

# THE "WEBSTER" RUIN IN SOUTHERN RHODESIA, AFRICA

BY EDWARD M. ANDREWS

## I. GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The ruin here described was discovered by the late Mr. Dunbar Moody in 1892, who led the trek from the Orange Free State into this country in that year. It was shown me in May, 1906, by Mr. W. Webster, whose farm it adjoins, and who extended much courtesy and kindness to me while in this district. The ruin I named after him. It is situated in the M'Shangaan country close to the present kraal of Ichickwanda, who is, I believe, the head Induna of M'tamas, the paramount chief of the people. It is about 25 miles south of Melseetter township, which in its turn is distant from Umtali some 85 miles. It is on a high plateau, which runs on a ridge one mile due northeast, where it commands a magnificent view of the surrounding country and has water close by on either side. The farm is the property of J. M. Oeper, Esq., former surveyor general of southern Rhodesia, and I am greatly indebted to him for permission to explore and excavate, subject, of course, to the approval of the government.

The ruin is nearly circular, the defect being on the northwest side, where also is the rounded entrance. It is built in two tiers, the second tier rounding off on top, just to the northeast of where the entrance or passage comes out, in a "curl" which rises about a meter above the tier in question.

The height of the lower tier on the northwest side is on an average 1.8 m. and is built with some care, of stones mostly flat and averaging 30 pounds weight. There is small attempt at bonding, the courses are bad and no mortar has been used. From this tier the fall back to the second tier is 2.1 m., and that brings one against the "curl," which from the level on the northwest side resembles a small tower or cone (pl. 1). The height of the second tier on this side is 1.2 m.

On the southwest side the height of the lower tier is 2.8 m., from the level of the ground the fall back to the second tier being also 2.8 m. The height of the second tier on this side is 1.3 m. The diameter of the building at its greatest width is as nearly as possible 16 meters. It is generally in very bad repair, caused in a great

measure by two enormous wild fig trees growing from the southeast side, and which apparently have their roots right through the building. Very small portions of the original wall of the lower tier are to be seen, so great is the damage done. In fact this applies to the lower tier on all sides with the exception of the northwest side, which, as already stated, is in the better repair.

The entrance is about one meter wide, and has large rough flat stones for steps, placed along its whole length, which is 5.2 m., gradually rising to the top, and coming out due west of the "curl" and almost against it.

The center of the building on top, and inside the walls of the second tier, has apparently been filled in with earth. Many rough planks of some very hard wood, averaging about 40 cm. in width and 7.6 cm. in thickness, were found lying here. Their original lengths must have been about 2.5 m. All have oval holes cut along the sides, and they must have been fastened together, as the iron hasps still remain in many of them, the hasps being in very fair condition considering the great dampness always prevailing just where they were found. Whether these planks had anything to do with the structure I cannot say, but it almost seems as if they had been made to serve as a sort of platform across the earthen portion, already referred to, inside the walls. In some cases the wood is in excellent condition.

The "curl" is oval and its greatest length is 2.6 m. In the center, on top, lies a large flat stone, giving it the appearance of being capped. The greatest length of this stone is 1.3 m., with an extreme breadth of 1.1 m., and its general thickness is about 10 cm. For what purpose it was placed there, whether for ornament or not, does not appear.

On the northwest, or entrance, side the lower tier rises from a built foundation of large, rough, flat stones, in all about 1.5 m. in height. In taking the height of the lower tier on this side the height of the foundation was not included.

Close against the entrance are two monoliths, one large and one small (pl. 1, 1). The larger one, of slate, is 2.4 m. high, 40 cm. wide, and 10 cm. thick. The smaller one, close against it and Y-shaped, is 1.2 m. in height, 30 cm. wide, and 10 cm. thick. These two monoliths stand directly in front of the entrance.

Almost due north of these entrance monoliths, at a distance of 2.3 m., there are two more monoliths close together, the smaller one 1.2 m. high, 20 cm. wide, and 10 cm. thick; the larger one 1.7 m. high, 30 cm. wide, and 10 cm. thick. At a distance of 1.8 m. due



ENTRANCE TO RUIN, WITH MONOLITHS. THE SECOND TIER WITH "CURL" IS SEEN ON TOP ON THE LEFT



THE "CURL" WITH LARGE STONE OR CAP



west of the entrance monoliths there is a single monolith 1.4 m. high, 30 cm. wide, and 10 cm. thick.

As already stated, two monoliths are directly in front of the entrance; therefore any one approaching the entrance must pass between those monoliths to the west and north of the entrance.

At a distance again of 7 m. west from the entrance is what I believe to be a large grave, having at its east end a monolith 1.8 m. high, 40 cm. wide, and 10 cm. thick. A small monolith is also found on the southwest side of this supposed grave.

Close by there is another grave having a monolith at the south end. This has fallen. It is 2.4 m. high, 40 cm. wide, and 10 cm. thick. Five meters northeast of the entrance there is another large grave, with a large slate monolith at the south end, 3 m. high, 50 cm. wide, and 10 cm. thick. A large number of what apparently are graves are on the northwest and west sides of the building, these graves being piles of stones of various shapes and sizes, but the whole grave nearly oval in shape.

Now that the undergrowth and tiers have been cleared away, several other monoliths of various sizes are seen lying around. The supposed graves apparently face without regard to any particular direction.

The remains of several native huts lie a short distance from the ruin, but they must be quite recent. Cement flooring, in most instances about 7.5 cm. thick, is found in all of them; also the small circular place for cooking, which can today be seen in any native hut.

Though I made careful search, I have so far seen nothing of the nature of a real debris heap. True, sherds of common pottery lie around the outskirts of the building, but I do not think they can have any connection with the ruin itself.

From enquiries made among the natives in all directions, I can learn nothing respecting the history of the ruin, though the natives generally appear to regard it with some reverence. It is scarcely surprising that I am unable to procure information on the subject, for no native appears to know anything of the past, unless that past happens to have been within his own personal recollection. Some there are, but very few, who do know something of the history of their people, mythical or otherwise, mostly the former, but it is very difficult to get them to speak of it in any way to a white man.

The photographs I am sending were taken for me under most trying conditions of light and shade by Mr. J. Myers, of the British

South African police, and I am indebted to this gentleman and his comrades for much courtesy and kindness.

## II. NOTES ON THE ICHICKWANDA RUINS

These ruins are situated one mile northeast of the Webster ruin and on the same ridge. They are on the extremity of the spur, the descent being sharp and some hundreds of feet into the valley below. They consist of one main ruin surrounded by four other inferior ruins or rough stone enclosures.

I spent some fourteen days clearing and working all of them, but the result was again practically nothing. However, an account of the main ruin may be of interest, as in some respects it resembles the famous pit dwellings at Inyanga, so clearly described by Dr. Randall MacIver in his work "Mediæval Rhodesia."

The structure is as near as possible circular, being built of large stones, averaging 70 pounds in weight, which in some instances are slightly dressed. It consists of one circular room, or *kya*, extremely neatly built up. This room is exactly 4 meters in diameter, and the height of walls, as they presently stand, average 2.7 m. There is no attempt at bonding, and no mortar has been used. The walls of the dwelling are in perfect condition inside, with the exception of the very tops; clearly stones are missing here. Roots of the trees have grown out and in among the walls, forming sorts of clamps, and just at present binding them very strongly.

Measuring from any point inside the dwelling walls to the extreme edge of the outside wall, the average is about 6 m. wide. Many of the stones—in fact, many tons in all—have rolled down, yet portions of the original walls are here and there to be seen.

The entrance faces due south and on the west side is beautifully rounded, though the east side has been destroyed, but I am of the opinion that this side was not rounded, for the reason that the east wall of the entrance inside is not rounded, while the west again inside is rounded. The length of the entrance is 3.5 m. and the width in no part exceeds 70 cm. Inside the dwelling on the north side two stones, each about 70 cm. apart and in equal distance from the top and floor, project from the wall, and were no doubt used as steps. The diameter of building is about 14 meters.

One can only suppose this to have been the dwelling of human creatures; it could not have been built as a cattle kraal, as bullocks, at any rate, could not have gone through the entrance, and surely such enormous walls were not necessary to enclose cattle. It may

have been built for a fort; certainly the situation encourages the idea, though at present the ground around is densely wooded. I excavated to bed-rock and carefully searched through the soil, but fragments of common household pottery only were found, and certainly not enough of that to lead one to suppose the place had been inhabited for any length of time.

The outlying stone enclosures may or may not have been used as cattle kraals. I could find no evidence of human occupation in any of them.

(CHIPINGA, S. MELSETTER, S. RHODESIA, *November 19, 1906.*)

### III. WORK DONE ON THE WEBSTER RUIN.

#### THE TEMPLE.

*October 13, 1906.*—Commenced sinking a shaft 2.3 m. in diameter through the earth in the center of the upper tier. At 30 cm. came upon quantities of common household pottery sherds, undecorated. At about the same depth found an iron spear-head, the head being 20 cm. in length and 2 cm. broad at the widest part, the iron shaft being 10 cm. in length, having four sides. Again, at the same depth, a circular iron shaft of spear 20 cm. long; also at the same depth one iron arrow-head 15 cm. in length and 1.5 cm. in width at widest part. They are in fair condition, the earth where they were found being seldom dry. At 1.6 m. from the surface came upon stone rubble, showing every indication of considerable depth, probably to the level of the foundations. This rubble much resembles the rubble foundations found in the majority of Rhodesian ruins.

The shaft is sunk nearly against and due southeast of the "curl." My reasons for sinking through the ruin were: (1) It appeared to me that should the large flat stone, or "cap" of the "curl," have any connection with an underground chamber I was far more likely to cut that connection, besides doing infinitely less damage, and (2) there would undoubtedly be a great saving of time and labor.

*October 15.*—Having on the last day's work sunk through earth 1.7 m. in depth, proceeded this morning to remove the rubble. I worked through this rubble, which had a depth of 1.2 m., when I again came upon the same sort of soil, which is in reality decomposed sandstone. I worked through this to a depth of 70 cm., and at that depth it strongly resembles bed-rock, though I am not at all certain at present that it is.

This makes the depth of the shaft 3.6 m. From very careful measurements taken from the outside, corresponding with the level

of the top of the shaft and that of the level at the base of the building, I found the measurements to be very much the same, and from this I am led to suppose my shaft is not yet down to bed-rock.

Unless with a lot of extra work, it is hardly possible to go deeper, as the rubble keeps continually falling and making work dangerous. As the building, excepting on the northwest side, is so much destroyed, owing to the roots of the large trees going through the walls, and as it can only be a matter of a very few years before the whole structure tumbles to pieces, I have decided to cut a section through the building from the northeast side and come through onto the shaft. This will leave three sides of the structure as they were. On removing the cap on the "curl" I found rubble underneath, and the question arises as to why this cap was placed there. At present I can only conclude it was for ornamentation. During this day's work, no articles, not even potsherds, were found.

*October 16.*—Commenced cutting a section from the northeast side, towards the center of the structure. On working away the stones which had fallen from the second tier, and once within the circle of the second tier, found that though the outer walls had at least some attention paid to the building of them, yet the inside was composed of rubble thrown in and earth to fill up the crevices. About 2 m. inside the second tier came upon two monoliths firmly embedded in the ground, and each slanting to the northeast at an angle of about 45 degrees; they were one meter apart. At this point sherds of very common household pottery were also found, and at the same level and almost in the same place a piece of green glass was found. This glass much resembles the green glass found at Dhlo-Dhlo last year, only this piece is very much thicker and looks as if it had at one time formed a portion of a bowl. This glass is about 5 cm. in size either way. Almost in the same place and at the same level was found a thin piece of glass about 11 by 6 cm., which has a thin coating of what is apparently silver on both sides, but from the different hues I take the glass to be colored. One piece of decorated pottery only was found, and that had the cord pattern on it. Large bones and teeth of animals were found in fairly large quantities at all levels. Two "fuba" game stones and one grain-crushing stone were also found among the rubble.

*October 17.*—Continued the section through to the center, working away the top portion right into the "curl." Removed the large stone on top of same, and worked downwards, with interesting results. At about one meter down came upon fragments of a very fine earthenware or porcelain bowl. From the fragments by me—





RUIN FROM NORTHEAST SIDE SHOWING SECTION BEING CUT. THE SECOND TIER AND "CURL" ARE PLAINLY VISIBLE



RUIN AND MONOLITHS FROM THE WEST



and they would form nearly half the bowl—I should imagine the bowl to have been somewhere about 22 cm. in diameter, with a depth of about 3 cm. It is as nearly as possible the color of terracotta, about 5 mm. thick, on the average, and is enameled a bluish color on both sides. The enamel has very much cracked, as if it had been fired too much or from some other cause. I can venture to give no name to it, as I have seen nothing of the sort before. As I have yet to go a considerable depth below where these interesting

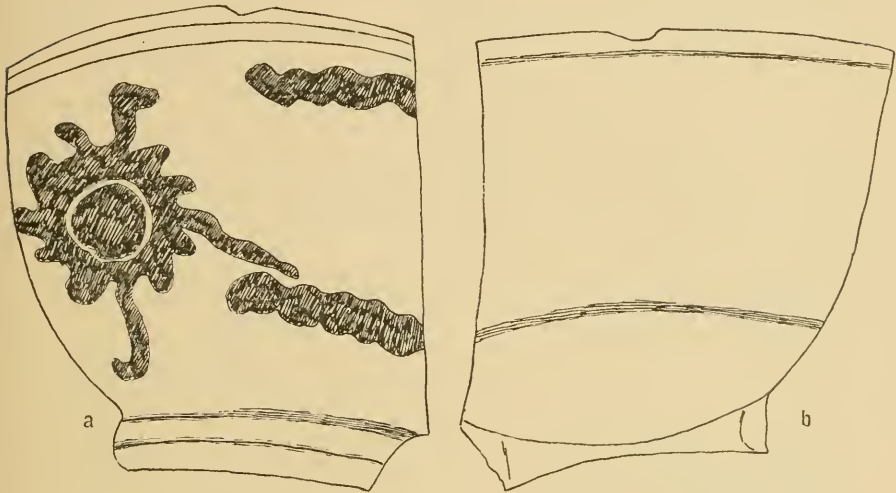


FIG. 13.—Piece of Nankin china bowl; *a*, outside; *b*, inside. Two-thirds natural size.

pieces were found, I hope I may be lucky enough to find some of the remaining pieces (fig. 13).

Almost in the same place and at precisely the same level, I came upon a very fine piece of a Nankin china bowl. The bowl must have stood about 11 cm. high, with a diameter of 17 or 20 cm. It is beautifully marked, the glaze is perfect, and the coloring very fine. I may be lucky enough to come upon other portions of the bowl later on. Another piece of pale-green thick glass, about 4cm. square, was found in the same place, and from its shape I judge it to be a portion of a bowl; also a small iron ring, or bangle, was found about the same spot. Also another piece of that colored glass, an exact copy of which is here given (fig. 14). It also has that silvery covering on it, and it makes one wonder whether such glass could have formed some portion of a sacred lamp or something of that sort.

The sherds of pottery found in this particular part were of very much better make, many of the sherds being colored with hematite and plumbago; one piece only was decorated, and that with thick vertical lines, in batches of three, about 5 cm. apart.

I must here state that it is quite impossible to work the building in an even manner, as the top sides must be slanted away in order to prevent the rubble falling on those working below.



FIG. 14.—Piece of cloudy glass; exact size.

The Nankin and other stoneware were found a meter below the center large stone of the "curl." Towards the top of the second tier and near the "curl," burnt wood supports were found, two or three of which I am keeping. These again form a link in other Rhodesian ruins, they being found in all.

*October 18.*—Heavy rain; work impossible.

*October 19.*—Resumed work on section. Nothing of importance to note except the finding of another fragment of Nankin china, which was found between the rubble, in almost the same place as the other. It is a different design from the other piece, and I fancy it is a portion of a plate. The design is that of flowers and the coloring is very fine (fig. 15).



FIG. 15.—Fragment of Nankin china; exact size.

In the drawings all those portions which are white are supposed to be pale blue; the designs are very dark blue, nearly black, while the lines are shaded accordingly.

Figure 15 is of the fragment of Nankin china found today and the exact size. The inside is quite plain, having no designs or lines of any sort. Its thickness is 4 millimeters.

*October 20.*—Continued section, bringing work through and under the "curl," to the head of the steps. A quantity of common household potsherds were found, but only one piece decorated. Four

iron arrow-heads, as per illustrations (fig. 16), were found; also one iron axe-head; one iron bangle, also shown, was found; one piece of an iron hoe and one piece of light yellow glass, similar to that found before. All these articles were found nearly on the surface, round and about the "curl."

*October 22.*—The work of excavation being now well under the steps and considering it not worth while going any farther in that direction, I concluded my work on the interior of the building. I then commenced work on the "addition" to the building, removing from the outside and going inward the whole of the added wall. There can be no doubt the portion removed was built after the main

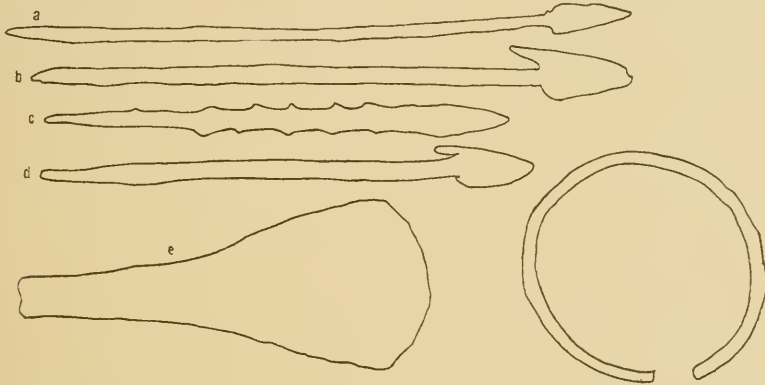


FIG. 16.—*a, b, c, d*, iron arrow heads; *e*, iron axe head; iron bangle. One-half natural size.

building had been standing some time, and I imagine 50 or 60 years to be the limit of age of this addition.

The monoliths referred to earlier in this report as having been found two meters inside the circle of the second tier were, I think, placed there as supports, as two more were found adjoining, all being the same distance apart, namely, one meter.

I have sunk below the surface or floor of the building in two or three places, but in every instance I have found bed-rock and nothing else. I have therefore decided to suspend work on the Temple for the time being at any rate, and turn my attention to the graves lying around, or rather to the northwest and west of the Temple.

There are plain indications of natives' habitations of no great age close around the building, and I will cut a section through these before leaving. Sherds of common pottery are lying all over the

place, but I can see no indications of any defined debris heaps, though a good deal may, of course, have been washed down the sloping hillsides.

That the Temple is the work of a negro race admits of no doubt, and though the style of architecture in general is different from other Rhodesian ruins I have seen, yet there can be small doubt that a negro race built it, and the presence of Nankin china among the rubble walls conclusively proves it cannot be earlier than the beginning of the XVIIth century or, at the very earliest, the very end of the XVIth century. The work of the builders is very poor, and were it not for the outer walls, one would say without hesitation that the ordinary Rhodesian native would on the whole make a better job.

The only objects found among the stonework of the addition were one iron arrow and two iron arrow shafts, a piece of yellow glass,

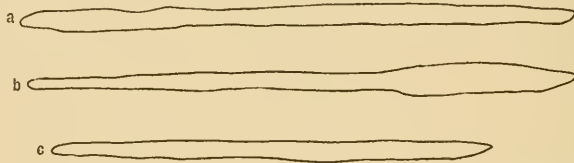


FIG. 17.—*a*, shaft of iron arrow head; *b*, iron arrow head; *c*, shaft of iron arrow head. One-half natural size.

and a small piece of iron with screw through same, which were found on the top of the wall of the addition. These are shown in figure 17.

*October 23.*—Commenced excavating at the foot of the northwest or entrance wall; worked carefully among the monoliths, going down to bed-rock, and though sherds of common household pottery were found, the only other articles found were an iron spear-head and portion of a native hoe, as given in the illustration. Having found no skeletons in the main building, I was almost sure they would be found outside, among the monoliths, but up to the present nothing of the kind has been discovered. And yet what object could the builders have had in view, in piling up heaps of stones and placing monoliths about them? It is quite true the M'Shangaan of today does not make his grave as these are made, if they really are graves. He is content to bury his dead in a recumbent position, without regard, so far as I can find out, to whether the body faces east or west, and then around the actual grave he places one thin line or circle of stones. Within a few hundred yards of

this spot M'Shangaan dead in considerable numbers lie around, but they are the dead of the ruling chief, Chikwanda, or of his people, and under these circumstances I have no right to disturb them. I am carefully turning over the ground around the building and supposed graves, but without success in any form up to the present.

The absence of debris heaps, and I am convinced there are none, proves to my mind it could not have been an ordinary dwelling ground, though there are a few native huts, or the remains of them, about, but they are quite recent. I have come upon no copper wire, brass wire, or beads of any description, nor do I think I am likely to.

The green glass I firmly believe to be the same as the Portuguese use at the present day in making the demijohns for their vino. I was comparing it with one a few days ago and it resembles the

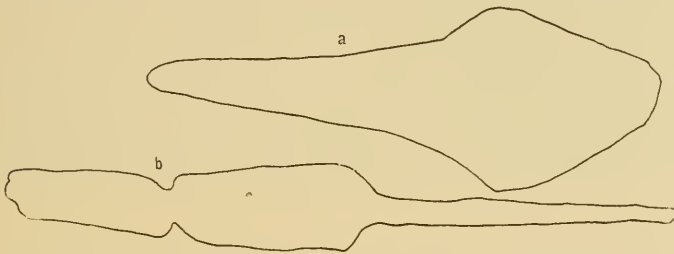


FIG. 18.—*a*, portion of hoe; *b*, iron spear head. One-half natural size.

demijohn very nearly. The iron things found today are shown in figure 18.

*October 24 and 25.*—Continued turning over the ground round the ruin and among the supposed graves. Only a few iron articles were found, as shown in figure 19. Quantities of sherds of common household pottery were found lying about, but none with decoration of any sort among them. I also turned over the flooring of three old huts, but nothing was found in either of them, with the exception again of common potsherds, and an iron spear used on the heel of an assegai and bound round with iron. The natives of the present day use the same thing. It is for sticking the assegai in the ground; also for digging out small roots, etc.

*October 26 and 27.*—Heavy rains on these days and quite impossible to do any work; in fact, the rainy season appears to have set in.

*October 29.*—Commenced work on the supposed graves, which work carried me on till November 7. As already stated, the graves are piles of large and small stones piled together, being in shape more or less oval, and each one has a kind of retaining wall, so as to keep the stones above in their places. In all, I have opened up

fourteen of these graves, and each one with a similar result—sherds of very common household pottery and bones of antelope only. In one instance only were any other articles found. These consisted of a piece of thick green glass, evidently a portion of the mouth of a large bottle. It appears to have been painted, but I can form no idea with what. From the same grave came a pottery spindle whorl.

Among the old huts or remains of huts around, I found two or three iron articles, these being classed with those articles found outside the main ruin.

As I can see nothing to be gained by doing further work on this,

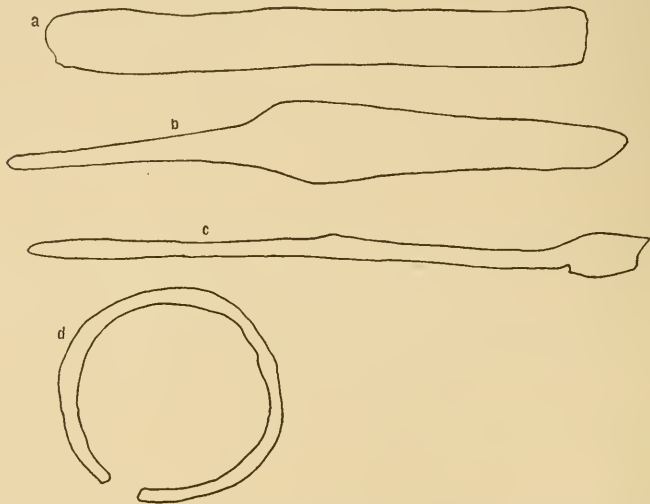


FIG. 19.—*a*, piece of iron nearly 6 mm. thick, much corroded; *b*, iron spear head; *c*, portion of iron arrow head; *d*, iron bangle, much corroded. Reduced one-half.

the Webster ruin, I may be allowed to draw my conclusions concerning the ruin generally.

It has been stated by one of the British South African police stationed at Chipinga, who was asked to make a report on the place before leave was granted me by the government to do some work, that the structure was a fort. This statement appears to me to be quite erroneous. I can see no point about the place which could lead any one to suppose it could have been or ever was intended to have been a fort.

The exceptional style of building, the monoliths, as it were, guarding the same from the northeast to the southwest, the graves, which are only found between these same points of the compass, go





GRAVES ON NORTHWEST SIDE OF RUIN



RUIN FROM THE WEST. THE FIG TREES



to prove very strongly to my mind that it was built for and has remained a sacred enclosure, the main building probably having been what I have termed it all through these notes, a "Temple."

In the Temple, more especially in the vicinity of the "curl," broken sherds of pottery were found; also bones of antelope (large). Round about the monoliths, bones and sherds were again found, and in all the graves opened there was the same result. Throughout not one skeleton has been found. Under the circumstances, is it not possible that cremation was in vogue among these people? It appears to me to be by no means an improbable solution of the mystery.

I have already remarked that the work throughout is that of a negro race, and again that the work cannot be earlier than the end of the XVIth century.

In case any argument may crop up, now or in the future, let me again state that the fragments of Nankin china were found in the main walls, or, to be exact, in the main wall of the "curl," quite a meter below the surface.

Again, the fragments of terra-cotta porcelain were found much in the same place; though I can give no name to it, yet in some respects it has the appearance of "coalport."