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The Soapstone Birds from Great Zimbabwe

THOMAS N. HUFFMAN

Ever since the ruins of Great Zimbabwe were found at the end of the nineteenth century, they have been the focus of archaeological attention.[1] We now know that the ancient town belonged to a cultural complex that evolved in the early twelfth century and extended from the Indian Ocean to the Kalahari Desert and from the Zambezi River to the Soutpansberg Mountains. Though Great Zimbabwe was a political capital for only 200 years, till about 1450, the culture it was part of continued until well after Portuguese contact. We know from oral and written history that, like other centers in the complex, Great Zimbabwe was ruled by Shona kings. Indeed Shona oral tradition, Shona custom, and sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Portuguese eyewitness accounts help us reconstruct the spatial organization of Great Zimbabwe and explain the meaning of its most famous symbols—the Zimbabwe birds.

Eight birds were found in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe (Figs. 1-3). They are carved of soft green-gray soapstone; each is about 30 centimeters long and perches on the end of a pillar a meter or more in height. The birds fall into two stylistic groups. Three have their wings wrapped around a vertical body with a short, fan-shaped tail. Five have their wings folded over the back of a sloping body, with legs bent and head horizontal, eyes on top. According to ornithologists (C. Vernon, personal communication), all eight represent birds of prey. It is not possible to identify any specific species because the carvings incorporate human as well as avian elements. One stone, for example, has lips rather than a beak; all have human limbs and four or five toes (or fingers) in front, rather than three talons forward like most raptors. Clearly then, these stones were not meant to be naturalistic representations. To understand their meaning, it is necessary to know the role birds played in Shona ideology.

1. R. N. HALL WITH THE SOAPSTONE BIRD FROM THE PHILLIPS RUIN, 1903. NATIONAL MUSEUMS AND MONUMENTS ADMINISTRATION OF ZIMBABWE.

2. SOAPSTONE BIRD ASSOCIATED WITH THE PLATFORM, WESTERN ENCLOSURE. NATIONAL MUSEUMS AND MONUMENTS ADMINISTRATION OF ZIMBABWE.

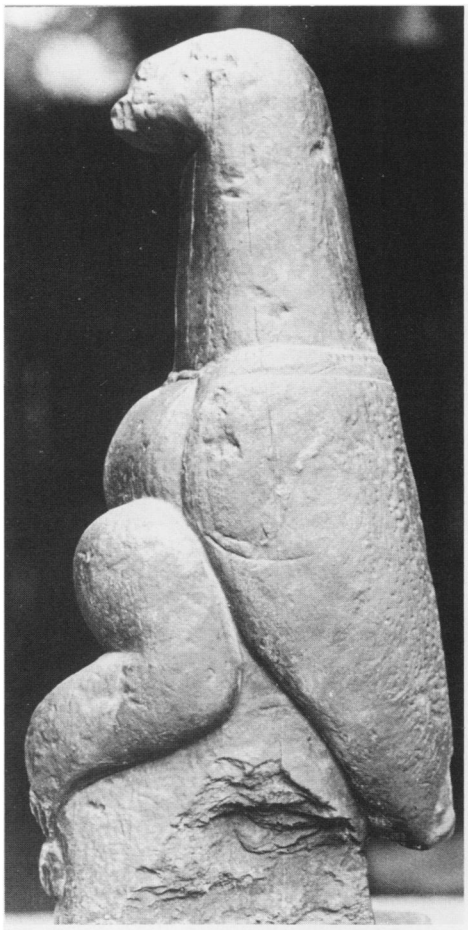
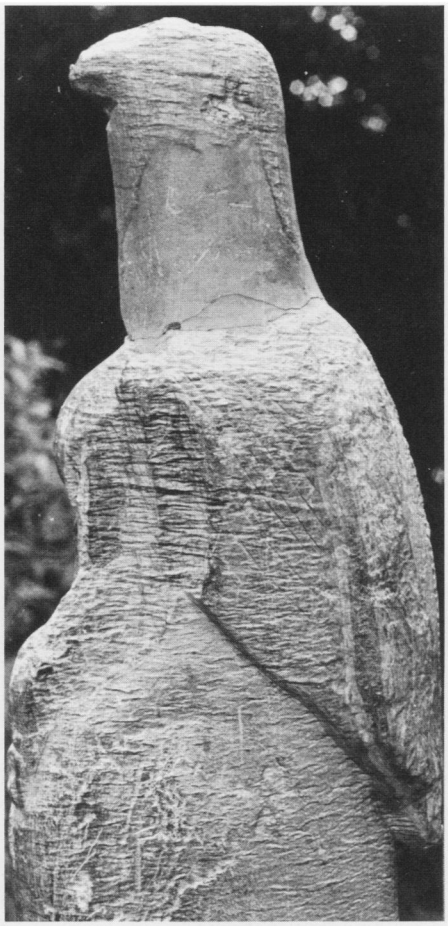
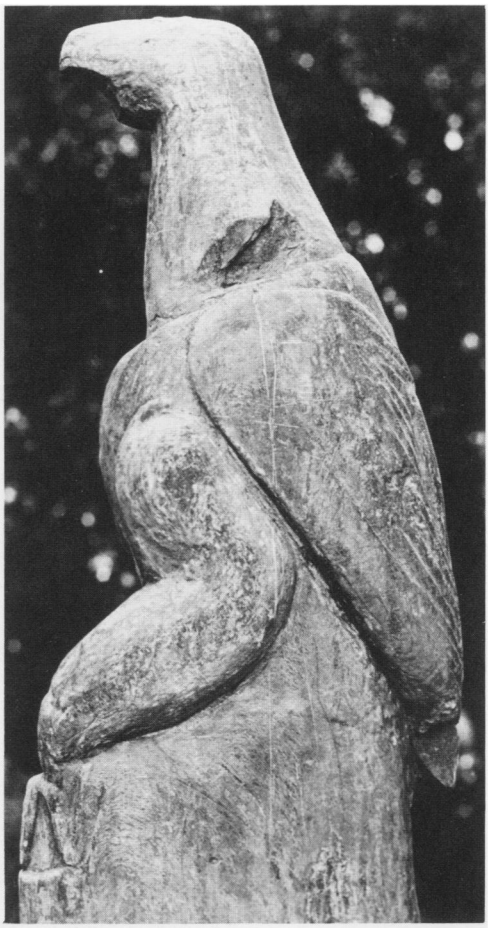
Traditionally, birds are messengers (Kriel 1971). A myth about the Rozwi (who ruled Zimbabwe prior to the nineteenth century) tells of a pretentious claimant to a district chieftainship who went to a Rozwi king to state his case. The king had the man beheaded and returned his head to his people in the beak of a bateleur eagle (Bullock 1927). Eagles, being the largest and most powerful birds, are appropriate messengers for the most important people.

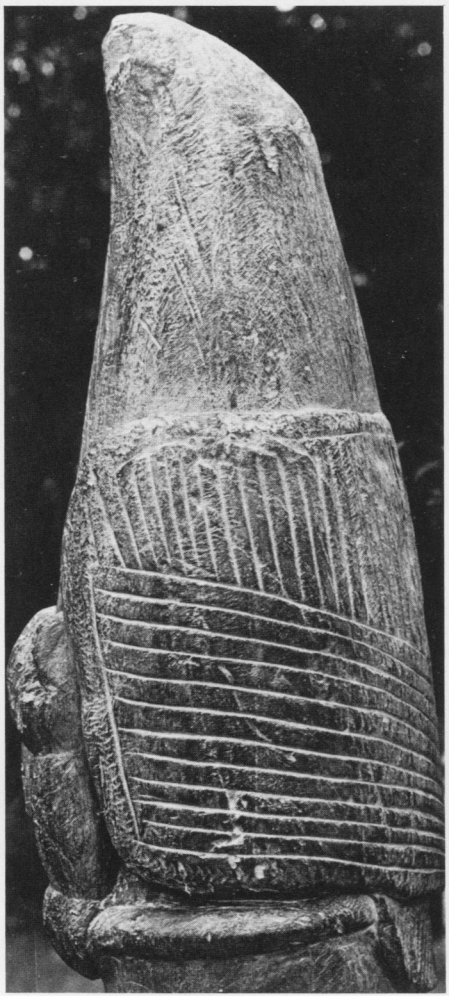
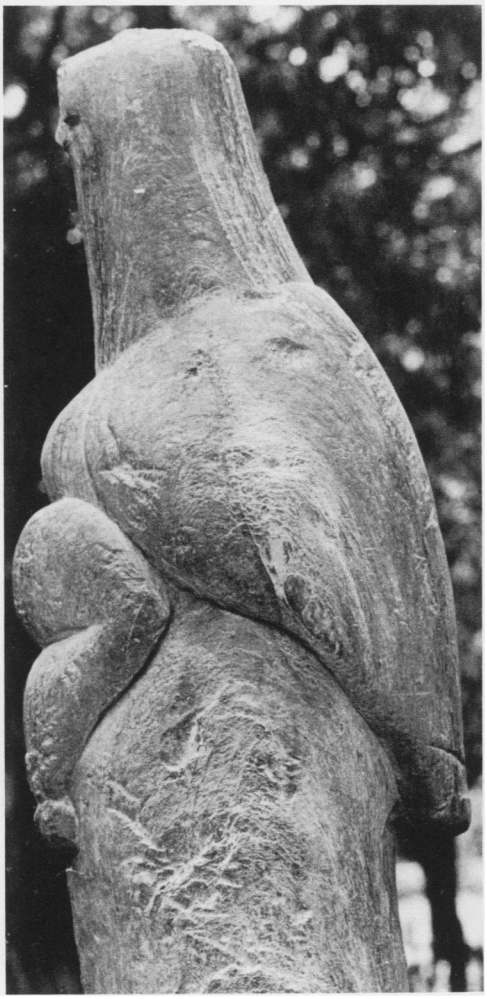
Eagles also bring messages from ancestor spirits. The Shona believe that spirit people live at the bottom of certain deep pools (Burbridge 1924, Edwards 1928), and that life on earth began when the first man emerged from such a pool (Frobenius 1931). Deep pools are entrances to the subterranean spirit world; and the bateleur, which nests near water, is the most important spiritual messenger (Burbridge 1925, Franklin 1933).

Since eagles travel between heaven and earth, they can also be messengers of God, who is "One Above" (Wokumsoro) or "Great One of Sky" (Nyadenga) (van der Merwe 1957). An eagle known as "bird of heaven" *(shiri ye denga)* brings lightning, which Shona call "the needle that stitches together heaven and earth" (van der Merwe 1957). Some Shona and Matabele say *shiri ye denga* is an invisible, supernatural eagle. Others think it is the fish eagle (Mbizo 1924). Whatever the case, eagles are believed to mediate between God and man.

The Shona have parallel beliefs about the role of ancestor spirits. The duties and importance of an ancestor spirit reflect the political importance of the ancestor when he was alive (Bullock 1927, Gelfand 1959). Thus the spirit of a com-

3. SOAPSTONE BIRDS FROM THE EASTERN ENCLOSURE. SOUTH AFRICAN MUSEUM.

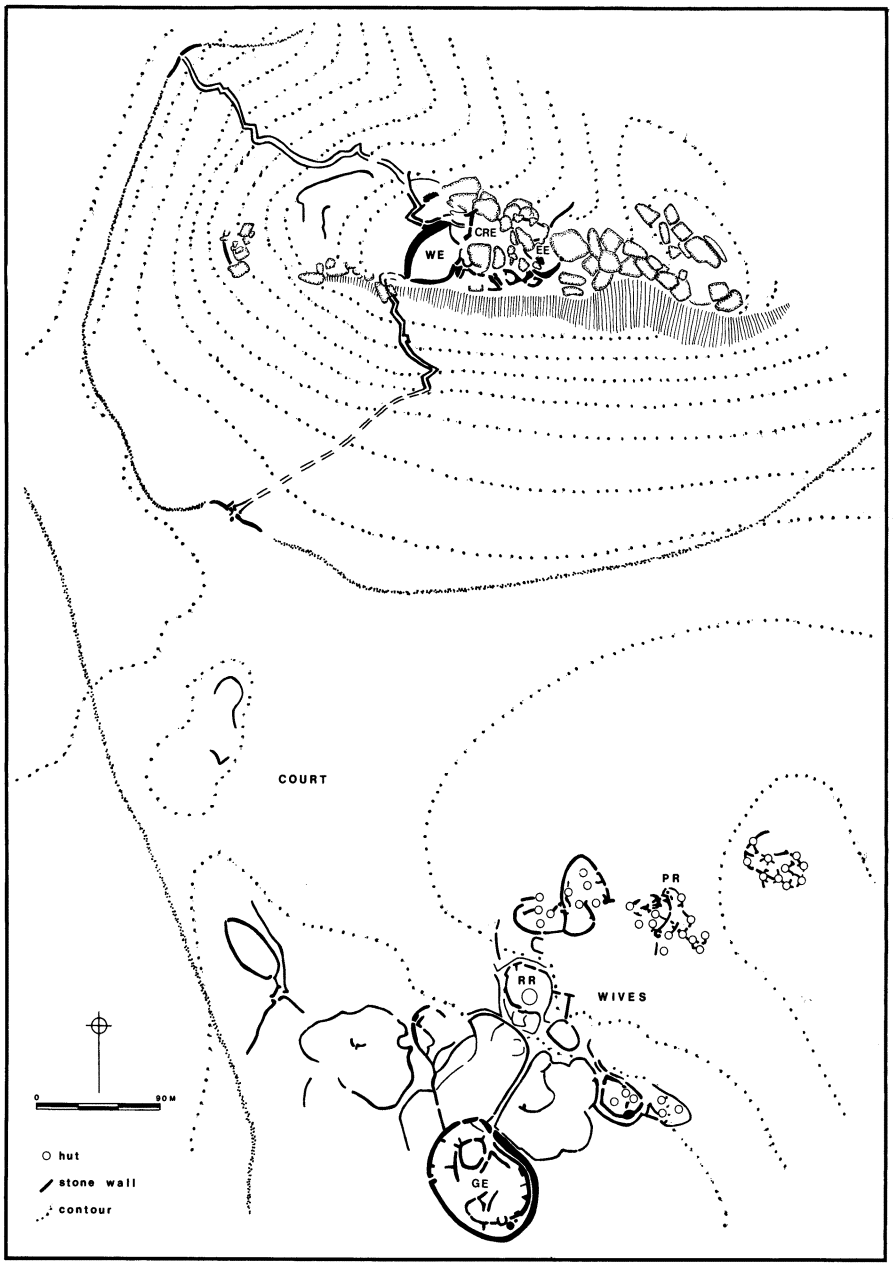




mon man's grandfather only looks after his personal needs, while the spirit of a former chief attends to national problems such as locust swarms, epidemics, and rain, as well as to his successor's personal needs. Unencumbered by human bodies, ancestor spirits are free to soar like birds, and the spirits of former leaders are thought to travel between earth and heaven like eagles, interceding with God on behalf of the nation. According to contemporary belief, an eagle in the vicinity of Taba Zika Mambo, a former Zimbabwe center, carries the spirit of a Rozwi king who once ruled there (K.R. Robinson, personal communication). Eagles therefore symbolize and may incarnate royal ancestor spirits.

The eagle-like features of the Great Zimbabwe birds are clearly a metaphor for the intercessory role of royal ancestors. The anthropomorphism in the stones themselves points to an intentional blend of parallel concepts about the mediatory flight of eagles and of royal ancestors. This suggests a further conclusion: royal ancestors were petitioned at the site of the stone birds (cf. Summers 1965). There is ample evidence to link the birds with spiritual activity. Their original location suggests they were part of a larger symbolic structure.[2]

The center of Great Zimbabwe is dominated by a large hill with a stone-walled complex on its summit (Fig. 4).



4. PLAN OF THE CENTRAL SECTION OF GREAT ZIMBABWE: WE=WESTERN ENCLOSURE, EE=EASTERN ENCLOSURE, CRE=CLEFT ROCK ENCLOSURE, PR=PHILLIPS RUIN, RR=RENDERS RUIN, GE=GREAT ENCLOSURE. BASED ON PLANS BY A. WHITTY AND D. F. MONROE.

This hill complex is not unique, for throughout the culture area similar stone complexes can be found. These elevated buildings are traditionally called *dzimbahwe*, which means the grave, residence, or court of a chief (de Barros in Theal 1898-1903, vol. 6: 264). To Shona speakers, the height and grandeur of mountains are metaphorically associated with the high status and majesty of leadership, and important leaders are often referred to as "mountains" in Shona imagery (Hamutyinei & Plangger 1974, Hodza & Fortune 1979). This mountain imagery is a feature of stratified societies with divine kingship. In such societies, the king was ritually secluded in his palace. Thus the stone walls of the palace high on the hill at Great Zimbabwe symbolized the secular and sacred status of the king.

Two stairways lead up to the palace complex. The most prominent stairway leads directly to the Western Enclosure, the largest compartment (Bent 1896, Hall 1905) and the official residence of the king. The front wall at the main entrance was decorated with several stone cairns and monoliths. Today, Shona speakers call these monoliths the "horns of the king" because the king stood in relation to his people as a bull does to its herd: the king protects his people with his spear, that is, his army, while a bull protects its herd with its horns. This entrance and the prominent stairway up the hill was for the king, members of his personal entourage, and official visitors seeking private audience. A secondary entrance on the opposite side of the Western Enclosure was probably reserved for people of lesser status. This division was like that of a Shona hut where men sit on a raised bench on one side, while women sit opposite on the floor. The Western Enclosure, then, was probably organized like a typical house, only on a much grander scale.

Another organizational principle concerned life forces rather than social status. Shona and other Southern Africans traditionally reserve the front of a building for public, secular activities and the back for private, sacred functions (Kuper 1980). A Shona man communicates with his ancestors at the back of a kitchen where his wife's pots are stacked on a low platform called the sanctuary *(rukuva* or *chikuva)* (Gelfand 1959). During spirit possession ceremonies, a thumb piano player sits here while he "calls" the spirit with his music, and the medium, once possessed, sits there too (A. Tracey, personal communication).

A comparable but unusual platform dominates the back of the Western Enclosure (Fig. 7). This platform area originally included at least three plain monoliths and three highly decorated beams (Bent 1896). The surface of one

5. GIANT CONICAL TOWER IN THE GREAT ENCLOSURE.

beam was covered with bands of excised diamond motifs with small circles in the center, a pattern representing crocodiles in Shona art (Nettleton 1984). Further crocodile imagery appears to have been intended by the large panel of decoration at the back of the *chikuva*, where triangular edges of stone are set on top of each other to form dentate ridges suggesting the back of a crocodile.

Shona kings were metaphorically linked to crocodiles through parallel associations—crocodile symbolism was another feature of divine kingship. According to legend, the founding father of the Shona, the first man and rainmaker, came from the spirit world at the bottom of a sacred pool of water (Frobenius 1931: 237-40), and the king as "father" of the nation is directly linked to this person. Crocodiles, like chiefs, are associated with deep pools and the spirit world beneath, and, like chiefs, they can bring rain. This link is made explicit during a chief's installation. A new Rozwi chief was supposed to eat food cooked with the stones taken from the stomach of a male crocodile he personally had caught in a deep pool (Bullock 1927: 289), symbolically becoming a crocodile in the process. It is therefore appropriate that a crocodile pattern should be part of the sanctuary for the king's ancestor spirits.

One stone bird was directly associated with this sanctuary (Fig. 2) (Hall 1905). A bull carved on its pedestal probably symbolizes the king as "bull of the nation." Whatever its meaning, the platform itself is only large enough for private worship; so this was probably where the king petitioned his ancestor spirits for his personal welfare.

The other six soapstone birds on the hill (Fig. 3) were found together in the Eastern Enclosure (Fig. 9), a place sacred both because of its position at the back of the king's residence and because in Shona religion the east is associated with life-giving forces.[3] A cave-like rock shelter in the midst of immense boulders also testifies to its religious importance. Hills and rocks like these are associated with important ancestor spirits, and caves, like deep pools, are important entrances to the spirit world. Since this Eastern Enclosure was devoid of normal residential debris, there is every reason to assume it was sacred.

In the 1880s the six birds were removed from the Eastern Enclosure (Bent 1896, Posselt 1924), and their original positions are unknown. Very likely they were mounted on low terraces toward the back of the enclosure rather than in the front, which contains a long bench and space for a sizeable congregation. This ritual area had a more national character than the king's private sanctuary.

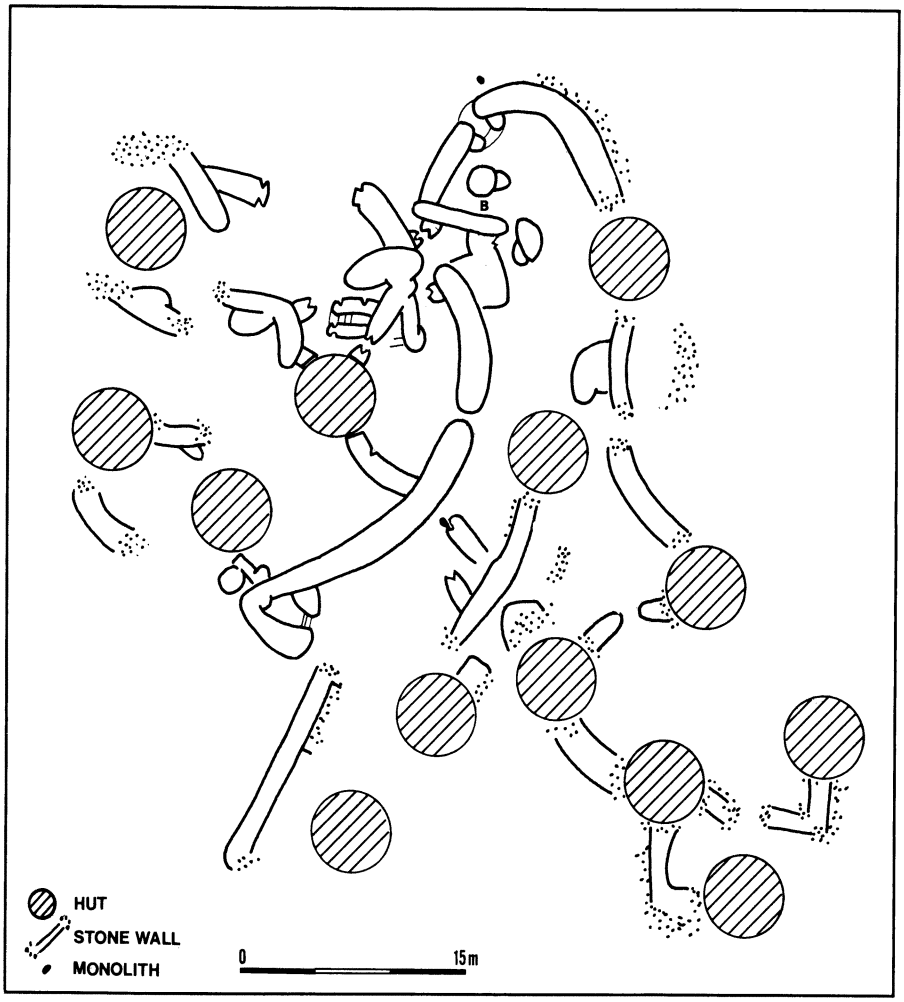
The entrances to the Eastern Enclosure give us clues about who used them. The outer wall of the eastern entrance incorporates a strip of dentate crocodile decoration like that on the platform at the back of the Western Enclosure. On the opposite side, the western entrance is connected by the central passage to the Cleft Rock Enclosure, where the king's senior sister probably lived. We know from Portuguese records (Bocarro in Theal 1898-1903, vol. 3: 357) and Shona oral history (Hodza & Fortune 1979) that the senior sister was an institutionalized position representing the female side of the ruling line. The reigning sister acted as an advisor to the king on matters of national importance and she was responsible for the charms that protected him and allowed him to govern. The king and his sister were principally responsible for invoking the royal ancestors on behalf of the nation. Other senior members of the ruling line probably attended the ceremonies (van Warmelo 1932). A spirit medium—unrelated to the royal family—could have been present as well. According to Shona custom today, a spirit medium's entry into a ritual area should go unnoticed. An underground passage discovered by Hall

(1905) in the front or an entrance among the boulders at the back could have served as secret passage. All the evidence suggests that in the Eastern Enclosure, royal ancestor spirits were propitiated for national purposes such as ensuring rain.

Recalling that the stone birds were a locus for such propitiations, we may speculate about why there were six together in the Eastern Enclosure. In present-day Shona rituals and elsewhere in Southern Africa, individual ancestors are invoked by name as far back as can be remembered (Gelfand 1959). It is likely that the same procedure was followed at Great Zimbabwe. The six birds may indicate that six kings had ruled there. On the other hand, they could represent individual mythical or important ancestors who lived before the establishment of Great Zimbabwe.

In contrast to those on the hill, the eighth and final stone bird was found in a building in the lower valley. There, on the south side of a large amphitheater that was the assembly area and principal court, stands a series of enclosures, sometimes called the Renders, Posselt, Phillips, and Maund ruins. These probably housed the royal wives. According to Portuguese records (Bocarro in Theal 1898-1903, vol. 3: 356) as well as Shona oral tradition (Fortune 1956), the wives of the king lived together under the general control of the king's senior wife, his *vahozi*. An unusual hoard of items was found in the Renders Ruin. Besides glass from the Near East and celadon from China, it included ritual bronze spearheads and iron double gongs (Hall 1905) exclusively associated with the king's office. According to Shona custom, the only person with the right to take care of a man's possessions is his *vahozi*. It follows that the Renders Ruin must have been the official residence of the king's senior wife. The other valley enclosures, linked to the Renders Ruin by various pathways, were presumably occupied by royal wives.

The last bird was found upside down against a small stone tower (Fig. 8) in a small enclosure at the east end of the Phillips Ruin (Fig. 6) (Hall 1905). There is no reason to doubt that the stone once stood somewhere in this enclosure, and was associated with the women's area. This bird is in an anomalous position compared with the others on the hill.



6. THE PHILLIPS RUIN. B. MARKS THE SPOT THE 8TH BIRD WAS FOUND. MAP BY A. WHITTY AND D. F. MONROE.

Though it is, like the others, a raptor, it is unlikely that it represented the king's royal ancestors: the welfare of the king's wives—unless they were his sisters[4]—was not their responsibility.

The stone tower in the Phillips Ruin provides a clue to the identity of the spirits invoked there and represented by the stone bird. But we must first consider the meaning of the towers in the place known as the Great Enclosure, a large building on the edge of the wives' area that has recently been identified as the site of premarital initiation schools similar to the Domba school of the Venda (Huffman 1984). This building contains two conical towers at the back that formed part of a cluster of symbols concerning adult statuses. The dentate crocodile pattern at the top of the largest tower (Fig. 5) shows that this structure signified "old and senior man," while the smaller undecorated tower next to it represented "old and senior woman." This smaller tower may once have had a herringbone design like the one marking the stairway to the residence of the king's sister. The tower at the eastern end of the Phillips Ruin is similar to this "female" tower in the Great Enclosure. In the context of a royal wives' area, the senior woman would be the king's senior wife, his *vahozi*. A sanctuary here for the ancestor spirits of this *vahozi* is in keeping with the principle that the importance and duties of ancestor spirits should reflect the structure of the social world. Since the *vahozi* is responsible for the other royal wives, it makes sense that her ancestors would also be concerned with their welfare.

The symbols on the bird itself (Fig. 1) suggest the focus of this spiritual concern. Four can be identified in terms of the Shona divining system (Nettleton 1984): the double chevron on the right side of the bird is like that on the outer wall of the Great Enclosure where it represented "young and junior man"; the crocodile image in front undoubtedly stood for "old and senior man," as it does on Shona divining tablets; the single chevron on the left side of the bird sometimes represents "young and junior woman" in Shona art; and the circles above this chevron are like the "eyes of crocodiles" on divining tables that stand for "old and senior woman." These four categories form the basis of the Shona divination system, and the prominence of the crocodile on the stone bird suggests that the ancestor spirits of the *vahozi* were concerned with witchcraft. In the divination system crocodiles are linked to the discovery of witches by virtue of their access through deep pools to the ancestors, for it is the ancestors who reveal the identity of witches.

To Shona, misfortunes during pregnancy and immediately afterwards are

specifically linked to witchcraft (Bourdillon 1976). This danger must have been heightened for children born to the royal family, some of them potential kings. It seems likely, then, that ancestral attention in the Phillips Ruin was focused on reproduction. Other symbols close by support this thesis. Numerous vertical grooves were built into entrances, platforms, and other walls throughout the wives' quarters and appear to be female symbols: most of them were made to be seen rather than used as doorjambs or other supports; in some buildings such as the Great Enclosure, entrances with these vertical grooves stand opposite "male" entrances marked by monoliths,[5] and this symbolic "couple," suggesting procreation, is only a few meters from the enclosure that housed the eighth bird. It may be that expectant mothers were confined to this area.

By Shona custom, if there was any reason for the king or other men to invoke the ancestor spirits of the *vahozi*, they would have had to come here. This may be the reason why an isolated male symbol, a single monolith, once stood outside the entrance to this enclosure, and why it can be reached directly from the court without going through any other part of the wives' quarters.

The spatial code of Great Zimbabwe establishes the spiritual importance of two original stone bird locations. But the spiritual importance of the third area in the Phillips Ruin would be less clear were it not for the bird. The sanctuary at the back of the Western Enclosure was devoted to the king's personal welfare; in the Eastern Enclosure more public issues such as rain were attended to; and protection against witchcraft during childbirth was the focus of ancestral attention in the eastern end of the Phillips Ruin.

Many questions remain. Why have similar images not been found in other *dzimbahwe*? Was the eagle imagery portrayed elsewhere? What is the relationship between the Zimbabwe birds and the Mwari cult? The direction of research should be guided by three major points established here: the raptor theme symbolized the intercessory role of royal ancestor spirits; the stones were focal points in sanctuaries where ancestor spirits were propitiated; and the eagle imagery was another aspect of divine kingship. Doubtless the full range of meanings of the Zimbabwe birds lies in the matrix of Shona ideology. □

Notes, page 99

TOP TO BOTTOM: 7. DENTATE DECORATION ON THE PLATFORM AT THE BACK OF THE WESTERN ENCLOSURE, CA. 1903. NATIONAL MUSEUMS AND MONUMENTS ADMINISTRATION OF ZIMBABWE. 8. SANCTUARY AT THE NORTHEAST END OF THE PHILLIPS RUIN, CA. 1903. NATIONAL MUSEUMS AND MONUMENTS ADMINISTRATION OF ZIMBABWE. 9. THE EASTERN ENCLOSURE.

the Temne to be drab, gray, or colorless to the sight (Timothy 1952: 64).

7. These flaps represent literally the kind of hide flaps worn in four radiating directions around the neck by medical practitioners among the eastern Mende, Kissi, and Loma (cf. Fig. 19).

8. A Temne Nöwo mask in the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, was collected in the field in 1924-25 (Fig. 25). Nöwo is documented among the Vai as early as 1854 (Koelle: 203), although no illustration is given. Therefore I must revise my opinion given elsewhere (Lamp 1979: 37) on the recent development of the Nöwo masquerade, although, still, the extensive absence of any mention of such a spirit (whom we know today to masquerade publicly and ubiquitously) in most nineteenth-century literature suggests that we have, in the twentieth century, a phenomenon that is new in many respects.

9.He referred earlier to "griggory men" (i.e., gree-gree men, persons who work with charms), but his account is second-hand and perhaps this passage refers to a separate circumstance.

10. The Temne, like other groups, make clear distinctions between various types of serpents and snakes in nonritual contexts, but discussion of esoteric ritual is always clouded in ambiguity. Nevertheless, further research is needed to determine the type represented in each particular case and the peculiar significance attributed to each.

11. This is not, as Hommel says (1974: 11), evidence that the mask has been desanctified. I have seen several metal-ornamented masks in use, and others are illustrated in Johnston 1906, vol. 2: fig. 410; Gervis 1952: (end); Alldridge 1901: fig. 147. See also the description of Volz 1910: 57; and Ellis 1914: 54.

12. The model described here holds true most faithfully in small villages of less than twenty houses away from the motor roads. In larger towns the variance may be due to a broader range of competing concerns beyond those of the ritual societies, and, to some extent, the disintegration of traditional systems and the influence of Western education. For example, the gardens are sometimes placed at any point, with the strict exception of the west, if the Pörö grove is there. The Bondo house is almost invariably in the east, although I found it in the north in two instances. In both of those instances, however, it had been moved recently from an older site in the east. The location of the Pörö house was more irregular. In six out of eleven Pörö villages that I mapped, it was within the western quadrant. One was in the north, but west of the Bondo house, which was in the northeast. One was in the northeast, in a village that had no Bondo house. Three were in the southern quadrant, although one of these was west of the old part of town, which has expanded since the establishment of the Pörö site. The location of three Pörö houses in the south and a Bondo house in the north may be accounted for, in part, by a confusion that I occasionally found among educated Temne between the traditional concept of a vertical east-west cartological axis and the European-designed map with its vertical north-south axis. For example, some said that the sun rose in the north and set in the south. In other words, the critical equation of up/down=beginnings/ends, seems now to have incorporated the new corollary, north/south.

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HUFFMAN, notes, from page 73

1. Bent 1896; Hall 1905; MacIver 1906; Caton-Thompson 1931; Summers, Robinson & Whitty 1961; Garlake 1973; Huffman 1982.

2. For further discussion see Huffman 1981.

3. See the origin myth in Frobenius 1931: 237-40.

4. The king sometimes married his sister. This was a feature of divine kingship.

5. Similar shaped notches on Shona headrests are female symbols (Nettleton 1984).

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LEWIS-WILLIAMS, notes, from page 59

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SCHNEIDER, notes, from page 66

1. There are perhaps exceptions among the other groups, such as the various Sotho peoples who do some wall decoration using earth pigments, textures, or molded mud relief patterns.
2. The Ndzundza are also known as the people of Mabhogo (a mid-nineteenth-century chief) or the Mahlangu (present royal family). Manala was also an early chief.
3. Haselberger 1961: 343-44; Forge 1973: xx; d'Azevedo 1973:xix; Firth 1973: v, 47; Leach 1973: 223; Fernandez 1973: 216; Etzkorn 1973: 343-77.
4. In many instances the purchased oxide colors that predominate reflect the colors of the clay local to the owners' previous residence. A former counselor to the paramount chief demonstrated this fact to me by correctly identifying the geographic location of some of my design unit samples, mainly by the colors used. One woman proudly described going back to her family's home area many miles away to bring back colored clay from a special deposit for use on the walls of her new home.
5. According to respondents, the bright colors of purchased pigments are today preferred over colored clays. Any kind of brush, even a toothbrush or shaving brush, enables the painter to outline the designs with more precision.
6. This paper is part of a much larger study based on empirical data collected in the field, and augments these intriguing accounts. See Ph.D. in preparation, University of the Witwatersrand.
7. F. Bothma, government ethnologist, personal communication, July 15, 1977.
8. For example, at the end of the 1870s two white settlers purchased eight farms from Afrikaners. The Ndzundza chief's emissaries told them this was Ndzundza land, purchased with Ndzundza blood (*British Parliamentary Papers* 1881-1882, vol. 36: 815), and that if they did not leave the next day their heads would be smashed and they would be skinned alive. The settlers appealed to the Afrikaner magistrate at Lydenburg to enforce their claims, but the request was received with laughter. Obviously the Ndzundza were the effective authority in this land.
9. Stories of atrocities reached England, and the Afrikaners, who had just regained control of the Transvaal from the British, were called upon to justify their use of brutal force *British Parliamentary Papers* 1882-1883, vol. 37: 620-21, 637, 650). British intervention resulted in the commutation of the regent Nyabela's death sentence to life imprisonment. Mampuru, however, was hanged.
10. David Hammond-Tooke, University of the Witwatersrand, personal communication, September 17, 1984.

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