

# FORESTRY'S HUMAN LEGACY

## The mystery of Mpumalanga's stone walled ruins.

sappi



# South Africa's greatest man-made mystery?

You do not need to wander too far into the Sappi Helvetia plantation in Mpumalanga to stumble across one of South Africa's greatest man-made mysteries – the stone circle ruins.

Neatly piled stone walls seem to appear from nowhere amidst Sappi's plantation pines and, when seen from above, it becomes clear that these are more than simple stone walls. Circles within circles, interconnected walls and terraces can clearly be seen. Indeed, there are hundreds of stone-walled ruins scattered across the Lowveld – many on forestry-owned land, with thousands more found across Southern Africa.

Their origins remain a mystery, although there are some well supported theories as well as suggestions that are simply out of this world!

**So what could these stone-walled ruins be?**

## HOMESTEADS AND CATTLE KRAALS?



The simplest and most widely accepted explanation is that these are the ancient homesteads and cattle kraals of the Bakoni people.

The Bakoni – or Koni (a name given by Sotho speakers to those they considered to be Nguni speaking invaders) – arrived in northern Mpumalanga from a number of different areas in the early 17th century. They populated vast stretches of the Lowveld and escarpment, from Ohrigstad in the north to Carolina in the south, and from the Belfast, Lydenberg and Machadodorp highlands in the west to the Badplaas valley which borders the Komati River in the east.

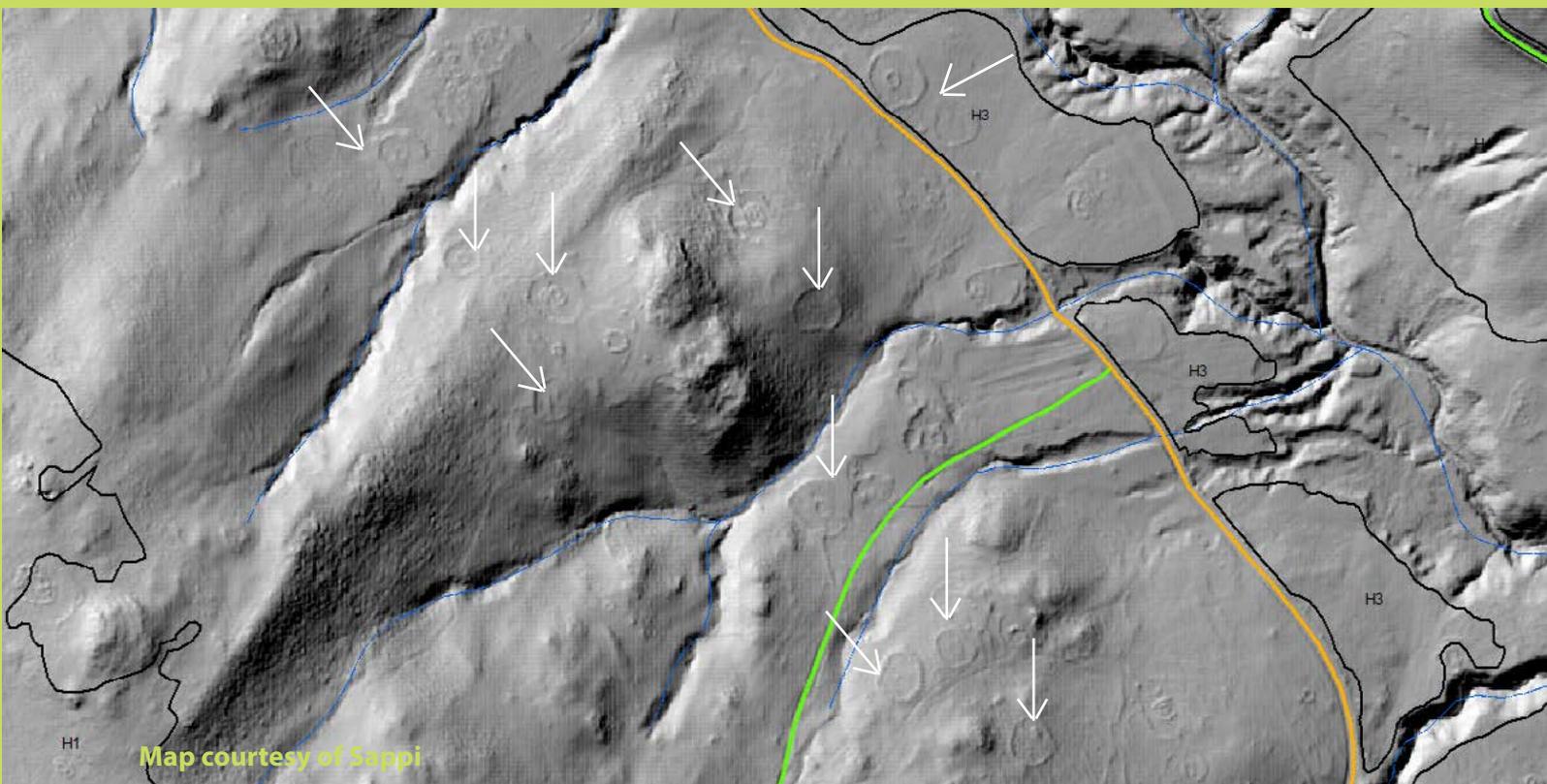
All photos courtesy of Sappi Forests.

The geographic placing of these stone-walled structures near water and preferably on eastern, lower-valley slopes, supports the idea that these were the early homesteads of pioneers exploring the region by using the rivers as a way of navigating the new landscape.

## AN AGRICULTURAL HUB?

An aerial examination of the structures revealed an extensive network of presumably agricultural terraces that, when in production, could have delivered far more than local needs. This suggests that this was once an agricultural production hub, with excess produce being traded with travellers moving between the coast and Highveld along the river systems. The idea of the ruins belonging to an agricultural community is further supported by cattle control tracts seen in aerial photography that indicate significant cattle numbers and the scientific research that shows significant soil enrichment inside some of the enclosures suggesting cattle were housed there.

From the first really detailed reports of these stone-walled ruins in 1939 by van Hoepen, through the 1970s when Revil Mason from the University of Witwatersrand used aerial photography to get a bird's eye view, to the most recent interest by the University of Pretoria, academic consensus has been that these ruins are those of 17th century homesteaders and their livestock.



A mapping tool referred to as Hillshade is used by Sappi to easily identify Bakoni heritage sites. A Hillshade is a grayscale 3D representation of the surface, with the sun's relative position taken into account for shading the image. It removes the vegetative layer and reflects what is on the earth's surface. The use of this tool is not limited to identify Bakoni ruins, but can be used as a tool to identify many types of heritage sites.

# ANCIENT TEMPLES AND LOST CIVILISATIONS

The interpretation given by Dr Cyril Hromnik, an expert in Dravidian culture, suggests the stone-walled ruins are Afro-Indian Temples, similar to those found in Madagascar and the East-African seaboard.

Hromnik believes that these are the ruins of temples built before the time of Christ by Indian sea traders known as Komates, a name is still present in the Lowveld in the form of Komati Gorge, Komati River, Komatipoort.

According to those who have toured the earliest ruins with Hromnik, the explanation he provided for their existence is that they would have originally marked the vicinity of gold mines, although they later spread throughout the country providing a physical record of ancient trading routes (Sabie blog, accessed 2019). Besides bearing similar architectural features to the temples in Madagascar, there are a number of other features found in these stone-ruins that appear neither coincidental nor in keeping with homestead/cattle kraal hypotheses. These include a perfect Zoroastrian Swastika, prayer rocks and the presence of many concentric walls without any apparent openings. While Hromnik's interpretation has been rejected by main-stream archaeology, it gained a popular support during the 1990s even within the forestry community.

Hromnik's theory may involve people from a far-off land, but there is another theory that is quite literally out of this world. Michael Tellinger is an equally engaging stone-circle expert, who dismisses the common homestead/kraal theory as many of these circles have no doors or windows and their walls often form concentric circles. Instead, he believes these ruins are part of a much wider network of close to 10 million circular structures across Southern Africa, originally built by an ancient civilisation.

Tellinger's hypothesis is centred on the most famous of these stone circles: Adam's Calendar between the towns of Waterval Bowen and Kaapsehoop, which marks the passing of time, days and key celestial events (MTPA, 2019). Adam's calendar is believed by Tellinger to be over 75,000 years old, linked to the Pyramids of Egypt and Greater Zimbabwe and he believes it has the potential to unlock the secret of free energy, thanks to its ability to harness electromagnetic fields.

The other stone circles, or stone-walled ruins, like those at Helvetia are also remnants of this ancient civilisation, and while many of these structures have been used by African and European settlers subsequently, in his view their original purpose was certainly not for cattle.

# FORESTRY'S STANCE ON THE STONE CIRCLES

While stories of Indian temples and ancient civilisations are enchanting, homesteads and cattle kraals are still probably the most obvious and academically supported theory as to the origin of Mpumalanga's stone-walled ruins. We may never definitively know their true origin and as the decades go by, perhaps a new and even more captivating theory will come to light.

What we do know is that these ruins have an interesting story to tell and are part of this country's human heritage. This is why Sappi and a number of other plantation owners who have these stone-walled structures on their land have identified them as heritage sites to be conserved and protected.

Their original purpose, and indeed their age – 75,000 years old or a mere 400, may remain debatable. But what is certain is that by being designated a Sappi heritage site these stone-walled ruins will be protected and preserved for future generations to puzzle over.



## WHAT'S A HERITAGE SITE?

Sappi is guided by the National Heritage Resources Act (no25 of 1999) when interpreting what is meant by a Heritage Site. Simply put, Heritage Resources are those resources, both human and natural, created by activities from the past that remain to inform present and future societies of that past. Some examples of what may be considered to be a heritage site are buildings older than 60 years, relics from early mining activities and battle sites, grave sites, sites that are known to have historical or cultural significance, such as rock art and evidence of forestry activities from the early part of the 20th century.



# FINAL THOUGHT

*"There is no doubt that the stone-walled structures dotted around the Mpumalanga Escarpment are remnants of a past history that need further investigation. For many years, this period of our history was not the focus of academic research and we are grateful that some light is now being shed on the origins of these structures.*

*Whatever your interpretation is of these ruins, the important thing is that examples of value to history are identified and managed within the plantation landscape to ensure their conservation. Sappi have recognised the importance of heritage and retaining what can still be conserved. A heritage database has been compiled for each plantation, capturing what is known from past records and from what is unearthed during the normal lifecycle of planting and harvesting compartments."*

Peta Hardy

Area Environmental Manager  
Mpumalanga, Sappi

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Photos courtesy of Sappi