

The Ones Who Came Before

Most romantic-sounding foreign names turn out to have a disappointingly prosaic meaning. Zimbabwe, for instance, simply means 'stone houses': the whole vast area between the Zambezi and the Limpopo is dotted with the ancient remains of stone buildings and stone enclosures.

The funny thing is that the present-day Bantu inhabitants by preference never build in stone or even mud bricks. They prefer soft construction: a wattle framework of sticks driven into the ground, the walls daubed, the roof thatched. A wholly temporary affair. When this type of house is abandoned it disappears without trace after a very few years.

Anyone might suppose that stone buildings would have been kept in use and improved upon, but according to the archaeological evidence, none of them have even been lived in for the past five hundred years or more. They are not all impressive like the famous Great Zimbabwe ruins at Masvingo. There are numerous less conspicuous stone ruins, forts, hut foundations, enclosures, now long overgrown and ignored. The people living in these areas have no knowledge and few theories about the original inhabitants. They are simply 'the ones who came before'.

Look at almost any koppie, any little hill, any big hill in modern Zimbabwe, and you are likely to find evidence to show that it has been used at some time as a defensive fortress or, at least, a place of refuge. You will nearly always find telltale traces of stone walling bolstering the natural rock defences. Plainly the local people have frequently lived in fear of attack by somebody or other. And those local people themselves must once have settled at the expense of some other race. As in Britain, as in America, as in Australia, so in Africa. The process had been going on for unknown millennia before Europeans settled here in the name of civilisation. The colonists' motives may have been basically selfish, but I doubt if the area has ever really been more peaceful than when the British were in charge.

The fact is, the soft hut builders were, and if left to their own devices largely still are, semi-nomadic farmers practising the sort of shifting cultivation that has always been unsympathetic both to history and to a fertile environment – slash, burn, sow, reap, sow, reap – move; slash, burn, sow, reap, sow, reap – move; a seemingly endless cycle until, one day, you have no new area to slash and burn, and all the fertility has gone.

If your culture happens not to include the skills of reading and writing, and the Bantu had no time for either, you don't leave any history behind you. You simply leave speculation. History, after all, is the invention of the person writing it. It's not really something that exists already, simply waiting to be written down. Writing history is a highly selective and imaginative process – a matter of picking out events, painting them vividly, and portraying them according to your own (possibly blinkered) point of view.

As Black Africa has never gone in for record-keeping, history has never been told or written down from the Black African viewpoint. Recent attempts to rectify that omission usually manage to look like a case of sour grapes, so I'm certainly not going to try it. In the Zimbabwe area Arabs have been toing and froing for ages. The Portuguese

were here from the 16th century, and by then the stone house culture was already on the way out; they may well have given it a final push. It is mainly their records that tell us about the Empire of Munhumatapa.

Map names are often confusing in many countries. According to the Portuguese, 'Zimbabwe' once covered the whole area between the Zambezi, the Limpopo, and the Indian Ocean – including, that is, a great chunk of present-day Mozambique. They often referred to these lands as Monomotapa, or Munhumatapa, after the African emperor of that name.

For what the knowledge is worth, the Portuguese were conquering and occupying these African lands when Henry VIII was on the English throne. Before they arrived, the coastal strip at least had been the southernmost stronghold of the Sultanate of Kilwa, which reached down the coast from Zanzibar. And before Prince Ali Bin Hassan founded this sultanate, it was for many centuries the Greek colony of Rhapta.

When empires expand and colonies appear it is usually because they promise to be a source of wealth. It's not just since Victorian times that the great political powers have been squabbling over Africa. There have always been traders and adventurers pressing inland, with politicians constantly staking claims. But the further inland one went, the more limited the outside influence became, and meanwhile the African kings had their own power struggles, though, of course, no-one thought of writing them down.

We know from our own records that the Ndebele were in the habit of plaguing the Mashona tribes within this area, during the latter part of the 19th century; but this is modern history. The Ndebele never existed as a separate tribe before they broke away from the Zulus and were driven northwards across the Limpopo by the Boers.

During the centuries before that, could it have been the Zulus who made life so uncomfortable that the stone kraals had to be abandoned? Were *they* the real menace behind all these little hill forts? Is this the reason why so many rocky hills and other natural sanctuaries well within Mashonaland bear Zulu-type names – often adopted on the older European-made maps – as well as Shona-type ones?

Or could it have been the incoming Bantu who terrorised another, forgotten race – perhaps the various mysterious tribal people we call Hottentots? It would not surprise me. This sort of thing has happened before, is happening now, and will happen in the future. It's a continual hand-me-down process, and not simply a power-struggle between conflicting tribes. On a much larger scale it entails the rickety descent of human souls from their ancient pristine human state, through the lesser spiritual worlds of animals and plants, finally to reach the material level, the basic level which sums up the spiritual status of modern humanity.

From our retrospective viewpoint, selective history emerged from the mists of sheer speculation only a very few generations back. Who were the truly human people – did they die out with the sons of Abraham? We scarcely know what it means for whole races to occupy this exalted level of existence. Perhaps the loss of truly human status coincided with the beginning of animal farming, stock rearing, which we know about and understand. Is the cattle-breeder somehow higher in the order of things than the plant-orientated farmer growing his crops? And is his way of life in turn somehow higher than

that of the industrial worker, seeking an honest wage?

All the varied tribes known collectively as the Bushmen were long ago displaced from all the favoured places and driven into the southern deserts. Pre-Bantu, some say the Bushmen were also pre-Hottentot, pre-Negro, pre-Hamitic, pre-Semitic, pre-Celtic, pre-Roman and pre-Greek: the same hunter-gatherers, perhaps, who painted their quarry on European cave walls, as they did in so many sheltered rock faces and cave walls in Zimbabwe and other parts of Africa – little wrinkled brown-skinned people displaced goodness knows how many centuries previously. Were they the original human ones?

We who live within the consumer economy are unashamedly materialistic. In spiritual terms we may be lower than the animals, lower even than the plants, but by that very degradation we find ourselves infinitely higher, infinitely better off. Could this be the will of God – or the power of Satan?

Perhaps the answer depends on what exactly we mean by 'Satan'. What could be more satanic than one person enslaving another? Do not think that there has never been indigenous slavery here in southern Africa, or that slavery is a European introduction. It has always been rampant, all over the continent. The Arabs have always been natural slave-masters; these are the natural plant-level people of the world. There is a certain arrogance about Arab culture that leaves little room for self-doubt. So long as you don't feel that *you* are the wrongdoer, it is perfectly all right to be horrid to others. And as it says in the Koran, if a man wants to have sex with his slave girls, that's fine by Allah! There used to be a saying in Zanzibar: when we play the flute all Africa dances, from Zanzibar to the Great Lakes.

Yes, you can understand a Muslim supporting the slave economy. But Christians do at least profess to hold the interests of others equal to their own, even if they don't really mean it. It is truly amazing what people can justify, if they put their minds to it.

In my own lifetime, miscreants and nobodies under Portuguese rule were rounded up and set to work in chain gangs. In previous lifetimes, they were liable to be rounded up and taken to Sofala, then shipped north to Zanzibar to supply the Arab market; or, latterly, southwards around the Cape, bound for the Portuguese settlements in the New World.

Pagans are seldom the ones with the big stick. But at the Great Lakes lay Uganda, the one Black African country that looked upon slavery as an excellent idea. They would not compete with the Arabs but, from all accounts, the Ugandans imported thousands of slaves every year for their own use. I believe they sacrificed them, and I also believe that every new building, every new hut, had a slave buried beneath it to act as unwilling soul-guardian of that building. These unfortunates must have been brought from deeper inland. Did long wailing caravans of human merchandise wend northwards under black slave-masters? Could this be why the Mashona tribes abandoned a settled stock-rearing tradition and took to the bush to build soft huts, slash, burn, sow, reap, always ready to move at a moment's notice?

While the English were thinking about having a civil war, the Portuguese were busy pinning down the Emperor Munhumatapa. First, they converted him to Christianity.

Then they persuaded him to hand over the rights to his goldmines and other interests to Portugal. To keep tabs on him, they removed him from his own heartlands and resettled him as a tame puppet emperor in a new 'stone house' at Masapa, near the mouth of the Zambezi.

It seemed like a good idea at the time, but it did the Portuguese little good. With their paramount chief gone, every petty chief and induna became a law unto himself. They all grabbed what they could, and the trade in gold faltered. The Arabs and Syrians and Indians who for generations had been settled inland as artisans went out of business.

The gold mines have disappeared almost without trace, but I am sure gold washing took place wherever there was water and gritty crystalline soil. I knew of one such place in the eastern hills, a small valley deeply eroded into washed-out dongas at some time in the past, now clothed again in thick bush. Here and there on the slopes are to be seen the stone foundations of what I believe were once gold-panning troughs.

Sofala is not much of a town nowadays, but in ancient times it was a busy port exporting African goods. The stream of gold which had poured through Sofala into the courts of Arabia, Europe and Asia, slowed to a trickle, then dried up completely. Ivory too was becoming scarce, and bearers were hard to find. It was simply unsafe for people to walk abroad at that time, because the trade in slaves flourished as never before. Like the Conquistadors of Central America, the Portuguese too had their dream of Eldorado, and Africa was surely the fabled Ophir of King Solomon's mines. Now, they panicked and lowered their sights, grabbing what they could.

To make a neat piece of history, the Emperor Munhumatapa should have lived at Great Zimbabwe. It would have tied everything up nicely. But the archaeologists are adamant. The ruins have yielded artefacts from the 13th, the 14th and the 15th centuries, and nothing beyond. There is absolutely no trace of any later habitation. The Portuguese treaty with Munhumatapa happened in 1629. It was never *his* Great Zimbabwe. The mystery remains.

Just what relics have been found? In some of the other larger ruins there were Portuguese items dating from the 16th century – a bell, a ring, a chalice, a cannon or two – the signs perhaps of temporary occupation. But these were not in Great Zimbabwe itself. Here were only a few shards and glass fragments from the Arab world and the eastern Mediterranean. Some ancient Chinese porcelain... in the 13th century even Kubla Khan was sending expeditions down the East African coast, with a roving commission.

Whoever lived there, someone initially took the most elaborate pains over the building of Great Zimbabwe, the largest ancient African building south of the Sahara. It is one enormous enigma, with that marvellous conical tower, beautifully built, forty foot high before a chafing tree branch knocked the top off. Most people think the place was a medieval gold-trading centre, although it is difficult to see exactly how it could have worked.

For five, six, seven hundred years visitors have gawped at it, trying to fathom it out, and I too have run my hands over its stones, equally mystified. Of what use is a

conical tower that you can't get into? A look-out post, or a minaret for the Muslim merchants, with a wooden ladder for the Muezzin? That would be distinctly precarious, and besides the tower is partly hidden behind the walls and not on the highest ground. Does a king lie buried beneath? Hardly, because archaeologists and others have been burrowing and poking around for so long, they would surely have pulled him out long ago. Or is it purely symbolic – perhaps on a par with the stone phallic symbols to be found in West Africa?



Around the tower, a maze of walls. A wonderful corridor of quite skilfully interlocked stones. But the scale seems so variable, the outer wall ranging from slender to massive, from high to low. And the whole place seems to have been constructed, not for a crowd of people, but for *one*. The gateways allow *one* person to enter at a time. The curving passageway too is a tight squeeze. The great stone stairway that runs uphill to the upper chamber, impressively broad at its base, narrows at the top so that only *one* person at a time can get in. A defensive measure, for sure, important perhaps when dealing with gold; but a very inconsistent one.

Here it was that the only ancient stone carvings ever found in southern Africa were discovered – the 'Zimbabwe birds'. Creatures of heraldic appearance, they sit atop pillars of blue soapstone. One of them has a crocodile, or perhaps a toothy lizard, crawling up as though to bite it in the foot. Are they indeed birds, or fabulous beasts, gryphons perhaps, lion-eagles? A totem of the Emperor Munhumatapa, his symbol of power, or had he no inkling even of their existence in his kingdom?

I have mentioned the commonly held theory of a gold-trading post; but here is another theory: suppose you were an important chief living in the back of beyond, and you had a smudgy picture of a fort in a dog-eared manuscript – an Arabian stronghold, perhaps, or a Crusaders' fortress, or a Norman castle – and you sent for your best builder and said: "Build me a place like that. Spare no expense!" Assuming your builder was skilled at dry-stone walling, he might well have come up with Great Zimbabwe.

Those massive outer walls which curve so as to accommodate the natural features of the land and make best use of outcrops and boulders – the Saxon King Offa and his men used much the same technique when building their British Dyke. I have even done it myself, on a very much smaller scale, to make a picturesquely terraced rock garden in a comfortable little English town. Your master builder would stand back, squinting hopefully at his smudgy drawing, and try to get it *just right*.

Similar but smaller ruins, lacking the tower, are to be found throughout the region. But why nowhere else in Africa? The native people simply have no traditional explanation of these places, not even a plausible folk tale about their original inhabitants. They were simply 'the ones who came before'.

