

# ZIMBABWE: CAPITAL OF AN ANCIENT RHODESIAN KINGDOM

ROGER SUMMERS, F.S.A.

*Keeper of Antiquities, National Museums of Southern Rhodesia*

ZIMBABWE is known all over the world, but it implies different things to different people. To most it is synonymous with mystery, high antiquity and an exotic civilization in Central Africa; to some it is an archaeological puzzle which has not been solved—and, they hope, never will be; but very few have given it the careful attention it deserves.

Its very situation, in a wild stretch of woodland, is a challenge to the imagination, while its vast size and evident importance are even more thought-provoking. The difficulty of understanding obscure archaeological evidence deters the majority of people from a careful reading of the principal books on the subject, while the excellent popular books written by followers of the more extreme advocates of the Diffusionist School have still further confused the issue. Small wonder then that Zimbabwe has gathered about itself far more of fantasy than of fact. It is the aim of this article to draw attention once again to certain facts discovered by the most objective of the human sciences, Archaeology, and to interpret them in the light of what is now known of African history.

## **The Ruins**

These lie some 17 miles south-east of Fort Victoria, Southern Rhodesia ( $20^{\circ} 14' S.$   $31^{\circ} 55' E.$ ) and are but a few miles from the main road linking Johannesburg to Salisbury.

Zimbabwe Ruins are by no means the only ruined stone buildings in Southern Rhodesia; we know of some 200 others; but they are both the largest in extent—covering some 70 acres—and the most impressive.

There are two principal ruins: one, on a rocky hilltop, called by Victorian antiquarians the 'Acropolis', and another, in the valley 350 feet below, to which the misleading name of 'Temple' has been given. Scattered about in the valley are many more ruined stone buildings, but compared with the 'Temple', these are of minor importance, although any one of them is at least as big as the general run of Rhodesian ruins.

## The 'Temple'

The 'Temple' is indeed a most impressive sight. It is roughly elliptical in plan and is nearly 300 feet long by 220 feet broad. The great Outer Wall is quite the most massive piece of pre-historic architecture in Southern Africa, for it is over 30 feet high and in places 20 feet thick. It is built of granite slabs laid dry in regular courses, the stones having been selected for thickness and usually trimmed on at least one face. However, it is only the faces of the wall that are carefully built, the main core is of angular granite blocks thrown in anyhow, and, should a part of the face give way, the filling cascades down. Old photographs show several such breaches in the wall, but they have now been repaired, and it is very difficult to tell the new work from the original.

Within the 'Temple' are walls which are lower than the outer one, but which still tower up to a height of 20 feet or more. Some enclose narrow passages, while others sub-divide the interior. The most striking feature is, however, the Conical Tower, a more or less circular structure some 18 feet in diameter at the bottom and just over 30 feet high. It tapers upwards, and the present top (from which at least two courses are known to have been removed) has a diameter barely half of that of the base. The taper is not uniform, but increases as one rises, so there is an apparent bulge in the sides about a third of the way up.

The entrances to this great building had already collapsed when the Ruins were discovered, and, in order to prevent further falls of stone, were rebuilt in their present form 30 or 40 years ago.

From observations made in 1872 by one of the earliest visitors, it is probable that all the entrances were doorways having hardwood lintels.

Yet despite the impressiveness of the building, it displays many signs of unskilled work: there are many 'straight joints' where junctions between blocks run straight up through several courses; there is no bonding between walls, one rests against another; and, finally, in finishing off the Outer Wall, it looks as if the builders were incapable of joining up their work masonwise and could only connect two walls by butting one up against another.

## The 'Acropolis'

The 'Acropolis' is far more elaborate than the 'Temple',

and its plan is most difficult to comprehend until one realizes that it has been built as a series of courts working outwards from a jumble of immense rocks, which are a prominent feature above the frowning cliffs of smooth bare granite on which the 'Acropolis' buildings are perched. These rocks, said the son of a Chief who had his kraal on the Acropolis Hill until 1900, are the only part of the whole complex to which the name 'Zimbabwe' really applies.

### Research Work

A German geologist—Carl Mauch—was the first to describe the Ruins, his account appearing in 1872. Although very brief, for he was beset with difficulties, Mauch's account is most valuable, as it contains information regarding various religious ceremonies in the Ruins, in addition to describing features which disappeared soon after his visit.

In 1891 Mr. Theodore Bent, an English traveller and antiquarian, undertook an examination of the Ruins at the request of the British South Africa Company, but by then the site was already being ransacked.

By 1905 there was little left to dig at Zimbabwe, and Dr. D. Randall-Maclver, who was charged with reporting on the Ruins to the British Association, spent little time there, choosing to examine sites like Khami, Dhlo-Dhlo and Inyanga which had been more or less unexplored by anyone other than treasure hunters.

Just before Maclver's visit, a local journalist of antiquarian tastes, Mr. R. N. Hall, had been given the task of clearing up Zimbabwe for the benefit of visitors. Hall's work was not research, but his very detailed description of the fabric in his book *Great Zimbabwe* is still the best we have.

Apart from restoration and preservation work, nothing more was done until the British Association, paying its second visit to South Africa, asked Dr. Gertrude Caton-Thompson to examine Zimbabwe and other monuments "which seem likely to reveal the character, date and source of the culture of the builders" and to report to the Association in August, 1929. Miss Caton-Thompson's *Zimbabwe Culture* is still the bible of students of the Rhodesian Iron Age.

About the same time that Miss Caton-Thompson was working in Rhodesia, a large German expedition under Leo Frobenius was examining rock paintings and ruins in the same area.

Frobenius himself wrote in general terms, but a detailed study of ruins, partly original field work and partly comment, was published in 1941 by his assistant, Dr. H. A. Wieschhoff.

Since 1929 no considerable excavations have been made at Zimbabwe, as the Southern Rhodesian Historical Monuments Commission, who are the jealous guardians of the fabric of the Ruins, ruled that nothing should be done there until some new techniques were available and more was known of the Rhodesian Iron Age. For the last 10 years therefore, the Chief Inspector of Monuments (Mr. K. R. Robinson) and I have been patiently amassing information from several hundred sites scattered over an area as big as Spain, besides doing intensive work at Khami and at Inyanga.

All this miscellaneous information has a bearing on the Zimbabwe problem.

### The Meaning of the Name

The present spelling dates back to 1892, when Theodore Bent wrote his *Ruined Cities of Mashonaland*, but it was not then completely established, for Sir John Willoughby spells it 'Zimbabye' in the title of a little book published the following year. Mauch wrote the name 'Simbabye,' while various 17th century Portuguese spellings are 'Zimbae', 'Zembahoe' and 'Zimbahe'. Those different spellings arise from differences of dialect between the Karanga of Southern Mashonaland, who have a word *Zimbabwe*, while the Zezuru and other Shona speaking peoples in Northern Mashonaland with whom the Portuguese were acquainted use the word *Zimbahwe* or *Dzimbahwe*. Both words are more usually used in their plural form *maZimbahwe* which, I am told, is most correctly translated as "the chiefs' graves".

Every Shona chieftainship, and there are very many, has its *maZimbahwe*, where the bodies of the chiefs are buried in ox-hides, the grave being kept open until the *mondoro*, the spirit of the chief, has left the body. It is around the *maZimbahwe* that the spirits of the chiefs gather, and so, naturally, it is to this spot that the people of the tribe come to ask for the spirits' advice on tribal matters and to ask for help in time of social calamities like droughts, famines, cattle sickness, or human epidemics (other human diseases are the concern of family spirits, not those of the chiefs'). Mauch records such visits to the Zimbabwe 'Acropolis'.

Frequently *maZimbahwe* are under tall rocks and sometimes

in caves or shelters in the rocks. I have seen several such places myself and have heard of them from many informants, European and African. They are kept free of weeds and refurbished regularly on certain special days each year.

The *mondoro* speak through specially selected persons and give advice on tribal matters which can, on occasion, be directly opposed to popular sentiment; but when it comes to matters such as drought or disease, the *mondoro* cannot be of direct assistance; all they can do is to intercede in the tribe's interest to *Mwari*, the high-god, and in his own good time *Mwari* will usually relieve their distress.

Thus there is in the Shona mind a divorce between personal and corporate religion. The first is a simple family matter, very like that which existed in Republican Rome, but the latter is a more complex business, involving several officials in the smaller tribes and a whole hierarchy in the case of the larger ones.

This brief exegesis on Shona religion has been necessary because it is a subject on which most readers of *Africa South*, and indeed most European residents in Southern Rhodesia, will be ignorant, since practically nothing has been written about it. I am grateful to my friends, Mr. J. Blake-Thompson and Mr. P. F. Matedza, for explaining various points to me.

### Zimbabwe Birds

It was in the 'Eastern Temple', the real *MaZimbahwe*, that most of the famous Zimbabwe birds were found. These are carved pillars of soapstone about 5 or 6 feet high surmounted by a bird of hawk-like aspect. Eight of these are now known to exist, all are in museums and none at Zimbabwe itself.

Although there is a general family likeness between these various 'birds', they are impossible to identify, having been conventionalized both in anatomy and stance. They are, however, differentiated from each other by a variety of marks—circles, chevrons and bars—which serve to identify each separate one.

As they are known to have stood on little stone or mud pedestals in the most sacred place in the Ruins, there can be little doubt that they were memorials of departed chiefs. Their differentiation suggests a device for remembering their several identities, for a somewhat similar method is used to-day for remembering ancestors among the Venda of the Northern

Transvaal.

### Age of Zimbabwe and Associated Buildings

It was to discover the answer to the vexed questions of age and cultural affinities of Zimbabwe that the British Association sent out both Dr. Randall-MacIver and Miss Caton-Thompson, and to these questions they both gave unequivocal answers.

On the question of age MacIver says "these buildings are mediaeval and post-mediaeval" and entitled his book *Mediaeval Rhodesia*. Caton-Thompson considers that if certain deposits indicate an earlier settlement on the same site, "the foundations of Zimbabwe belong to some period between about the 9th century and some time during or after the 13th century when . . . the porcelain shows the place to have been in full occupation", adding that if the deposits already mentioned belonged to the first building period (and she herself thought that they did), then the foundations may be a century or so older. Wieschhoff's view is that the Zimbabwe buildings (i.e., the Rhodesian Ruins as a whole) belong to periods later than the 14th century, some to the 17th, 18th or 19th centuries.

In 1950 we thought we should clear up the question for good and all, for two pieces of timber were discovered in the base of one of the walls in the 'Temple'. These were extracted by Mr. Robinson, who also dug sections which proved that portion of the wall to belong to the second phase of the Rhodesian Iron Age. The wood was submitted to radiocarbon tests in Chicago and London, and dates of A.D. 591 ( $\pm 120$ ) and A.D. 702 ( $\pm 92$ ) were found. These were the dates at which the trees ceased to live, and normally that would be a useful indication of date of use. Unfortunately the wood is of a type which is never cut by Africans to-day because of its dangerous sap, and it is usual for anyone wishing to use such wood to cut it from a tree which has fallen and has seasoned naturally in the veld. As it is white ant-proof and virtually indestructible, the Zimbabwe timber might conceivably have lain for centuries before use.

I personally do not think this was the case, but, having access to much information not available to previous workers, think that the late Sir John Myres was right when he said in a letter to *The Times* that the masonry was built on a site which had been previously occupied. It seems to me that the timber was re-used from the older site in a wall of post-13th century date.

Having reviewed the evidence many times in the light of subsequent field evidence, I believe that much of Zimbabwe as we see it to-day is no more than a few centuries old. Nevertheless, Zimbabwe is on an old site, and here I feel we may accept the evidence of the timber that the site, as opposed to the buildings on it, was occupied as long ago as the 7th or 8th century A.D., a figure which agrees very closely with Miss Caton-Thompson's estimate, based on quite different evidence.

### Origin of the Zimbabwe Culture

MacIver, Caton-Thompson and Wieschhoff all agree—"the character of the dwellings contained within the stone ruins, and forming an integral part of them, is unmistakably African . . . the arts and manufactures exemplified by objects found within those dwellings are typically African. . . ." (MacIver in 1906); ". . . examination of all the existing evidence, gathered from every quarter, still can produce not one single item that is not in accordance with the claim of Bantu origin. . . ." (Caton-Thompson in 1931); "The builders of the Zimbabwe monuments were Africans." (Wieschhoff in 1941).

Confirmatory evidence continues to accumulate, and, in a recent study of human figurines from the Southern Rhodesian archaeological record, I have been able to show that many of the 'phalli', so beloved by older antiquaries as indications of a Phoenician origin for Zimbabwe, are, in fact, stylized female torsos, the prototypes of which are to be found in deposits of the first phase of the Rhodesian Iron Age.

The lack of building tradition and failure to understand the nature of stone building is itself a further argument for an autochthonous origin. Mr. Anthony Whitty, a Rhodesian architect who is now Surveyor to the Historical Monuments Commission and a close student of the architectural problems of Zimbabwe, has written in a recent paper that Zimbabwe stonework is peculiar to the site and "cannot be accounted as originating from any culture within possible reach of the builders"; on which I would comment that, as there is ample evidence for trade contacts between Zimbabwe and the East African coast, it is quite possible that one of the kings who lived at Zimbabwe may have seen some stone building or other on the coast and, when opportunity offered, copied it in the local building idiom. In my view there is just a bare possibility of outside influence through visual impressions, although I agree

with Mr. Whitty that the techniques are local and the architecture is "essentially primitive".

Before leaving the subject it is worth mentioning that Frobenius considered Zimbabwe to have belonged to an 'Erythraean' culture complex which possessed Indian connections. As we have seen, no other scholars have supported this view, but in working through records of "ancient workings" (i.e. pre-European gold and copper workings) a few years ago, I was surprised to find how closely the prehistoric Rhodesian mining techniques resembled those of India. Indian gold trade connections were suspected by Caton-Thompson 25 years ago, and the weights used until fairly recently by local Africans when weighing gold dust have both Indian and Bantu names. So close a correspondence in primitive mining engineering almost certainly implies Indian direction in mining operations as well as in trade.

### Conclusion

Recent archaeological work in Southern Rhodesia amply confirms the main conclusions of earlier workers.

The local Iron Age proves to be more complex than either MacIver or Caton-Thompson suspected (although the late Sir John Myres was uncannily correct in his interpretation). There have been some slight adjustments in dating—the Zimbabwe buildings are probably more recent than most people think, although the culture practised by the inhabitants probably came to Rhodesia some six or seven hundred years ago.

But the chief conclusion of the older archaeologists remains unshaken: there can be no doubt that Zimbabwe was built by Africans for Africans; at the very most, they copied something whose construction they did not understand, but even that is doubted by one local worker.

Such a great undertaking implies peace, prosperity and a very considerable administrative ability. Who can have possessed such power and such ability? One cannot just say "Africans" and leave it at that, for there are many different kinds of indigenous people in Africa, and to use so general a term may lead us to false conclusions; let us, therefore, try to be more specific.

Who the original settlers were we do not know, but we think that they were the forefathers of the present Basuto and other peoples now living in the Union and the High Commission

Territories.

Many of the smaller buildings must have been built by the forerunners of the Karanga, who still live in the area to-day and who gave their name to the whole country in Portuguese times and, we have good reason to think, until the coming of the Matabele in 1837. There can be little doubt that so important a place as Zimbabwe was at some time or another the residence of the paramount chief of the Karanga and Shona peoples, who was known to the Portuguese as Monomotapa, and although the primary function of Zimbabwe seems to have been connected with Bantu religion, yet its size alone entitles it to be regarded as the capital of the Monomotapa's domains during the period of their greatest prosperity in the 14th and 15th centuries.

But the greatest works of all were, we think, built by the people called Rozwi, who were also responsible for building Khami, Dhlo-Dhlo, the lovely Naletali and many of the strongholds of Belingwe. The Rozwi were a people whose origins are still unknown, who are still credited with almost supernatural powers as magicians and who were utterly smashed by the Angoni, a horde of abominably savage warriors whom Shaka had driven out of Zululand. The Rozwi were scattered to the four corners of the country about 1830 and have lost all vestige of political power. Yet they retain a dignity and sense of responsibility which still sets them head and shoulders above their fellows and marks many of them as natural leaders.

Excavations planned for 1958 will teach us more about the order in which the walls of the 'Temple' were built, and until then we can only say that present indications are that Zimbabwe, previously the capital of the Monomotapa kingdom, was for a limited period the capital of the Rozwi kings who are known locally by the dynastic name of 'Mambo'.

#### *Some useful Books on Zimbabwe*

- Bent, T. *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland*. London, 1892 and 1896.  
MacIver, D. Randall-. *Mediaeval Rhodesia*. London, 1906.  
Hall, R. N. *Great Zimbabwe*. London, 1905.  
Caton-Thompson, G. *The Zimbabwe Culture*. Oxford, 1931.  
Wieschhoff, H. A. *The Zimbabwe-Monomotapa Culture in South-East Africa*.  
Menasha, Wis., U.S.A., 1941.