

NYANGA'S ANCESTRAL GOLD



'dwarf cattle' of theoryland didn't roam the pastures. They were stall-fed inside the tanks to produce manure to fertilize the poor soils of the terraced hills for growing grain. In Shona, manyowa and fetiraiza, with hei for stall-feeding, are words borrowed from the English language for a method of farming introduced in colonial times!

Taking the bull by the horns, recent research turned to science to challenge the mountain millets and the 'dwarf cattle' of theoryland. Immediately direct evidence from the laboratory went against the grain. A geochemical sampling exercise found that the harvest from the terraced hills was gold. An exacting pilot of sampling for assay found that the associated tanks were hydraulically designed for the recovery of gold by gravity concentration. In the blueprint for the mining perspective the uphill tunnel entrances came into their own. They were purpose-built to bring in water from hilltop runoff, or from skilfully graded water channels tapping distant springs and streams.

Terraces, when geochemically tested by grab-sampling and trenching, proved to be walls that once trapped the gold of easily worked 'placer' deposits – the eluvial 'pay dirt' that commonly forms on

TRAVEL WRITER

Have you ever wondered why anyone would plant millet on the mysterious terraces built tier upon tier on the beautiful heights of Nyanga? In the days before maize? Where Eastern Highlands' seasons are too cool and damp for phantom sorghum? And where there were – and still are – wide horizons of less story, much more fertile land in the stream valleys below?

In among these terrace walls is the enigma of Nyanga. Hundreds of roughly circular ruins that the early colonialists gave the unlikely name 'slave pits'. In the first decade of the 1900s British archaeologist David Randall-MacIvor – who took Great Zimbabwe away from fantasies of Solomon and Sheba into a medieval African

past – saw the strange buildings as 'fortress dwellings'.

Perhaps places to keep women in safety. But roofless death traps for men fighting against the armed 'other tribes' he injected into his story line. One thing he was sure of: such masterly constructions in stone were not built to house cattle, the most widely promoted theory today. You will find it published as fact in tourist literature under the name 'pit structures'. Not at all like pits, stone-lined tanks are encased in massive freestanding platforms! In theoryland cattle entered these tanks along long dark tunnels – stumbling blocks through the platforms explained away as symbolism.

The cattle had to be dwarf-sized to fit into the uphill entrance of the tunnels. Not at all like cattle stockades traditional to Africa – their entrances always downhill to inhibit footrot from waterlogging. Again unlike Africa, the



hillslopes by weathering of a mineralised bedrock source. The 26 tanks of the pilot programme were sampled deep within the entrance tunnels and exit drains engineered through their platforms. All samples assayed with residues of gold ranging from 0.4 to 1.78 grammes a tonne.

You can't see residual gold: it is detected only in the laboratory. The results are clues to the extraction and processing of the placer gold of the hillslopes in ancestral times. The unusually high value of 1.78 g/t Au means exploitation of a tonne of ore to yield the weight of a slim wedding band. The pilot's average residue was 0.31 g/t Au – equating to one-sixth of a gold ring won in hard labour from 'pay dirt' weighing a tonne.

No tunnel or drain holds that much soil! So don't go digging into these sites of national heritage thinking you will find the pot at the end of the rainbow. The ruins themselves are priceless. Under the custodianship of National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, fines for

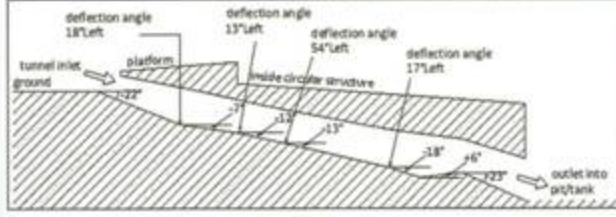
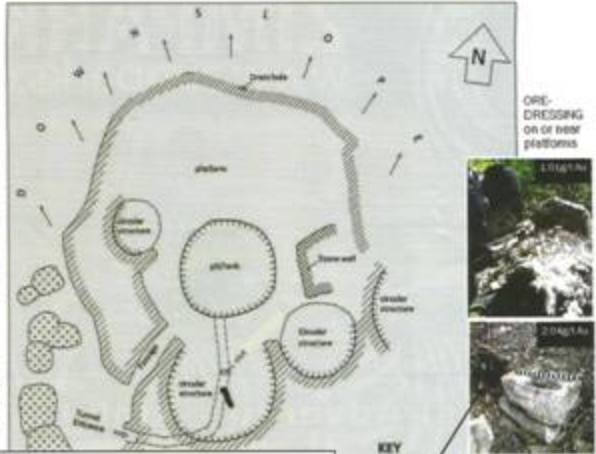
damaging them are heavy.

The unique archaeology of Nyanga is beginning to attract international interest. In a not-too-distant future, protected by good heritage management and rebranded as a tourism feature, Nyanga's precolonial gold mining will compete with the tourist attractions of Roman gold mining at Las Medullas in Spain, and the silver recovery of ancient Laurion in Greece.

Take a small step into this exciting future for Nyanga's cultural heritage at the free Gold of Old exhibition at Claremont Golf Club where a display of photographs, diagrams and text tells Nyanga's ancestral mining story. Exhibits range from heavy-duty stones for crushing quartz that take two men to lift, to delicately wrought copper bangles found at a tank platform. Under the enthusiastic commitment of club manager Francis Chiuta, a scenic walk on the 9-hole golf course, with photo opportunities for Mount Nyangani ahead of you, leads to a well-preserved tank 'in the rough' at Green 3.



Professional survey reveals structural plan of Nyanga tanks is unsuitable for cattle pens NATIONAL MUSEUMS & MONUMENTS OF ZIMBABWE. Research team: Chief archaeologist Kundishora Chipunza and Justin Magadzike (mapper, above)



Chief archaeologist of National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, Kundishora Chipunza, has selected this tank for excavation. Topographical mapping by Justin Magadzike shows in plan and cross-section the typical bend inside the stone-built tunnel and the very restricted dimensions and steep slope at its uphill entrance. Handicaps for livestock, symbolism for theoryland – purpose-built components of the mining perspective.

Gold of Old Walks and Talks are being planned for the future. The evidence is found far afield. Around the grinding grooves on Nyahokwe hill near Zwa National Monument, and under the eye of a Zwa Museum curator, samples of quartz chips were taken for assay. Residues of 0.12-0.49 g/t Au prove that this dramatic site was an ore-dressing floor where vein-quartz was crushed in a long-distant past. Manual crushing to liberate gold is much in evidence as

work in progress on tank platforms. It is the 'it' ingredient of the Roman historian Pliny's sequence for premechanical processing: "They crush it and wash it and burn it and grind it to powder."

Quartz is the world's best-known geological host for gold. Yet theoryland turns a blind eye to the profusion of quartz rubble on the terraces, quartz waste dumps in the field, sorted quartz in stone troughs, pieces of vein quartz and quartz chips at tank sites, quartz grains in the tunnels and drains.

In January the first luminescence date received from Washington State University is AD 1080-1180 for a piece of hard-baked clay covered by centuries of natural soil filling a tank. The tank itself will be older. When funds are found for more samples to be tested, it will be the quartz grains inside tank tunnels – an ideal subject for luminescence dating – that will give the definitive answer "Metal or Cattle".

