



Prehistory Society of Zimbabwe

Newsletter 136

Editorial

I have had a great deal of correspondence on the Nyanga gold-mining hypothesis, most of it sensible, other of the “slave-pit” variety. I have accepted two further discussions on various aspects of the alleged phenomenon for publication in this issue and will then consider the matter closed. This does not preclude the later inclusion of new data or evidence on the subject in future issues, but the Nyanga region has dominated our pages for almost a year now and it is time to move on. Other portions of the country must be as active in their archaeological investigations and one would be happy to hear of them. Email the Editor at hubcapzw@gmail.com with your short articles, questions, views and comments.

Congratulations to Munyaradzi Manyanga of the University of Zimbabwe on the attainment of his PHD from Uppsala University, entitled *Resilient Landscapes: socio-environmental dynamics in the Shashi-Limpopo Basin, southern Zimbabwe c. AD 800 to the present* now published by Uppsala University (Manyanga 2007). If you have a fast internet connection, his thesis can be freely downloaded at <http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/publications/digitalEng.htm>. Several other works of interest to Zimbabweans are also available including Chipunza’s (1993) analysis of the Hill Ruin at Great Zimbabwe and Jonsson’s (1998) thesis on early plant economy in Zimbabwe.

I must re-emphasise that anything published in the newsletter remains the sole responsibility of the author(s). Neither the Editor nor the Prehistory Society of Zimbabwe will be held responsible for opinions expressed or ideas advanced. With that disclaimer out of the way, I have included a news report of a sensationalist claim about Zimbabwe’s history. Professor Tudor Parfitt claims to have discovered the fabled Ark of the Covenant in a dusty storeroom of the Museum of Human Sciences in Harare, after years of searching and writing fantastical books about the lost tribe of Israel. We are all aware of the rich archaeological heritage of our country, but this is unacceptable romanticism soured with a dollop of pure folly. All the typical phrases used by charlatans (from UFO seekers to mystics) such as “mysterious”, “closely guarded”, “secret” appear; pointing to delusions of grandeur on the part of the author. His idea is hardly new, having been proposed earlier by von Sicard (1952) who rejected it and Mullan (1969) who was unsure but liked it anyway. The sacred drum in question is Venda (not Lemba as Parfitt claims) and it is

a sign of royalty among them. It was donated to the Zimbabwean museum many years ago since it was collected from the Venda, who, I believe, looked for it a few years ago, making a copy of it for their royal ceremonies in South Africa. Parfitt's lurid claim is classical misdirection of the kind that dominated the "Zimbabwe debate" and shows ignorance and/or suppression (undoubtedly intentional) of what is actually known. One has to ask how he obtained a sample of the drum for "dating"...? The reader is referred to the work of Le Roux (2003), Stayt (1931) and van Warmelo (1940) for more sensible and less biased information on this object. More than a few scholars and the National Museums & Monuments of Zimbabwe have been contacted for comment so watch this space.

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Nyanga Mists or a Golden Fog

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Following the debate of the previous Newsletter 135 (Dec. 2007) about the origins, functions and demise of the Nyanga stone-ruin complex I feel obliged to offer a few additional comments. Like Mupira I am glad that Kritzingler has brought to our attention the existence of gold deposits in the Eastern Highlands; they were not as barren in minerals as earlier Rhodesian geologists had depicted. However, the mere existence of gold in this small area does not imply it was used in the past. If we follow this debate, then should we not expect Marange diamonds to have bedecked the wealthy of Goa and beyond? The history of mining worldwide has always been one of locating new, sometimes previously unexpected deposits. On a similar vein should we say that the National Sport Stadium on the western edge of Harare is a gold production facility since it will have a higher than normal gold levels being the site of an old gold mine. No, the function of the stadium is independent of the geological traces! Associations can be merely fortuitous.

We should also be very wary of telescoping back into the past current knowledge and practice. This is a problem in archaeology as a whole where the "tyranny of ethnography" has often determined the interpretations offered. While Kritzingler feels able to criticize the current interpretations of the pits for penned feeding and use of dung slurry for the fields as '... a style of livestock management from the continent of Europe that is alien to the continent of Africa', are

not gold extraction tanks equally alien and a reflection of a century of colonial change? Or is this direction of debate taking us along Eurocentric or modernist path of circular logic; both denying African initiative, the extent of historical change through adaptation, adoption and abandonment and a reflection of ourselves rather than the facts?

I must admit that I do not find Kritzinger's critique of agriculture in any way convincing. The rare recovery of seeds in the Nyanga excavations is not at all surprising. It is the case with most archaeological excavations in this part of Africa where the coarse, acidic soils and their fluctuating moisture content are not conducive to organic preservation. In an equally extensive project to investigate the Sotho-Tswana settlements of the southern Highveld of central South Africa, Maggs (1976) recovered only a few carbonised seeds, mostly single examples with one batch collected by chance in a channel in a stone-lined floor at one site (Maggs 1976:69). To suggest that these were not agriculturally-oriented settlements would be to fly in the face of all evidence and historical records. Take a look also at other sites excavated – Great Zimbabwe, Khami, and even Early Farming Community sites occupied well before the advent of gold mining; everywhere seeds are far and few between. Depositional and post-depositional factors need to be remembered as the archaeological record is fickle. I do not think the environmental conditions for organic preservation in Nyanga are suitable. If the seeds were not studied by Chirawu for his dissertation the point is that they have been studied by another member of the research team, Jimmy Jonsson (2002:249-250). Floral and fauna reports are not always included in dissertations, most especially at the Masters level as they are specialist studies, often undertaken by post doctoral consultants.

That the recent crop trials in the area were considered unsuccessful is probably more of a reflection of the work ethic and anticipated outcomes of modernity. Given the greater ease in getting supplies from the shop, various NGOs or the State, who would be willing to expend the greater effort necessary? If there was no option and these alternatives were not available people would be forced to make the necessary, added effort or simply starve. Wild animals have also always been a problem across Zimbabwe; it is not a specific Nyanga issue of any greater degree - every community would have dealt with it.

I would strongly suggest that the author consults one of the few palaeo-vegetation reports for Zimbabwe which was done on pollens from Nyanga (Tomlinson 1973)¹. In it he notes a spike of the pollens of cereal crops. This he suggests was associated with the clearing and planting of the terraces. If we argue he was wrong in this interpretation and that the "terraces" were in fact mining-related why then this increase? Furthermore, mining should have disturbed the local ecology to a greater extent than small-scale subsistence agriculture and I would have expected the identification (if not still the lingering presence) of several pioneer species that are common elsewhere on old mines, including those in the nearby Makaha and Penalonga Belts. I refer to indigenous species which are often seen recolonising disturbed ground around mines; things like *Acacia polyacantha*.

I still feel that it is necessary to prove the use of penned feeding in the pits but I think there is clear evidence for the use of dung and household waste as "fertiliser". It would also be interesting to know why Kritzinger believes the art of using such residue is thought to be a recent

¹ EDITOR'S NOTE: Further references on this study: Tomlinson, R.W. 1972. Towards reconstruction of Rhodesia's past vegetations. *The Rhodesia Science News* 6 (8): 228-230, 236. & Tomlinson, R.W. 1974. Preliminary Biogeographical Studies on the Inyanga Mountains Rhodesia. *The South African Geographical Journal* 56: 15-26.

phenomenon. Given the relative poverty of the leached soils of this area it does not surprise me when we locate isolated pottery fragments over a considerable area near archaeological sites. This was undoubtedly the refuse that was taken out to enrich the fields rather than being allowed to accumulate as domestic middens which are rare on Nyanga sites. Equally relevant is the reopening of the hillside terraces and water furrows on the western slopes of Nyanga North and above the Old Dutch Settlement immediately after independence in 1980. The local settlers were simply resuming a practise banned by colonial policies. Similarly as Mupira points out there is terracing elsewhere in the Biriwiri area near Chimanimani – not actually the gold area of the wider Chimanimani District. Why is it assumed that agricultural terraces are modern and European derived?

The issue of high rates of coarse sand on the terraces could as easily point to a reason for their local abandonment for the practise of agriculture. The finer residue had been disturbed and flushed out by the rains accompanied by ash and traces of dung residue. I however think that Kritzinger has a point about the phosphate analysis. It is not a suitable technique as values are determined by a variety of depositional and post-depositional conditions. As such, it is now accepted by researchers in South Africa that it is not a reliable indicator (cf. Huffman 1993). A re-evaluation of these soils looking at phytolith content and character, i.e. silica residue, may prove far more reliable.

I remain unconvinced by the issue of slag. It was not adequately addressed. Is this GOLD slag or is it more commonly smelted iron? Is it smelting slag or secondary smithing slag? Is it in primary contexts? To locate any old “slag” on the platforms and terraces could be a purely fortuitous association; its being in secondary contexts. This is especially likely where sites have had multiple periods of habitation - Ziwa being a prime example. Have we had archaeo-metallurgical analysis of this slag?

It is unfortunate that Kritzinger has also focused on only one time-sector of the longer and wider Nyanga phenomenon. The gold-working hypothesis seems to fail when we have to consider the earlier remains – the “early hilltop settlements” and “ruined pit structures” that characterized the society from the Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries. They are not apparently associated with the later terraces and I cannot see how these earlier “pits” in the settlements could be gold production related. These features are not the later “tanks” but are smaller hollows without substantial walling that clearly evolve into the later “typical” pits of Nyanga. The evidence at the contemporary and possibly even more recent structures at Ziwa and Nyahokwe also do not fit with this gold premise. The selection of an area at Sanyawe which is both temporarily and spatially restricted cannot be accepted as representative of an entire evolving social unit, which was after all more developed and probably evolved north of this marginal location in the first instance. Readers need to consult Soper (2002, 2006).

As the reviewers point out the area was not significant in the early Portuguese reports. To suggest that there is ‘slender evidence’ for Portuguese travellers in the interior of what is today Zimbabwe is simply wrong - cf. Axelson 1959, 1960, 1973; Beach 1994, 1996, 2002; Bhila 1982; Mudenge 1988 and the various reports have been reprinted by the National Archives of Zimbabwe. The area was indeed well known to the Portuguese and their vassals and they would have taken particular interest in any major economic enterprise. But they did not. I am not saying that there may have been no local production but if this was such an important mining centre to the extent that it is argued, why then are there no real references? All we have is a comparatively recent, mid-Nineteenth Century report after a couple of centuries of Portuguese interest. Even

then it is questionable if the Nyanga Complex was actually included in the list cited by Pereira – see the map in Beach (1988). The first modern colonial mines in this region, opened even before BSAC colonisation of Zimbabwe, were in the nearby Penhalonga Valley so the area was not a total blank in Portuguese knowledge.

While the new information provided indicating gold and its possible exploitation in the Nyanga area is important the arguments presented fail to provide a reason for rejecting the agricultural essence of the Nyanga Peoples. True there remains some concern about the issue of small livestock, but this does not imply that everything else is wrong. We need to remember that at all times mining was always a SUBSIDUARY activity in precolonial Shona society. Agriculture was and is the mainstay of the country. Even the Rhodesians found this out when they colonised the country in the hope that it would sustain them through gold mining. What is needed is further work on the nature of the agricultural system rather than ditching it.

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Terraces at Nyanga and elsewhere: for grain or for gold?

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Following the recent number (135) of this Newsletter - featuring Ann Kritzinger's rejection of the agricultural explanation of the terraced hillsides of Nyanga - I am reluctant to extend the discussion without some new evidence to contribute. However, there is one aspect of Kritzinger's response relating to terracing in other parts of Africa - to existing terrace systems deriving from longstanding local traditions - whose implications are rather startling and need spelling out.

My previous remarks drew attention to instances, in dispersed parts of eastern and middle Africa, of highly specialised agricultural systems, figuring hillside terracing of grainfields, sometimes equipped with drainage or irrigation devices, alongside the stall-feeding of diminutive cattle and the treatment of their manure to bolster the fertility of the fields. These compact populations and their integrated farming techniques maintain themselves in relatively secluded mountain situations, such as Konso in southern Ethiopia and the Nuba hills and Darfur in Sudan, or on islands, notably Ukara in Lake Victoria. When first encountered by literate outsiders in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these systems were already old. Despite some points in common, each is different in detail, having evolved in response to local conditions, in particular the limitations of cultivable land. In other words, lacking the option to expand, these communities have managed by turning inwards and intensifying their husbandry methods. It used to be imagined by the culture-historical school that all such scattered examples of 'intensive' or integrated agriculture were related, as if the relics of some ancient 'civilization' which had diffused through the length and breadth of the continent, with one arm reaching Zimbabwe, thus to account for the terraces and other archaeological remains of Nyanga. That view may still find its adherents these days, but it looks increasingly untenable in the light of the accumulated archaeological and other historical research conducted across Africa over the last fifty years. More likely, each example has developed in its own locality; they remain, however, relevant to historians at large, and especially archaeologists, for comparative purposes. (See Azania XXIV, 1989: special volume on African agricultural technology and field systems; and M. Widgren and J.E.G. Sutton (eds.) 2004. *Islands of Intensive Agriculture in Eastern Africa*, Oxford: James Currey)

What one sees on the Nyanga landscape now - the vast areas of stone terracing, the numerous 'pit'-structures and other complexes, etc - are all archaeological, being the remains of a community which became defunct some time before the colonial era. (What happened to those people - whether they just 'disappeared' or died out, or were, rather, assimilated and re-aculturated into the Manyika/eastern Shona - is not our concern here.) That means that any particular theory, old or new, to explain the functions of these Nyanga remains - for agriculture or mining or anything else - necessarily involves an element of intuition and analogy. But on Ukara island and in Konso and the Nuba hills, by contrast, the terraces and homestead structures, including the cattle-sheds, are in current and constant use, their annual maintenance being family and communal responsibilities. Understanding these living agricultural systems needs intelligent observation, therefore, not archaeological ingenuity. One can watch the terraces being prepared and sown in anticipation of the rain, and the grain as it grows and eventually ripens for harvesting. One can inspect (with due agreement) the homestead compounds and, within these, the stalls housing the small cattle, observing moreover the fodder carried in, the milk yields, and the dung piling up for composting. In suggesting that the terracing of these various places could be the result of gold-mining, Kritzinger is insinuating in effect that all those explorers, agricultural officers, geographers and anthropologists who have visited and studied these communities over more than a hundred years have been hoodwinked by the locals, and that the sorghum and other crops planted each season on the terraces - not to overlook the meticulous spreading of manure - are really a screen masking a more lucrative activity. Strange, then, that these people have to work their land so hard year in and year out to feed themselves, betraying no hint of a secret source of wealth!

It may be that Kritzinger was not meaning to sound categorical in surmising a coincidence of terracing with auriferous zones across Africa. Nevertheless, if this issue is to be pursued further,

geographical rigour will be essential. Merely noting the rough propinquity of these various instances of terracing to the continent's rift system, collision belts and Precambrian shields, or to localities, precise or less precise, where some gold has been obtained or rumoured, entails - to my reading - that anything can be made to fit. (Moreover - if one needs a gazetteer of terracing in Africa - Summers' map of fifty years ago is hardly ideal. Though a commendable pioneering compilation for its time, unavoidably it combined vague and confused information with the genuine.)

Lastly - and moving from existing African agricultural communities to the longer past - one particular place cited by Kritzing, namely Aksum in northern Ethiopia, calls for comment here. This is well known as the capital of an empire which flourished alongside that of Rome in the first six centuries AD. It has long been acknowledged that Aksum's prosperity was due, in part, to its trade of African products, including gold from uncertain sources, to Roman Egypt (through the Red Sea and perhaps the Nile route too). Recently, however, some excitement has been stirred by the suggestion - by Laurel Phillipson in *Azania* (XLI for 2006) - that gold was mined (or collected) around the outskirts of Aksum itself, and that this might explain the siting of the city. However, the geological and mineralogical signs of such gold are not very apparent, and the case depends essentially upon how one should interpret two types of surviving 'megalithic' installations. While Laurel Phillipson imagines these as devices for washing gold ore, other archaeologists active there are unconvinced. A satisfactory verdict may need time. But it is worth noting that one of these installation types seems, from analogies in Nubia and the Levant, more probably designed for pressing grapes and the storage of wine. Maybe an imperial court would have been rich enough, in gold among other things, to devote land and labour to vineyards - planted, quite plausibly, on terraces - but it seems less likely that the gold derived from the same soil.

Professor claims to have discovered Ark of the Covenant

Abbreviated from Medianews, Sunday 3 March 2008

Like another famous swashbuckling treasure hunter, he has a fear of snakes. He's not averse to associating with mystics, charlatans and crooks in his quest for prized artifacts. But unlike his fictional alter-ego, the "British Indiana Jones" claims he's discovered the genuine Ark of the Covenant or at least a direct descendant of the vessel constructed to hold the original tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. In a newly released book, *The Lost Ark of the Covenant: Solving the 2,500 Year Old Mystery of the Fabled Biblical Ark* University of London Professor Tudor Parfitt claims to have located the treasured artifact on a dusty shelf of an out-of-the-way museum in Harare, Zimbabwe. "It was just by chance that I finally managed to track it down to a storeroom in Harare, was able to analyze it and discover that quite apart from anything else, it's quite probably the oldest wooden object in sub-Saharan Africa," said Parfitt, an expert in Oriental and African Studies. "It's massively important in terms of history, even apart from its status as the last surviving link to the original Ark of Moses."

In his book, Parfitt describes traipsing around the globe, decoding ancient texts and deciphering numerous clues to locate the enigmatic object. Along the way, the man dubbed the "British Indiana Jones" by friends, colleagues and the *Wall Street Journal* uncovered genetic evidence confirming claims by the Lemba tribe that they are descendants of ancient Israelite priests, the caretakers of the lost Ark. Among a host of similarities with the Israelites, the Lemba priests have been the guardians of the *ngoma lungundu*, a sacred but unassuming wooden drum they say came

from the "great temple in Jerusalem." Based on radiocarbon testing dating it to 1350 A.D., Parfitt believes a replacement was constructed from a piece of the original *ngoma*, which legend says destroyed itself or was destroyed in a pyrotechnic explosion.

But some Bible scholars, archaeologists and Ark experts are skeptical of Parfitt's claims and even of the existence of the Ark. Others say the *ngoma* could be one of multiple replicas constructed in ancient times. Parfitt, whose work tracking down the lost tribes of Israel has been featured on "60 Minutes" and the BBC, began to suspect the Lemba tribe possessed the Ark after attending a tribal ceremony in 1987. At the time, tribal leaders told him about the *ngoma*, which they said was guarded by the white lions of God and a two-headed snake inside a nearby mountain cave. Over the next two decades, Parfitt travelled from Israel to Egypt, Ethiopia and the ruins of Great Zimbabwe in search of the *ngoma* and its secrets. He encountered a cannibalistic tribe in Papua, New Guinea, was ambushed and shot at in Africa and narrowly escaped being kidnapped by Islamic outlaws in Yemen.

He experienced a major breakthrough in 1999 when he took DNA samples from 136 male members of the Lemba tribe. In a finding that drew worldwide publicity, a genetic analysis confirmed they were descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses. In 2001, Parfitt returned to the Dumbhe Mountain cave, but he didn't find the *ngoma*. He was later told the *ngoma* had been moved, and he kept searching. Finally, based on a tip about the transport of artifacts in war-ravaged areas and using a photo of the *ngoma* taken by a missionary scholar in the 1940s, Parfitt located the sacred object in a storeroom in the Harare Museum of Human Science in Zimbabwe. The wooden drum had a blackened hole in the bottom and the shattered remnants of wooden rings on each corner. Parfitt also noticed a carved, interlaced pattern described in the biblical Book of Exodus. While the *ngoma* is still stored at the museum in Harare, Parfitt is concerned the highly valuable artifact may once again disappear in a nation plagued by violence and corruption. Parfitt, who was inspired to search for the Ark by a friend, hopes the discovery will bring peace.

New board appointed for National Museums

Herald Reporter, 7 February 2008

Government has appointed a new board of trustees for the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe.

The board comprises Great Zimbabwe vice chancellor Mr Obert Maravanyika, Chief Supt Oliver Mandipaka, Chief George Chimombe, Professor Sarah Feresu, Mr Oswald Madziva, Mr Joel Zowa, Rtd Brigadier Ngulu, Mr Jacob Chademana, Mr Cassian Mutsambiwa and Mr Stanford Bonyongwe. Also in the board are Mr Stanley Hadebe, Arthur Chadzingwa and Mr Kenneth Saruchera. The executive director of the NMMZ, Mr Godfrey Mahachi, said the members of the new board would elect their chairman later.

Speaking at the inauguration of the board at the Museum of Human Science in Harare yesterday, the Minister of Home Affairs Kembo Mohadi said "Government fully appreciates the role National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe plays in national development."

"It is true that holding in trust for the people of Zimbabwe their very rich and diverse cultural and natural heritage is a heavy responsibility. In this era of globalisation which has reduced the world into a global village, the challenge faced by the new board is to ensure that through the heritage resources and cultural achievements of the people of Zimbabwe, the imperative for national identity, norms, values are achieved and sustained."

"Our nation, like all other nations across the globe, has a history unique to itself. We have monuments and sites that symbolise and illustrate our history and collective memory and

experiences and the responsibility for ensuring that Zimbabweans and the international community have access and appreciation of the values and significance of the country's heritage rest on the board's shoulders," Mohadi said.

New Publications on Zimbabweanist Archaeology

Burrett, R.S. 2007. The Garonga ceramic assemblage. *Southern African Humanities* 19: 153-166. Garonga is an Early Iron Age site in north-eastern South Africa. Ceramic decoration on sherds from the site seems to combine elements of the two traditions that appear in the subcontinent near the beginning of the first millennium AD, that is, the Urewe and Kalundu traditions. This combination of decorative styles contradicts the application of any simplistic, compartmentalised culture history sequence to our understanding of Iron Age sequences. The merger reflects an ongoing social dynamism operating at the level of the individual potters or subgroups within the larger community. Further, it is illustrative of one way in which changes in ceramic style trajectories could originate.

Swan, L.M. 2007. Economic and ideological roles of copper ingots in prehistoric Zimbabwe. *Antiquity* 81: 999-1012.

As well as being modes of supplying metal, cross-shaped copper ingots in Zimbabwe are shown to be emblems of currency and status. The author dates them to the first half of the second millennium AD and connects the appearance of ingots to increased social stratification.

Swan, L.M. 2007. Early Iron Manufacturing Industries in Semi-Arid South-Eastern Zimbabwe. *Journal of African Archaeology* 5 (2): 315-338.

Recent research about the history of human settlement and impact on the environment has focused on part of the semi-arid, south-eastern lowveld of Zimbabwe. Two iron smelting sites were excavated in 2004. Both sites indicated use of local magnetite resources for production beyond immediate subsistence needs. The Kwali Camp smelting site was used by some of the first farmers in the region, associated with the Gokomere tradition on the southeastern Zimbabwean plateau. The Mhangula smelting site was used in a later period and probably supplied iron to elite communities associated with the Zimbabwe State.

Zimbabwea Volume 9

By far the largest edition of this occasional publication yet produced. Edited by Gilbert Pwiti and Seke Katsamudanga, the papers within report on the results of the research project entitled *The Ancestral Landscape of Manyikaland*, a hitherto archaeologically under-researched area in Zimbabwe. There are articles on the surveys conducted, the various excavations done, the rock art of the area, an overview of Nyanga archaeology and a fascinating description and analysis of extant rainmaking ceremonies.

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