



Society of Africanist Archaeologists

17 March, 2016

Mr. Vusithemba Ndima
Acting Director General
Department of Arts and Culture
Republic of South Africa

Dear Mr. Ndima,

I write as President of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists (SAfA), to urge the Department of Arts and Culture of the Republic of South Africa to act to prevent mining operations taking place on the Canteen Kopje heritage site, in the Northern Cape Province. These mining operations, now proceeding despite the declared provincial heritage status of Canteen Kopje, will certainly result in substantial damage to one of the most important archaeological sites in South Africa, and indeed on the African continent.

Canteen Kopje has yielded extremely significant evidence for Early Stone Age occupations in southern Africa, as well as some of the earliest evidence for long-distance transport of specularite, an iron mineral with no known utilitarian uses but with striking visual characteristics. The transport of this mineral over distances of more than 150 km strongly implies that humans at Canteen Kopje were using this material for symbolic or ritual purposes approximately 500,000 years ago, marking an extraordinarily important step in the evolution of modern human behaviour. Canteen Kopje will certainly take its place among other iconic South African archaeological occurrences – if it is not destroyed first.

The variety and prominence of the scientific publications associated with Canteen Kopje simply underscore its exceptional importance. Across the globe, Professors of Archaeology (like me) teach their students about sites like this: as South Africa continues to occupy its rightful place upon a world stage, Canteen Kopje and archaeological sites like it remind people in other countries that this, in a very real sense, is where humanity began.

Construction on this site will certainly result in irredeemable damage to the archaeological record of the Northern Cape Province, and of South Africa as a whole. The Society of Africanist Archaeologists very much hopes that the Department of Arts and Culture will oppose mining operations at Canteen Kopje, and in doing so will continue to protect this site for all South Africans.

Yours sincerely,

Scott MacEachern
President, Society of Africanist Archaeologists