

ANCIENT SKIES

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THE RUINS OF ZIMBABWE

BY ERICH VON DANIKEN*

In 1868 the German explorer and ivory dealer, Adam Renders got lost in the dense Southern African bush. With his knife he slashed a path through the tropical undergrowth in an attempt to find his way back to civilization. Suddenly he found himself facing a wall that was 10 meters high! For a moment he was convinced that he was safe again, assuming that where there were walls, there were men too. He ran along the walls, but soon realized that he was going in a circle. Finally he found a hole in the wall covered with brushwood and trees. Renders suspected that he was the first white man to come across the ruins of Zimbabwe!

In 1871, Renders guided the German geologist, Karl Mauch to the spot. Mauch made a plan of the site, returned to Germany and claimed he was the discoverer of Zimbabwe. Mauch supported the theory that Zimbabwe and its environs had once been the site of the dreamland of Ophir, from which King Solomon had gold and precious stones sent (1 Kings 9, 26 *et seq.*). That was one of the countless explanations which were supposed to solve the mystery of Zimbabwe.

But others located Ophir in India and Elam, in Arabia and in East Africa. Probably it lay on the southern part of the west coast of the Red Sea. However that may be, Karl Mauch contributed one of many theories and had no idea that the mysterious place had been reported long before. Incidentally, Adam Renders never left the ruins again, staying there until his death.

A dense mist, in which imaginative theories flourish, envelops the ruins of Zimbabwe. The archaeologist Marcel Brion collected all the theories and came to the conclusion that they were nothing more than "romantic speculations".

The learned Arabian writer and world traveller Abu l-Hasan Mas'udi (circa 895) fails to mention Zimbabwe in his main book Gold-washing Sites, although large quantities of gold were mined in the area during his time.

Damiao de Goes (1502-1574), a much-travelled Portuguese historian, does mention Zimbabwe, but he never actually saw it; he was told about its massive architecture by proud negroes. His countryman and colleague, Joao de Barros (1496-1570) also writes of Zimbabwe in his book Asia. He wrote "The natives call these buildings Zimbabwe, which means

'royal residence'....No one knows when and by whom they were erected, for the inhabitants of the country cannot write and have no traditional history. However, they claim that the buildings are the work of the devil, because, in their view of their own capabilities, they think it impossible that they were the work of human hands...."

I was in Zimbabwe, which has long been a popular tourist attraction, in the autumn of 1976. You reach the ruins from Fort Victoria by a narrow asphalt road. Only a few kilometers from Zimbabwe lies the Zimbabwe Ruins Hotel. Several thatched huts form a horseshoe around a shady courtyard. Polite blacks serve food and drink as you sit at a stone table. Silk bands across their chests announce their job in large letters. Food waiter. Wine waiter. Head waiter. You could live an idyllic life here, if it were not for the almost incessant sound of rifle and machinegun fire from a nearby valley. Mozambique is only one and a half hours away.

I had a talk with 35 year old Rhodesian archaeologist Paul Sinclair, of the National Museums and Monuments of Rhodesia, who has been working for the Zimbabwe Museum for many years. On his own initiative he organized excavations in neighboring valleys and at deep levels found Chinese silks, Arabian pottery, countless Bantu ornaments and strange figurines. I asked Sinclair:

"Who built the massive buildings?"

"The blacks," he answered. "In the Shona language Zimbabwe means something like 'esteemed' or 'revered house'. It can also mean a religious temple or a kind of royal residence. Unfortunately, we have not yet found the grave of the megalomaniac dictator who may have commissioned the gigantic works. So the question of his identity will remain unanswered."

"What led you to the conviction that the blacks were the builders?" I asked.

Sinclair then took me to a cupboard with many drawers, which he pulled out, one after the other. "Look," he said. "We found these objects in the Valley of the Ruins. Between here and the ports of Sofala and Quelimae in Mozambique there are about a hundred similar ruins, generally on a more modest scale, but built by the same methods. Granite slabs were split by the application of heat and laid in layers without mortar. In the past the Kingdom of Zimbabwe stretched as far as the Indian Ocean. Presumably the unknown kings of Zimbabwe exported gold in order to obtain other goods from the Arabs and Chinese. Here are the proofs! This is Chinese silk and those are Chinese ceramics which were found in the ground here. We found Arabic cloths, bracelets, fragments of glass and even the odd ornament from India. These finds convinced us that there was a trade route here to the ports on the Indian Ocean

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*This article is based upon a chapter in the author's latest book, Signs of the Gods?, available in the United States from G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, and in Great Britain and the Commonwealth countries from Souvenir Press, London. The book was published originally in German by ECON, Dusseldorf, under the title Prophet der Vergangenheit.

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(present-day Mozambique). What did they trade with? Gold, of course, for we know that there were gold mines in and around Zimbabwe. The king's title, Monomotata, also points to this, for it means roughly "Master of the Mines".

"Wouldn't it be more reasonable to assume that the Arabs were the builders?"

"No. The fact that objects of foreign origin were found in much smaller numbers than those which were obviously of negro provenance contradicts that theory. All these drawers are full of finds. Relics of the black construction workers."

There they lay in the drawers, the figurines which may have been carved around a campfire as a leisure activity. The faces exhibit predominantly negro features, but I also saw some which immediately reminded me of my astronaut gods. They had round heads totally enclosed by a helmet. I rummaged among ivory bracelets, bone necklaces and more refined artifacts of wood, with ivory intarsia.

"If I understand you correctly, Mr. Sinclair, the blacks built Zimbabwe, but for what purpose?"

The archaeologist thought that Zimbabwe was built as a fortress, a protection against robbery, for even in those days the gold stored there was a much sought after metal. This answer did not satisfy me at all.

What was it the Portuguese historian wrote, after listening to native traditions? "They claim that the buildings are the work of the devil because, in view of their own capabilities, they think it impossible that they were the work of human hands..."

What does Zimbabwe look like today?

The main feature of the ruins is an elliptical wall, 100 meters in length, which encloses an area of some 2,000 square meters, in other words an area about the size of two football fields. Today this ellipse is called the "Royal Residence", which is an absurd name, as we know that it is most unlikely that a king ever resided within the walls. No tombs, writing, statues, busts or remains of tools or implements have been found there.

Zimbabwe has no history.

The wall that surrounds the "residence" is ten meters high, with an average width at the base of 4.50 meters. The wall was dry built, without mortar, and used up an estimated 1,000,000 tons of material.

There is no satisfactory explanation of the ruined walls inside the ellipse. There are circles, smaller ellipses, a lower wall running parallel to the outside one and a tower, ten meters high on a base with a diameter of six meters, in the right-hand corner (but strictly speaking an ellipse has no corners). I could make no sense out of the tower, because it has no entrance, no steps or windows, and its exterior wall is completely packed with stones on the inside.

The English archaeologist, Gertrude Caton-Thompson, who was in charge of excavations in 1929, thought there was a tomb under the tower. Digging took place, but no tomb was found. So the tower stands there among the other buildings, even though it has no apparent purpose.

A less spectacular site, called the "valley of ruins", extends around the ellipse. However, I found no signs of a valley. The ruins are scattered over the same plain on which the large ellipse lies. And, as is only appropriate here, luxuriant colorful plant life flourishes between the stones.

The large ellipse and the valley ruins are dominated by a third complex, which lies on a hill and is called the "Acropolis". The natural features of the ground have been used with extraordinary ingenuity. Walls have been built wherever there are gaps in the rock. The thickest, outer walls are 7.5 meters high and 6.70 meters wide at the base, and although they taper upwards they are still 4 meters wide at the top! The construction workers must have had good heads for heights, because some sections of the walls are built on sheer rock faces. These

sections of the Acropolis must have been easy to defend - if Zimbabwe really was a fortress.

Digs on the hill have revealed small gold bracelets, glass beads and eight birds made of soapstone, the mineral saponite, which feels like soap in its dry state. These "Zimbabwe birds" add to the mystery of the site. Thirty centimeters high, they probably were perched on columns originally.

There are geometrical patterns on the floor of the Acropolis. Looking down on the valley ruins and the great wall, the view is breathtaking.

Some of the stone blocks, which are over 15 meters high, seem to have been worked by human hands, others could have been dressed mechanically. I know monoliths in Peru which bear similar traces. There, above the Inca "fortress" of Sacsayhuaman, it looks very much as it does here in Zimbabwe - as if giants had once been toying with the blocks of stone. Today a narrow zigzag stairway leads up to the monoliths. Anyone ascending in the noonday heat without a guide should beware of snakes.

Cecil Rhodes (1853-1920), the founder of Rhodesia, visited Zimbabwe and was extremely interested in the numerous theories about the origin of the buildings. He opted for the biblical version, according to which Zimbabwe was Ophir, the land of gold.

About the same time, the archaeologist J. P. Went supported the view that Zimbabwe had been built by the Arabs. Today this view is still shared by R. Gayre, who says that Bantu negroes have never built monolithic buildings anywhere else, so why here? Gayre uses the gold trade to justify his hypothesis. The Arabs mined here in pre-Islamic times and built Zimbabwe to protect their treasures. As regards the elliptical wall, he points to a similar seventeenth century wall, which is located in the Yemen.

According to some estimates, as much as 600,000 tons of gold a year were excavated in Zimbabwe's heyday. Today Rhodesia's annual gold production is a mere 16 tons.

Everything is problematical; uncertainty reigns. Zimbabwe really does seem to have no history.

As I like to imagine that our ancestors, whether black or white, thought about practical matters very much as we do, I never felt at all happy about the dreamland of Ophir idea, when actually faced with the massive buildings. Why not? If a garrison is supposed to have been there to guard the transport of gold, the soldiers would certainly have lived in the formidable Acropolis. They could have overlooked the plain from up there.

On the other hand the ellipse of the big ruins in the plain makes no sense. There was no commanding all-round view, nor any of the features which defenders in all ages have needed: towers, battlements, embrasures! It was not even possible to climb the walls of the ellipse; there were no steps leading to the top or projections from the wall to scramble up. As a fort the great ellipse is a washout.

Why, for heaven's sake, did African negroes drag hundreds of tons of granite here and then break them up to build this monumental edifice?

I could not get this question out of my mind; it followed me daily on my visits to the various ruins, until a map of the complex on the wall of the Zimbabwe Museum gave me an idea!

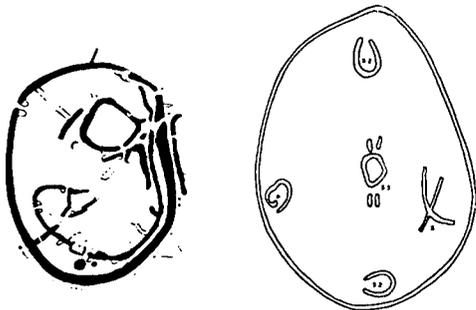
Inside the great ellipse, the massive conical tower in the "right-hand corner" has a significant position. Ellipse and tower - surely they resemble, with slight distortions, the Sirius model which was discovered among the Dogon negroes in the West African Republic of Mali?

The scholar Robert K.G. Temple has clearly proved that the Dogon tribe has known about the Sirius system down to the last detail from time immemorial.

Sirius A is the main star in the constellation of Canis Major. A tiny invisible neutron star, Sirius B, revolves around it in an elliptical orbit. This orbit around Sirius A is clearly recognizable in the "bottom right" of the Dogons' sand drawings.

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Left: Plan of Zimbabwe Ruins
Right: Dogon drawing of Sirius system

The Dogon assert that they got their enormous astronomical knowledge from a god called "Nommo". But not only did Nommo tell the negroes about the orbit of the invisible Sirius B around Sirius A, he also supplied the names and orbital data of some other planets in the Sirius system. For example, there is a "shoemaker planet" and a "planet of the women" - knowledge which modern astronomy does not yet possess. It knows only that Sirius B revolves around Sirius A in an elliptical orbit lasting fifty years.

Standing in front of the plan in the Zimbabwe Museum, I felt strongly that there was a visual parallel. Surely the great ellipse of Zimbabwe with the conical tower at the "bottom right" resembles the traditional Dogon Sirius model? Do the inexplicable ruined walls inside the great ellipse trace the orbits of the "shoemaker planet" and the "planet of the women"? Why else does an apparently meaningless wall run parallel to the elliptical wall for a full third of its length? It cannot have served a defensive purpose, any more than the other round or spiral-shaped walls inside the ellipse.

You need only to fly at a moderate altitude to see that the great ellipse of Zimbabwe with the massive tower in the bottom right-hand corner is almost identical with the Dogon Sirius model.

The question is whether there is an ideological connection between the Zimbabwe complex and the Dogon Sirius model, in addition to their astonishing visual similarity?

In all places at all times religion has been the driving force that spurred men on to superhuman achievements. Signs for the gods all over the world were of religious origin. Religious impulses inspired megalithic temples and pyramids, not to mention Arabic mosques and Christian cathedrals. Incas and Mayas built their step pyramids and temples in honor of the gods. In all the leading religions in the world even the poorest of the poor collected gold and precious stones to ornament the symbols of the gods. Heathen or Christian, it makes no difference; man has always built and made sacrifices to honor a god.

We must ask ourselves whether the Zimbabwe native worshippers of their god Nommo, built a gigantic edifice in memory of his origin in his home amid the stars - a model of the Sirius system. Did religious fervor drive them to undertake the monumental work in order to express in stone their hope that Nommo would return? Did they want to signal to their god, "Here we live and wait for you!"

The eight Zimbabwe birds from the Acropolis are very similar to the sacred falcons of the Egyptian god Horus, who was originally a celestial god. He was symbolized by a falcon with outspread wings.

Did the Dogon acquire their ancient wisdom from the Egyptians, as Robert Temple postulates? In fact the oldest Egyptian calendar was a Sirius calendar and Isis, the Egyptian goddess, was originally the Sirius goddess.

What are the eight falcon-like birds doing in the African ruins?

We do not know when or by whom Zimbabwe was built. The ruins apparently have no history. But neither do we know when and whence the Dogon came to Mali. The model of a stellar system seems to have been familiar to both the Dogon and the Bantus. Both worshipped the falcon, the symbol of the Egyptian god Horus. Were the Dogon perpetuating the memory of a visit from the gods with their stellar legend of the Sirius system? Were the Bantus doing the same thing with a model of the system laid out on the ground in stone, even though it could be understood only from above?

I do not claim that my contribution provides the solution to the Zimbabwe mystery. I know only that so far no one has said anything at all satisfactory. As the great ellipse of Zimbabwe was not a fortress (the fortress is 100 meters higher up on the Acropolis) it must have been either a residence or a kind of temple. But the residence theory fails because no signs of occupation for this purpose were found; there are no kings' names or decorations on the rather barbaric masonry. Nothing resembling a throne was found. No rooms to indicate that men once lived here. And what could a king have had to do with the conical tower inside the ellipse or the pointless second wall running parallel to it?

If the fortress and residence theories are eliminated, we are left with the assumption of a religious cult. When I was staying in Zimbabwe, I could easily imagine a procession of chanting Bantus advancing through the passage between the parallel walls towards the conical tower and worshipping the god Nommo from the Sirius system.

The solutions to the problem of Zimbabwe that have been put forward so far are no more than speculations. That is why I add my own. It is just as valid as any other speculation about Zimbabwe.

ANCIENT AZTECS "FLEW LIKE BIRDS"

In its July 23, 1934 issue, the New York Times reported that Prof. M.J. Tenenbaum, a Polish archaeologist, revealed to a group of Spanish scientists in Madrid that long before King Solomon considered the possibility of man being able to fly, an Aztec ruler named Netzahualcoyotl regularly glided from mountain heights into the valleys. Further, the Aztec king founded a school of aviation for his people.

Tenenbaum exhibited a stone engraving he found in Mexico on which is traced a design of a glider called a "crir". He said that references to a crir are made in an old history of Mexico by a Franciscan missionary, Francisco Xavier Clausijiro, who reported that the Aztecs could "fly like birds." The missionary described the crir as an appliance with wide, spreading wings fabricated from storks' feathers.

Prof. Tenenbaum's conclusions were based upon nine years of archaeological research in Mexico. He said that in addition to the design of the Aztec glider, he has found drawings of goggles for airmen not unlike those worn by aviators in modern times. He added that instead of helmets, the Aztecs wore a high fur muffler around the neck which covered the lower part of the face.

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WHO WERE THE CULTURE BEARERS?

BY VAUGHN M. GREENE*

Conventional science is beginning to admit, although grudgingly, the possibility that life as we know it exists in other parts of our galaxy. Thirty years ago no astronomer would dare admit this, yet today the possibility that planet Earth was visited by extraterrestrials no longer raises eyebrows. There is in fact considerable evidence of this, some of it thousands of years old.

While conventional scientists continue to ridicule the Charles Forts and the Erich von Danikens, it is now fashionable for them to re-examine evidence once swept under the rug.

The most striking indication that Earth has been visited by an advance race is found in man's emergence as a civilized being, living in cities. In a few, small places on Earth, between 11,000 and 5,000 years ago, brilliant new cultures suddenly sprang up, seemingly out of nowhere, and quite often, they vanished just as enigmatically.

Just ten years ago, the Earth's first civilization was deemed to be Sumer, but Zecharia Sitchin's book "The Twelfth Planet" has given excellent evidence that Sumer was visited, if not created, by extraterrestrials. While we know now that older civilizations existed in Europe and in Peru, Sumer is unique in that it began the longest, continuous thread of civilization directly related to our world today. From Sumer came the knowledge for Egypt to the west and Mohenjo-Daro to the East. To the north, Greece, then Rome, and then all of Europe sprang from Sumerian roots.

The history of Sumer begins about 11,000 years ago when cave-dwelling nomads came from the hills to found the world's first town - Jarmo. Why did they select such a barren, hot, dry plain, with no wood, stone or minerals? What caused an unrelated group of neolithic cave men to develop suddenly the arts of city building and administration, laws, writing, leather working, agriculture, chariot building using the wheel, irrigation canals, poetry, religion, astronomy and the concept of democracy?

In the New World, another group of people suddenly sprang up in the jungles of southern Mexico to found the first civilization of the northern hemisphere. These were the Olmecs, from which the Toltecs, the Aztecs, the Mayas and most other Indian groups owe their culture. While Sumer with its sky-gods and ziggurats gives ample hints of astronauts, the Olmecs may give us the more decisive proof.

While we do not know who the Olmecs were, where they came from or why they suddenly disappeared, we can study the ruins of their remarkable structures. The Olmecs built a great temple complex on a man-made island in the middle of a swamp. Called "La Venta," the principal structure of the complex was a 100 foot high, cone-shaped pyramid. Also, great pits were dug into the ground and paved with intricate designs, but then covered up. One pit has been excavated which was 24 feet deep and filled with 1,000 tons of paving blocks. Another, 16 feet deep covers an area of 15,000 square feet.

Almost all the Olmec statuary found has been defaced, usually with the heads broken off. It is interesting to note that the primitive Jomon people of Japan also broke off the heads of their statues.

The Olmecs were an unusual looking people, resembling no other race on Earth, if their statuary is accurate. The people had very high deformed foreheads, slant eyes and round faces. The gigantic stone heads which they carved, some weighing up to 20 tons, were not of the Olmecs themselves but of a race of giants, which the Olmecs may have exterminated.

There is ample proof that these giants lived all along the west coast of America. In 1897 a group of

miners in Yosemite, California found a tomb with a mummy of a woman seven and one-half feet tall. What is unique about the giant heads of the Olmecs is that they depict a race of people with negroid features, wearing what appears to be crash helmets! Again, the Jomon statues of Japan also depict similar helmets.

The Olmecs also carved concave mirrors in stone which are precision ground to near optical specifications.

The most amazing of the Olmec statues is of a person about seven feet tall with ratchet-like shoulders, which accommodated movable arms! Again, the head of the statue is missing. Could this statue have been a representation of a robot? The statue was unearthed at San Lorenzo, Mexico in the late 1960's by Michael D. Coe. His book "America's First Civilization" contains an excellent photo of the statue.

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TAFI DEL VALLE

In the Province of Tucuman, Argentina, an archaeological site called Tafi del Valle lies in an area called El Mollar. In 1977, archaeologists established "Menhires Park" and placed in the park some eighty stone, carved monoliths, estimated by some to be as old as 10,000 years. They range in height from two to four meters and weight up to three tons. No one knows who carved the great stones or for what purpose. The accompanying photograph shows the type of carvings found on the stones. Carlos A. Benedetto, Baigorria 2553 - P.A. 1417, Buenos Aires, ARGENTINA.

