

DISCOVERY OF THE ZIMBABWE RUINS

The statement by "D.M.H." (*Historia Junior*, 27, August, 1963) that the Zimbabwe Ruins were discovered by Adam Renders in 1868, cannot be sustained in the face of evidence from early accounts.

One of the few substantially correct versions in English of the discovery is by Summers in a recent publication.¹

Events leading to the discovery might well be summarised here more fully, since the main sources are evidently not readily accessible to those who write on the subject.

During the first three years after his arrival in the Eastern Transvaal in April, 1860, the Rev. A. Merensky (father of Dr. H. Merensky of platinum and diamond fame) heard many stories about ruins of stone north of the Limpopo. He tried to obtain more information from elephant hunters and the indigenous people, and although everyone who had travelled in the north knew about these old structures, the information was vague.²

Among Merensky's informants was a Lekwapa (Shangaan), named Malema, who had seen the ruins while acting as a bearer to a Portuguese trader, but he was afraid to venture closely.³

The Rev. Merensky and his colleague, the Rev. Nachtigal, left their Mission Station in July, 1862, to reconnoitre on foot the land to the north, setting as their ultimate objective the Ruins of Zimbabwe. Merensky's detailed report of this journey, evidently compiled from a diary after his return, is quoted by Wangemann.⁴

South-east of the present Tzaneen they obtained from Serobane, a local chief, the services of Makeritsane, to guide them across the Limpopo to the "ruins of old buildings", from which country Makeritsane emanated.

On reaching the Venda, east of the present Louis Trichardt, the party found the people suffering from small-pox, and also learnt that there was no epidemic-free passage to the north. Reluctantly they abandoned their objective, and returned to Sekukuniland, where Chief Sekukuni told them of extensive ruins, which he had seen in the country they had intended visiting, during his wanderings with his father (Sekwati) as fugitives (from Mzilikazi).⁵

When the German traveller, Karl Mauch, heard about these ruins from Merensky in 1867, they agreed upon a joint visit to the legendary old buildings.⁶

In 1868 Mauch undertook a journey to the north, details of which are contained in several letters published by Dr. Petermann.⁷ In July Nachtigal wrote from Lydenburg saying that Mauch had left there with

1. Summers, Roger: Zimbabwe. Nelson, 1963, pp. 6-12.
2. Merensky, A.: *Missionsleben in Transvaal, 1859-1882*. Missionsgesell., 2nd. Ed., Berlin, 1899, p. 139.
3. Wangemann, T.: *Geschichte der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft in Südafrika*. Evang. Missionsh., vol. IV, Berlin, 1877, p. 60.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 60-97.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
6. Merensky, A.: *op. cit.*, p. 150; Mauch, K.: *Peterm. Mitth., Ergänzungsheft No. 37*, 1874, p. 49.
7. Petermann, A.: *Peterm. Mitth.*, 1869, pp. 188-192.

the Zimbabwe Ruins as one of his objectives. For this purpose Nachtigal had provided him with two guides, Plaatje and Makgaonyo, who ". . . knew the road well".

Three months later, on reaching the Inyati Mission Station, about 40 miles north of the present Bulawayo, Mauch was disappointed in finding that his merchandise, intended for bartering food and goodwill on his contemplated investigations, had not arrived. Even more hampering was the political confusion which followed Mzilikazi's death, a few weeks earlier. Whereas Mauch was at liberty to wander about freely in previous years after meeting the Matabele Chief, accompanied by his (Mzilikazi's) old friend, Henry Hartley, the Matabele were now openly hostile, especially on hearing persistent rumours of the imminent invasion of the country by prospectors to look for gold previously discovered by Mauch. Mauch was eventually conducted to the Regent, Ngumbat (uMncumbata), who ignored Mauch on satisfying himself that he was not a spy. After six frustrating months Mauch returned to reach Potchefstroom in May, 1869, saying that the closer he believed to come to the Ruins, the further they seemed to recede.

Mauch was able to consult some literature on the subject, which made him even more determined to locate the Ruins. Although the references are not mentioned one may guess them to emanate from an account by Joao de Barros, published 300 years earlier, in which he described structures in mortarless masonry, called Symbace, in the land of Benomotapa, inland from Sofala. (It may be noted here that *Zimbaoé* appears near the source of the Sabia River, in a relatively fairly correct position, on a map by Kipert, dated 1749).

When Mauch was ready to resume his search in the winter of 1871, this time to be accompanied by Merensky, the latter was detained by reports of an imminent hostile attack on his Mission Station at Botshabelo, near Middelburg. Merensky unfortunately never saw the Ruins, but he was the man who kindled Mauch's urge to find them.

Mauch set foot in the Temple on the 5th September 1871. His arduous journey of about five weeks from Albassini's farm, east of Louis Trichardt, during which he was robbed and deserted by his bearers, ended for the time being when he was held captive by Mapansule, a local chief, some 25 miles south of Zimbabwe. Here he learnt about a White man at Pika's kraal, about 10 miles further north. He smuggled a note to this stranger, whom he suspected to be Adam Render, one of his countrymen (not an American, as some accounts state), and about whom he had already heard in the Zoutpansberg. The man proved to be none other than Render (Renders, according to later spellings). By Render's intervention Mauch was freed, and when he secretly entered the Ruins he described himself ". . . as the first White man to see them".⁸

In examining this claim one might be inclined to assume that Render, who had been living for several years only about 12 miles from the Ruins, must have seen them before Mauch. On the other hand, the Ruins were taboo, and Render may have respected local custom for fear of

8. Mauch, K.: op. cit., p. 49.

being ejected from the community, or suffer an even worse fate, unless, of course, he had visited them secretly.

Be as it may, Render can on no account be considered the discoverer, because he did not conform to the essential qualification of informing other people. In fact, the afore-mentioned informants would have prior claims, since they did tell others what little they knew about them. It remained for Mauch to discover both Render and the Ruins. He subsequently published accounts of the Ruins, including a map showing their geographical position.⁹

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9. Ibid, pp. 49-52.