street; a statue in Hendrina on the southern Mpumalanga highveld.



expresses the processes that have shaped the contemporary realities of South Africa. It is an area of human settlement in which diverse communities have come into contact and – through processes of conflict, co-operation, and exchange – created communities, identities, and futures that have transcended the limitations of all that went before. Hunter-gatherers, herders, farmers, speakers of Sotho-Tswana, Tsonga, Nguni, English, and Afrikaans have all had to learn to live together. Processes of cultural osmosis have been central to the making of modern social realities. These processes have often been brutal and unjust. But they have also revealed sparks of optimism, flickers of light, and, ultimately, the rays of hope that pointed to a new dawn both for the region and for wider society.

Just as there are many paths into the past, so there are many different routes through which the heritage of Mpumalanga can be explored. Each of the chapters in this book offers its own set of possibilities for curious travellers. Sadly, some key sites are unknown or at least unmarked, and many are suffering from neglect and/or vandalism. Part of the purpose of this book is to contribute to a concerted effort to identify, research, restore, and protect sites and to develop routes and materials that will alert a much wider audience to the fabulous history and heritage of Mpumalanga.

Children on a playing field in Mhluzi, Middelburg.

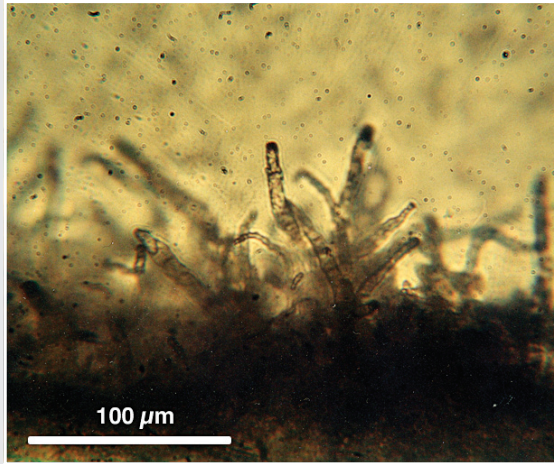


Beginnings

The Barberton Mountainland harbours one of the oldest and best-preserved rock sequences on earth. It contains microscopic traces of the world's earliest life forms, which suggests that the region was a cradle of life.

A section of the Komati River in the Barberton Mountainland, host to the oldest known rocks in Africa, and the oldest fossils found anywhere in the world.





Clockwise from top left: Hair-like tubes created by bacteria in volcanic rock in the Barberton mountains, photographed through an electron microscope; spinifex textures in komatiite, a unique volcanic rock type discovered along the Komati River; pillow lava along the Komati River; pillow lava with ocelli (eyes).