

## The Southern Rhodesian Ruins.

RECENT ARCHÆOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS.

By G. CATON-THOMPSON.

SINCE Dr. Randall MacIver investigated in 1905 the problem of the age and origin of the Southern Rhodesian ruins, little evidence on the purely archæological side has been forthcoming, except that Mr. Douslin, then Minister of Public Works in Southern Rhodesia, partially cleared in 1915 the deep deposits in the so-called Western Temple of the Zimbabwe Acropolis. In 1924, Sir Arthur Keith reported that four ancient skeletons found in various gold-mines, and one from Zimbabwe itself, were of Bantu type, but there is no evidence that these skeletons were those of the original miners.

Dr. MacIver, both in Mashonaland and Matabeleland ruins, found at levels considerably lower than the foundation courses of the containing walls, datable Oriental and European imports of medieval age, consisting of Chinese porcelain, Persian faience, Indian and Venetian beads, and Arab glass. These facts argued conclusively to his mind the general contemporaneity of the buildings with medieval times. With these dated imports was a quantity of native African pottery, metal work and other objects, differing little from those still made by local Bantu tribes to-day. No object datable as earlier than early medieval was found by him, or had indeed ever been found by the too active amateurs who had preceded him, who had had the pick of the untouched ground, but clung without concrete evidence to the idea of a Phœnician or even older South Arabian origin.

MacIver's argument was immensely strengthened by a structural peculiarity of the Rhodesian buildings, namely, the presence of very hard artificial floors of crushed granite (certainly contemporary with the walls), with which the builders furnished their enclosures and which, when intact, offer an absolutely impenetrable barrier against the infiltration of later objects to a lower level. In Zimbabwe's Elliptical Temple alone, MacIver put down seven test trenches through these floors to see what objects lay beneath. The results of six of these tests were as follows: In one case there was nothing; in four cases native objects identical with those found *above* the cement floor with dated medieval imports, were discovered; in one case two pieces of imported white porcelain, in company with an iron spear-head and native pottery, were found. MacIver does not specifically date these porcelain fragments, but classes them in his generalisation as medieval.

The seventh test, which was made in Enclosure 15, has become historic. Mr. R. N. Hall had, in previous years, all but cleared out this enclosure, removing 12 vertical feet of deposits from above the original cement floor, at which level he stopped. His published section shows Nankin china, Arab glass, and native pottery in what he calls his fifth stratum from the top—a

stratum immediately overlying the original cement floor; from this fact he inferred its later date. Accidentally or otherwise, Hall left a small section standing. This was found and critically examined by MacIver, who asserts that Hall's stratigraphy was mistaken, and that his fifth layer, containing the medieval china and glass, was, in reality, not a separate stratum, but an integral part of the cement foundations of a hut, forming a stratigraphical unit with the cement floor on which it rested. That being so, the cement would be dated by the objects Hall found in it as medieval. MacIver carried on excavation at this spot through the cement floor down to bed-rock 5 feet or so below. He got no datable objects; but a definite stratum of ash and sand was encountered, its level being some feet below the level of the foundation courses of the Temple walls. This lowest stratum contained coiled bronze wire bangles, native pottery, and spindle whorls, similar to the same objects found associated with the mediævally dated products at higher levels.

On inference, therefore, and in conjunction with his positive evidence, MacIver urges the approximate synchronism of the two within a century or two. The evidence bound up in that earliest stratum is obviously extremely important to the whole dating question, and I have concentrated our researches upon it.

At Dhlo-Dhlo, in Matabeleland, MacIver got more evidence of a corroborative nature. Beneath the unbroken cement floor of a platform in the heart of the little stronghold, he obtained Nankin china and Arab glass, lying side by side with typical African native iron and other objects. The midden and other places produced the same result.

My plan of work was as follows: First we tested the stratification over a wide, continuous area, not only down to bottom, but also with particular reference to its behaviour in relation to main walls in order to see if evidence could be collected proving the walls contemporary with a pre-medieval level. Secondly, we checked the results by means of excavations in the deepest undisturbed sections available in other areas, both at Zimbabwe and far afield in distant ruins, as well as by excavations vertically beneath some structure of unquestionable antiquity.

To fulfil the first part of this programme, a site had to be found providing two essentials not easy to come by:

(1) A site unquestionably as old as Zimbabwe's Elliptical Temple.

(2) A site showing an intact cement floor, and yet a site of sufficiently minor importance to warrant the inevitable destruction of that floor.

Dhlo-Dhlo, which I visited and tested on several

occasions, failed under the first heading; the Zimbabwe Temple and Acropolis under the second.

#### THE MAUND RUINS.

I found the spot which seemed likely to meet the case at the Maund ruins in the Valley of Ruins, Zimbabwe. The walls are ruinous, but show all the features characteristic of the Temple—the rounded, bastioned entrances, the grooved doorways, the peculiar concave or convex swing out of the bottom courses to form stepped approaches.

My test pit on virgin ground outside the Maund walls to prove the character of the natural soil showed 12 ft. 6 in. of yellow granite-sand sub-soil of Quaternary age; this was overlain by a layer of red hill-wash about 2 ft. 6 in. thick. This yellow sandy soil forms the sub-stratum of the whole of the Maund ruins, and excavations were not carried below its surface level. The Maund shows the curiously disconnected conglomeration of arcs of elliptical walls, so characteristic of the Rhodesian ruins. Some of these bound enclosures; others refuse to be connected up on any coherent plan whatever. The walls end abruptly, and our excavations, in only one case, revealed a foundation linking up two separated lengths.

Beneath a thin skin of humus we found 10 in.-1 ft. of a hard, yellow, artificial cement formed of pulverised granite. This had been laid as a floor over practically the whole area, and it covered the bottom three or four courses of the walls. This cement, in turn, overlay 2 ft. 6 in.-3 ft. of a brown-red, silty soil of natural origin—hill-wash—but containing charcoal, sherds, and iron tools and slag. Upon this the walls were actually built, and we found this to be the case, with only one exception, in every one of the twenty-nine segments of walls contained in the Maund ruins. (Substantial sections were left standing for examination by members of the British Association.) The red, silty soil passes vertically beneath the walls, which rest directly on it without any prepared foundation. In only one case does a wall rest upon the granite cement floor already described, and this wall appears structurally to be an after-thought. Above the cement floor there was a layer of humus of variable thickness, containing abundant sherds.

In the absence of any established sequence for ancient Rhodesian pottery, it is impossible to say with confidence what objects in this latter position belonged to the period of the cement flooring (the Zimbabwe period, let us call it) or what had shifted down on to it through the humus—or, inversely, what had shifted up into the humus from the surface of the ancient floor beneath. Though the cement flooring is barely covered in some places, in many others there is a large amount of red clay, locally called *dagga*, extensively introduced into these and all other ruins for hut building ('pole and *dagga*' huts). In places the *dagga* clay is piled over the granite cement floor, and in others there are clean cuts through the cement and these are filled with *dagga*. This shows that the *dagga*

is later than the cement, but there is little difference in the respective contents, and probably no great length of time separates them.

Beneath the intact granite cement floor 10 in.-12 in. thick, and as hard as stone, we obtained 418 sherds of coarse, gritty, red-brown ware. The rims have a flat lip sometimes decorated with diagonal or other arrangements of shallow, square or round punches in the wet clay. Dr. MacIver figures what appears to be similar ware from the Niekirk ruins near Umtali. It is of interest to remember that he judges the Umtali-Niekirk Inyanga group of ruins to be rather older than Zimbabwe. With this class of rough pottery was a small quantity of plain black polished ware, indistinguishable from that found all through the higher levels. Iron slag and weapons were found throughout this layer, and also fragments of bangles of flat bronze wire coiled over grass fibre. These finds are just what MacIver got in his lowest ash stratum in Enclosure 15 of the Temple.

No case can be established for an occupation before the building period, and all objects excavated from a sealed deposit of this period in the Maund are typically Bantu. In the course of the work, interesting paved pathways were uncovered; these will be discussed when the detailed results of the work are published.

#### THE ACROPOLIS SITES.

The hill-top fortress shows evidence of many successive additions, of terraces faced by curving walls, around the original centre; it also contains the enclosure called the Western Temple. Two test-diggings revealed the middens of the early inhabitants. One of them reached granite boulders at 18 ft. Here the top 12 ft. 6 in. was *dagga* clay, artificially laid down. It yielded good iron implements and fragments of a soapstone bowl in the top 5 ft. Below the *dagga* was a black midden with ox and other bones, sherds, also two undecorated native pots, six pottery phalli and fragments of bronze wire bangles. On rock-bottom there were two more pots, apparently Bantu, and another phallus.

The other pit, which was dug through a terrace, showed a paving of thin granite slabs 15 ft.-17 ft. below the surface, surrounding a curious stone structure; the objects found in the underlying 5 ft.-6 ft. of black midden are therefore as definitely from a sealed deposit as those from the Maund. This midden, at 18 ft.-25 ft. beneath the present surface, obviously comparable with the other, yielded further types of objects such as three fragments of iron tools, iron slag, a white porcelain bead threaded on thin bronze wire, and eighty other imported beads in opaque glass. Sherds included the usual black or grey ware, but also fragments similar to those in the lowest stratum in the Maund. Here, therefore, there were inhabitants when the building of pavements such as those of the Maund came into use; whilst at some still later period, the area was levelled up to form a terrace, with high retaining wall, by

the introduction of *dagga* and rubble, completely burying thereby the earlier building. This evidence is in harmony with that obtained in 1915 by Mr. Douslin (*Proc. Rhodesia Sc. Assoc.*, June 1921-22).

#### THE ELLIPTICAL TEMPLE.

Trenches totalling 260 ft. in length and averaging 5 ft. 6 in. in depth have been made near the Temple, in every case reaching down to the granite rock. The results have been the same everywhere, the finds from bed-rock level being analogous to those from the midden on the Acropolis. These finds give confirmatory evidence but are not of primary value because they do not come from sealed deposits. In one place, adjoining the Mauch ruins, rock bottom is reached at 9 ft., or about 4 ft. 6 in. below the bottom course of poorly built walls. Here there are two superposed stone pavements, and here again the oldest layer, a bed of grey ash and sand 1 ft. 3 in.-1 ft. 6 in. thick, resting on bed-rock, yielded imported glass beads. As this layer passes under the walls, it may be older than they, or it may belong to the period of construction.

Around the Conical Tower have rallied the theories of foreign origins and, with the consent of the Rhodesian Government and the help of a mining engineer, a tunnel was driven under the Tower from side to side, exposing the underlying deposits down to bed-rock. The tower rests, without any prepared foundation, on 5 ft. 6 in. or so of granite-sand. This sand yielded two palæoliths. Above this came a thin layer of reddish silt similar to that in the Maund ruins; this was sieved and washed. The objects recovered are a small iron band or clamp, a tiny gold bead, traces of a coiled bronze bangle, and a sherd of black pottery with metallic polish, similar to the ware found so abundantly in all our other excavations.

The purpose of the Tower remains obscure; no evidence has been found to suggest it was a grave; its workmanship is so haphazard that in a diameter of 18 ft. 4 in. there is a fall of 1.19 ft. That this is not due to later subsidence is shown by the fact that thicker courses to correct the error in the ground courses have been introduced higher up the Tower. This is scarcely the work of high civilization, and this opinion has been confirmed by numerous archaeologists and engineers who visited the ruins with the British Association.

#### SITES IN THE SABI RESERVE.

This reserve, of about 9,000,000 acres, lies on the watershed of the Sabi and Inyazitza Rivers. Matindere, the best known of the ruins here, has a rare dentelle pattern in its crescentic girdle wall. We made 160 ft. of trenches, reaching granite under about 2 ft. of veldt soil and rubble artificially introduced. The finds were the usual ones, and, in the adjacent midden, more than a thousand glass and shell-disc beads were obtained, as well as nineteen others of metal, bronze, and copper.

Chiwona ruins, unknown to all but four white people, yielded rough pottery phalli, hollow perforated bones such as are known from Khami, imported beads, bronze wire bangles and spindle whorls from the midden outside the walls. The site showed signs of recent occupation. A variety in the rather stale list of finds is a fragment of black polished pottery with a frog modelled in low relief climbing up to the brim.

Mshosho ruins, with relics of massive walls and a true Zimbabwe style of entrance, yielded, both from the midden and from the bottom of a fine rock-passage, recalling that of the Zimbabwe Acropolis, more beads, establishing its age as contemporary with that of the other ruins. Mshosho also had stone foundations for grain bins on its terrace-walls and contemporary with them.

Chibrumani ruins in the Sabi-Deruli district were also examined, and yielded similar results.

Beads have been classified from sites ranging from Dhlo-Dhlo in Matabeleland to the eastern regions of Mashonaland; these beads link up the dating evidence over this wide area.

#### DATING.

Two fragments of Celadon glaze were obtained from the foundations of a hut of no stratigraphical importance, and these are said by the British Museum to be of the Sung period, tenth to thirteenth century A.D., but they probably reached this remote spot later on. As to beads, Mr. Horace Beck makes a preliminary statement that some are of south Indian types, not later than 900 A.D. Other beads are of types found in remains of villages in Malaya, and also in similar sites in Borneo, the earliest dating for which seems to lie between 600 and 1100 A.D. We thus have imports the extreme dating limits of which in their homelands lie between 600 and 1300 A.D.: this evidence is supplementary, therefore, to that of Dr. MacIver. I should like to take this opportunity of expressing my admiration for his sound pioneer work.

It is inconceivable to me, as it was to Dr. MacIver, how a theory of Semitic origin could ever have been started. Every detail in plan, building, and contents seems African Bantu. Further, the construction is such that, apart from repairs, not one stone would be standing on another in a period reckoned in millennia and not in centuries. My respect for, and interest in, the Rhodesian ruins is enormously strengthened by these conclusions. Instead of a degenerate offshoot of a higher Oriental civilisation, we have a vigorous native culture showing high organisation, originality, and industry. It is a subject worthy of all the research South Africa can give to it; South African students must be bred to pursue it.

The thanks of the expedition are due to the Governments of Southern Rhodesia and of the Union of South Africa, to the Union Air Force, and to very numerous other helpers. The full results, with plans, diagrams, and other illustrations, will be published in book form.