Repatriation of a Great Zimbabwe Stone Bird

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The stone birds are the most famous objects found at Great Zimbabwe and are now the symbol of the nation of Zimbabwe. This paper describes how in 2003 Germany returned part of one of the birds (only eight of these soapstone birds were ever recovered) to Zimbabwe approximately 100 years after it had been looted from Great Zimbabwe.
The top half of the bird (which we’ll see later) was found at the beginning of the 20th century and has remained in Zimbabwe. The bottom half probably was taken from Great Zimbabwe in the decades just before the turn of the 20th century, but by whom and exactly when is unknown. This image was taken in 1983 when I was visiting the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin as part of my dissertation research on the art history of the Shona speaking peoples who now live primarily in the modern country of Zimbabwe. The first record of this part of the bird dates from 1906 when the Museum purchased the lower half from the missionary Karl Axenfeld of a Missionary Museum in Berlin. Following the Second World War, this part of the bird, along with a number of other items from the museum, were presumed lost and probably destroyed in the war. Hence my photograph is of a plaster copy of the lost original stone bird, and it was kept in the museum stores just as you see it, with, frankly, hardly any attention being given to it.
To jump to the end of the story, here is a photo taken by an Associated Press stringer with the following title,

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe holds the lower portion of the ancient stone sculpture the "Zimbabwe Bird" at a ceremony in Zimbabwe Wednesday May 14, 2003. The sculpture was officially handed over by the German Ambassador Peter Schmidt, second left, and Zimbabwean Home Affairs Minister Kembo Mohadi, left. Germany returned Wednesday the carved base of the "Zimbabwe Bird" that has spent on near 100 years in the hands of European collectors and museums. (Footnote #1)

What I intend to do now is to fill in some of the details of the archaeological context and history of the discovery of all of the Zimbabwe stone birds, finishing with this repatriated example.

Footnote #1. “ZIMBABWE GERMANY STONE BIRD”

Accu Net/ AP Multimedia Archive
14 May 2003, Accuweather, Inc.
12 July 2006 <http://ap.accuweather.com/>
Great Zimbabwe hardly needs any introduction for this audience, but to just briefly give the context of where the stone birds are from, here you are seeing the walls of what is known as the Great Enclosure in the valley ruins of Great Zimbabwe on the right, and the conical tower inside this structure on the left. Great Zimbabwe, with its many stone structures, is arguably the largest and most impressive archaeological site in sub-Saharan Africa. The dressed granite blocks were assembled without mortar into structures such as you’re seeing here. The height of this wall is 11 meters. It is 6 meters thick at the base, 4 meters at the top and the circumference of this enclosure is 255 meters.
From the late David Beach’s map you can see that Great Zimbabwe was the largest of many other smaller zimbabwes (or houses of stone) from the same time period. All are located on the edge of the plateau to be at the center of the annual movement of cattle between the highlands and lowlands. Gold was mined and traded to the outside but the real wealth of Great Zimbabwe was in the huge herds of cattle they controlled. From radiocarbon dates we know that the area around Great Zimbabwe was settled by the 5th century of the Christian era. The first walls were built in the 13th century and people continued to inhabit the site until approximately 1500. Most agree that the peak of economic prosperity, and when the majority of the building was done, was the period between 1300 and 1450.
There is no direct way to date when the stone birds were carved and so it is assumed that they also fall within this period. Only eight birds are known (whether there were more found is a point that will be returned to later). The birds are all carved from soapstone (also known as talc or mica-schist) and were mostly perched on the stelae or columns such as you’re seeing. The birds are all about 33 cm in height and the overall columns (including the birds) are about 1.6 meters. As others, including Summers, Garlake, Huffman and Matenga have noted (Footnote #2) they seem to stylistically form two groups. The first consists of those that squat with bent legs on rectangular plinths and have horizontal beaks, and the other group, with legs hanging down onto the ring they perch on, all have round columns and point their beaks vertically.

Footnote #2
Garlake, Peter. 1973 Great Zimbabwe. New York: Thames and Hudson p. 120.
Stylized versions of the birds now appear on everything from the nation's flag,
to coins. As an aside, and I’m sure our Zimbabwean colleagues can attest to this better, as I’ve not been back in the country for some years, with the annual inflation rate approaching 1200% in May of this year, such coins have themselves probably become abandoned relics. The newly printed 100,000 Zimbabwe dollar notes are not even worth one US dollar.
Karl Mauch, a German geologist and explorer was the first European to visit and write about Great Zimbabwe (Footnote #3). On the right you see some of the drawings from his 1871 and 1872 journals. Note the soapstone column with geometric incisions decorating it, that I’ll get back to. Mauch apparently never saw any of the stone birds, or at least did not mention them. Much has been written about Mauch and his assertions that Great Zimbabwe must be the biblical land of Ophir and connected with Solomon and Sheba. These ideas have of course been discredited. What is important for me is Mauch’s association with other Germans. Mauch was guided to the ruins by Adam Render (or Renders), who is usually credited with being the first European to visit the ruins. This German-born emigrant to America later became a hunter in southern Africa. In 1868 he had become stranded in the area of Great Zimbabwe and so married a Shona woman and settled in her village. The other German of note is Alex Merensky, a Lutheran missionary working among the Pedi peoples of northern South Africa. He had heard about Great Zimbabwe in the mid 19th century, and passed on this information to Mauch. He did not succeed in visiting Great Zimbabwe himself but wrote and lectured in Berlin about Ophir and Mauch’s visit and importantly worked with the Berlin Missionary Society (a connection I’ll return to later). Joseph Vogel’s annotated bibliography of Great Zimbabwe has admirably documented the German literature connected with these and other early visitors (Footnote #4).

Footnote #3

Footnote #4.
The hunter Willie Posselt took the first bird from Great Zimbabwe in 1889. He found four birds on the hill in the Eastern Enclosure (now also known as the Sacred Enclosure), placed in what he described as “an old ruined wall.” Despite the protests of local Shona living in the area, he cut one of them from its column (the bird you’re seeing on the right) and stored the rest “in a secure place” (Footnote #5) This bird he later sold to Cecil Rhodes (who you see on the left) and it has remained as part of the estate of Rhodes in Cape Town, South Africa ever since.

Footnote #5
Cecil Rhodes, the mining magnate, businessman, colonizer of Rhodesia, and that point Prime Minister of the Cape Colony in South Africa, also embraced the idea that Zimbabwe was Ophir and used this idea to justify the 1890 occupation of the area that was then known as Mashonaland by his British South Africa Company. Here in his former residence in Cape Town, known as Groote Schuur, is where Rhodes kept the bird and this is where it has remained. When he remodeled the house in 1893, Rhodes even had his architect, Herbert Baker, incorporate the bird symbol into the decorative motifs found throughout. Rhodes willed the house to the government of South Africa and it has been the residence of their head of state since 1911. When I visited in 1996 it was the residence of the Deputy President, (who at that point was F.W. DeKlerk). Note the bird shaped gargoyle downspouts.
On the inside you'll see birds embellishing the doorplates and prominently adorning the stairway.
Upstairs in Rhodes’ study is a bird-ornamented curiosity cabinet, and, in the close-up on the right, you can see some of the artifacts such as soapstone bowls from Great Zimbabwe that Rhodes acquired. The geometrically engraved soapstone column is the same one that was drawn by Karl Mauch. Mauch or Posselt must have taken it away from Great Zimbabwe so that eventually it ended up in the collection of Rhodes.
Even after Rhodes death in 1902, the obsession with the Zimbabwe bird continued as Herbert Baker again incorporated it into the design of Rhodes House in Oxford which was finished in 1928.
Here you see a close-up and the sign going into Rhodes house.
In 1891 the antiquarian Theodore Bent, with mostly Middle Eastern experience (and no archaeological training) was commissioned by the British South Africa Company (with help from the Royal Geographic Society and others) to investigate and excavate Great Zimbabwe. His conclusions that the ruins could not possibly have been built by “any known African race” and must have been done by an ancient Arabian people akin to the Phoenicians were immensely popular at the time but of course are now totally discounted. Bent found the four full soapstone birds and one half you see on right, in the Eastern Enclosure, and presumably they are the same ones that Posselt had stored away earlier. All are illustrations from Bent’s book, The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland, which went through three different editions and numerous reprinting. (On the half bird, which is a different one from the Berlin portion, you’re seeing both the front and back).
Bent also claimed to have found what he called two miniature stone birds, which you see here from his illustrations. They are less than 9 cm. high and to my thinking, and most others, look nothing like birds yet they have been the source of several declarations that there were at least ten birds found at Great Zimbabwe.
Bent deposited the birds in the South African Museum in Cape Town, (here they are shown in a photograph illustrating Hall and Neal’s 1902 book *The Ancient Ruins of Rhodesia*). They remained there until 1981 (soon after Zimbabwe’s Independence) when they were traded for a collection of bees, wasps and ants and repatriated back to the Great Zimbabwe site museum.
Here you see the Eastern Enclosure and Garlake’s reconstruction of perhaps what it looked like when the birds were still in place. Posselt, Bent and later Hall each give different accounts of where they supposedly had originally been erected, so we’ll never know for sure.
From this site map done by Peter Garlake you can see the location of the Eastern Enclosure.
This bird, the only one not found on the hill, was removed by Richard Hall from the Central valley (previously known as Phillips Ruins) in 1903. Hall (at the right of the photo on the left), who was formerly a journalist, was appointed Curator of Great Zimbabwe in 1902, and remained in that position until he was dismissed in 1904. During that time he stripped many of the ruins of their archaeological remains and stratigraphy through his reckless digging.
Hall found it by this small conical tower describing that, “It was upside down, with the base resting against the side of the cone, from the summit of which it had probably fallen” (Footnote #6) This bird has remained in the country since it was found, being displayed first in the Bulawayo Museum of Natural History (previously known as the National Museum) and then the Great Zimbabwe Site Museum.

Footnote #6

For this, the eighth bird, I’ll discuss who might have found it, and where, in just a minute. This is the earliest illustration of the Berlin portion of the bird that I know of, and it’s from Carl Einstein’s Afrikanische Plastik published in 1921. The publication provides no information other than it was then in the collection of the Berlin Volkerkunde Museum. Dr. Peter Junge, the current director of the Africa collection of what’s now known as the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum explained to me what happened to the bird during the Second World War. There also are a few articles on the fate of the collections (see Hofner 1992 and Feest 1991 Footnote #7). During the war many collections were packed up and sent to various parts of Germany for safekeeping. Sometime in 1944 some of the ethnographic collection was moved to a castle in Schrabsdorf in Silesia (now part of Poland). There it was captured by the Russian Army, taken as spoils of war and deposited in Leningrad Museum of Ethnography and Anthropology. In the 1970s an agreement was reached between the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic that the collections should be, quote, “repatriated” to the “good Germany.” In 1978 the collection was taken to the Leipzig ethnographic museum (which had lost much of its collection in the war) but again this was done with the utmost secrecy and never acknowledged to the public. Only after the collapse of the GDR government, on the eve of reunification of the two Germanys, was the Berlin Museum told that the 45,000 objects they thought had been destroyed in the war still existed. It took the next two years, 1990 to 1992 to get the objects back to the Berlin Museum.

Footnote #7
My own involvement in this story came in 1996 when I was arranging to borrow museum objects for an exhibition surveying the ancient and modern art of Zimbabwe that I was organizing with Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium. Here you’re seeing the cover of the catalogue. I knew that a lot of Berlin’s collections from the Kingdom of Benin, that they thought had been destroyed in the war, were in these recovered material, and so I asked the then director of the Africa collections, Dr. Hans Joachim Koloss, if the part of the Zimbabwe bird had also come back. He told me that it had. Zimbabwe was at first unwilling to lend any of their Great Zimbabwe birds to the exhibition (though we used the image of one on the cover), but when I secured the agreement of the Berlin officials to borrow the newly re-discovered lower half, they agreed to lend the upper part of the bird. At least a temporary unification of the two parts could then be accomplished at the exhibition.
Here are the two pieces as they were illustrated for the exhibition catalogue.
The top half had been found by Richard Hall in 1902 in an area known as the Western Enclosure. It has always remained in the country.
Hall does not say exactly where he found it but Edward Matenga (Footnote #8) believes it was from a balcony that overlooked the enclosure. We presume that the bottom half of the bird was also from this area but there is no proof of that.

Footnote # 8
Here is a photograph from 1903 when Hall was excavating the Western Enclosure. Most of the monoliths you see have disappeared and much of the walling has now collapsed. I’ve juxtaposed it with another of Peter Garlake’s reconstructions, this time of the Western Enclosure area.
Who took the lower part of the bird from Great Zimbabwe and when is unknown. Most feel it was taken before Bent started investigating the ruins but we’re not sure of this for, as we’ve seen Hall found two birds later. Hall adds to the confusion by claiming more than eight birds had been found and stating “Two, it is known were taken to Johannesburg in 1890, and about the same time the lower portion of a bird (of which the upper portion was found by the author in 1902) was removed and sold to Mr. Rhodes. . . [in discussing two supposedly unaccounted for birds he goes on to say] There is a general belief that one of these birds is in a certain museum in Austria, and this is quite possible, seeing that at least two Austrian scientists have visited this country” (Footnote #9). Hall is unfortunately not a very credible source of information and I think he has mixed this all up. I doubt Rhodes ever bought the piece. Matenga has pushed these connections even further by suggesting that Rhodes gave or sold the half bird to the missionary Axenfeld. Again I’m skeptical. Axenfeld was a Mission inspector for the Berlin Mission Society whose main missions were in German East Africa (Tanzania).

So, an explorer (Mauch in 1871), a hunter (Posselt in 1889) and an antiquarian (Bent in 1891) all had removed items from the Great Zimbabwe ruins around this time. After the 1890 colonial occupation of the country there were also, however, many other European visitors who could have removed it. Here you’re seeing an Ellerton Fry photograph of visitors to the ruins probably in the early 1890s. I think it is worth investigating Karl Axenfeld further to see if he really visited South Africa and Rhodes, but I also think looking into the connections and travels of the earlier mentioned missionary, Merensky, also of the Berlin Mission Society, may yield more results.

Footnote #9
In 1997 before the opening of the Belgian exhibition I told Dawson Munjeri, then director of the National Museums and Monuments in Zimbabwe, that that was the time that repatriation of the half bird should be sought, especially as the Germans had not really missed it very much for the last fifty odd years. That, however, would be a political issue that I could do nothing about. What transpired then is also somewhat unclear as museum officials have not told me many of the details.
The German ambassador to Zimbabwe, Dr. Schmidt, explained to the Zimbabwe Herald, (May 16, 2003 at the time of the public ceremony to give the bird back) that “following representations from the German federal government, the Prussia Cultural Heritage Foundation [quoting from Schmidt ‘the legal owners of the fragment’] in 1999 agreed to restore to Zimbabwe the fragment and on February 1, 2000, signed an agreement to this effect with the Department of National Museums and Monuments. Dr. Peter Junge, the Director of the Africa Department personally confirmed to me that the bird fragment left the Berlin Museum in February of 2000. What was not widely known, however, was what Edward Matenga confirmed (in his words),

Finally in February 2000 the German specimen was secretly handed over to the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe by the German Ambassador under a memorandum of understanding in which the bird was being returned to Zimbabwe on “permanent loan” while the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation remained the legal owner of the fragment. The loan document thus technically avoided the subject of restitution (Footnote #10).

Footnote #10.
Matenga, Edward. (unpublished material) “Return of Cultural Treasures. The Case of Zimbabwe.”
Why it took three years before the return was publicly announced in Zimbabwe is unclear. On May 6th 2004, a year after coming back to Zimbabwe, the two parts were taken back to Great Zimbabwe to be installed in the site museum in a lavish ceremony.

Here you're seeing some installation shots of the bird back home, kindly supplied to me by Edward Matenga.

The UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, and even the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects does not cover the plunder of the 19th and early 20th centuries and so I don’t think this will be the end of this or similar stories.