

The Terrace Builders of Nyanga

Robert Soper



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Preface

Many readers in Zimbabwe approaching this book will be familiar with at least some of the Nyanga ruins and will have speculated on their meaning. Most, however, will not be aware of their full range and extent, nor of their age and what they represent. The ruins have been described and discussed for more than a century and have given rise to various fanciful interpretations, some of which still appear to have some adherents. The sober facts may be less romantic but are no less interesting in documenting the achievements of the ancient inhabitants.

The results of extensive research conducted between 1993 and 1999 have recently been published as an archaeological monograph (Soper, 2002), which sets out in full the detailed evidence and technical analysis, and argues the interpretation at some length. Many people will find this treatment quite tedious, and this less technical account is offered as more palatable to the interested but less academic reader.

The stone ruins and other cultural remains associated with them include a wide range of features: stone-faced terracing covering escarpments, hills or valley slopes; extensive areas of cultivation ridges; water furrows; mountain-top settlement clusters; stone-built homesteads such as 'pit-structures' and various types of enclosures, which differ according to altitude and area; defensive structures or 'forts'; and iron-smelting sites.

The best known features of the ruins are in Nyanga National Park, where Nyangwe and Chawomera forts and the restored pit-structure are seen by hundreds of visitors every year. Other pit-structures are also signposted in several places. Less obvious to the casual eye are the old water furrows, but one is clearly visible from Chawomera fort to the east across the Nyangombe river, while another good example can be seen beyond the Nyamziwa river to the right as the road descends to the Falls.

There is little obvious terracing to be seen in the Park itself, as most of this is found at lower altitudes. To see this it is best to visit the Ziwa National Monument, 25 kilometres north-west from Nyanga village. This is one of the densest concentrations of terracing, stone homestead enclosures and other features in the whole of Nyanga. At first glance – indeed at second and subsequent glances – they present a bewildering maze of stone walls, staggering testimony to the industry of the ancient inhabitants. They are described and explained at the excellent Site Museum, the custodians of which will assist with a brief guided tour. More adventurous visitors may, with due precautions, wander extensively through the 33 square kilometres of the Monument. Camping facilities are available at the Museum.

The restored pit-structure in the National Park (Fig. 8) gives a good impression of the design of one type of homestead, although the addition of some tiny cows in the pit, and goats, people and children around the houses, would enliven the picture. The construction of the houses is consistent with excavated evidence, but the interior arrangements are not, apart from the slot in the floor of the main house opening into the tunnel. A more authentic house type would be divided by a low wall across the middle, with kitchen on one side and goats on the other, as described in Chapter 2.

The summit of World's View is also visited by many people and the walls of the early hilltop settlement can be seen around the highest point, although much is difficult to trace in the low, dense thickets.

The old grain bins in caves and the stone walls which are found among many hills and rocks from the Juliasdale area westwards have not yet been the object of any systematic archaeological research and will not be discussed in this book. They are probably to be attributed to the Manyika in the 19th century as more or less hidden settlements or strategic refuges in time of danger. We cannot yet say for certain whether the pit-structures that are often found in the same areas are of the same date: from the relative state of preservation they seem likely to be earlier.

While a general picture of the archaeology of the Nyanga ruins is now apparent, this cannot claim to be a final comprehensive account. Many areas have not been investigated in detail, if at all, and many questions remain to be answered. The recent research has concentrated mainly on the area north of Nyanga town, and within that on certain areas, especially Ziwa ruins, Maristvale, Nyautare, Ruangwe, Kagore, parts of Nyangui Forest land, and Chirimanyimo. Even here not all the remains have been visited and recorded. Similarly, excavations have been on a relatively small scale, aimed at a sample of terraces and of typical homesteads for dating purposes and to reveal the houses and other structures within them. Future work will clarify and expand the picture – and doubtless modify some of the conclusions.

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About the author

Robert Soper began his teaching and research in Africa in 1962 and he has worked in Nigeria, East Africa and Zimbabwe. His interests have ranged from Early Farming Communities in East Africa, to excavations at the ancient Yoruba capital of Old Oyo in Nigeria, to a survey of the still operating traditional irrigation systems of the Marakwet of Kenya.

He joined the History Department at the University of Zimbabwe in 1985 and was involved in establishing their archaeology teaching programme. After excavation of the Great Zimbabwe tradition sites in Centenary, from 1993 he directed the research project 'Archaeology and Agricultural History in Nyanga' studying the terraces and other agricultural works and the communities responsible for them. He retired from the University of Zimbabwe in 2006.