

Excavating Birds

In 1890, a miner digging in the south east of the land uncovers over one hundred and fifty soapstone carvings of birds. He lifts one carefully to his palm. Is it a fish eagle? A bateleur eagle? Each bird looks newly hatched. Shakily, he blows the soil off its body; it seems all that has held it down is a thousand years of heavy earth, a thousand and a half? What sort of incubation is this? He uncovers the rest of the birds, blowing the dry earth off each of them in turn, laying them down as though into a cradle. Each is about three inches high, the size of his own thumb. The wings are held down, the eyes are open wide. The birds are positioned fully upright; the movements of the earth, the thinning of the pliant soil surrounding them, the seasons of rain and dryness, have not disturbed them, no hazard has made them fall. They emerge intact, according to how they were interred. Should he have uncovered them and held them to the sun, as he has, the miner wonders? Is that a sacrilege? He cannot undo his act of trespass, of transgression. He is a digger of soils. He has never been so close to splendor, to such perfect replication, he is unable to tell one bird from another. Here, on his palm, the trace of a human being enraptured by the notion of flight. Who was he? Soft, slippery, the touch of soapstone held against his skin. He tries to imagine the state of mind of a man who made over one hundred and fifty birds, and buried them, one by one. He looks about him; he searches for the footsteps of a dead man. He feels delirious. (excerpt from Yvonne Vera's *Obedience*)

The opening scene of Yvonne Vera's unpublished novel, *Obedience*, is a strange presentation of birds that do almost everything that birds conventionally do not. They do not migrate. They do not sing. They do not fly. They are not alive in any ordinary ornithological sense. They are sculptures, archaeological objects, buried things. And yet Vera's language makes it difficult to think of them simply as objects. They are 'newly hatched.' They have been 'incubating.' The miner places them in 'a cradle.' He wonders whether bringing them into sunlight was a sacrilege. He tries to imagine the human being who made them, and who buried them.

In this evocation, the birds seem to have survived not simply as objects or things, but as beings that have crossed a temporal threshold. We're here witnessing a flock, each bird does not look like the other. What happens, then, if we encounter birds emerging from the earth, not the sky? This is the question I want to begin with. I am interested in what these buried birds might tell us about the categories through which we learn to understand birds: animal and object, nature and culture, living being and archaeological artifact, species and symbol. And I want to ask what happens when we place Vera's literary birds alongside the historical Zimbabwe Birds 'found' and 'discovered' at the Great Zimbabwe site by colonial explorers, especially their complicated history of removal, circulation, and return. What does it mean to

read birds from an archive, to read sculptures of birds, and to encounter a bird that has itself travelled through the colonial world?

The movement between literature and sculpture is not incidental here. It was Vera's preoccupation all along from the beginning of her career. Her first book is a question: *Why don't we carve other animals?* In *Obedience* we're invited to follow the birds across different forms of historical survival. They are then transported across borders, displayed in museums in South Africa and Europe, transformed into a symbol of power, and, in recent decades, those same birds were brought back to Zimbabwe. The bird that cannot fly in stone nevertheless acquires a history of extraordinary movement. The Zimbabwe birds from Great Zimbabwe have moved between earth, archive, museum, and back toward the place from which they were taken. Their history is therefore not simply the history of an object. It is the history of a relation, what the bird does as it moves between worlds.

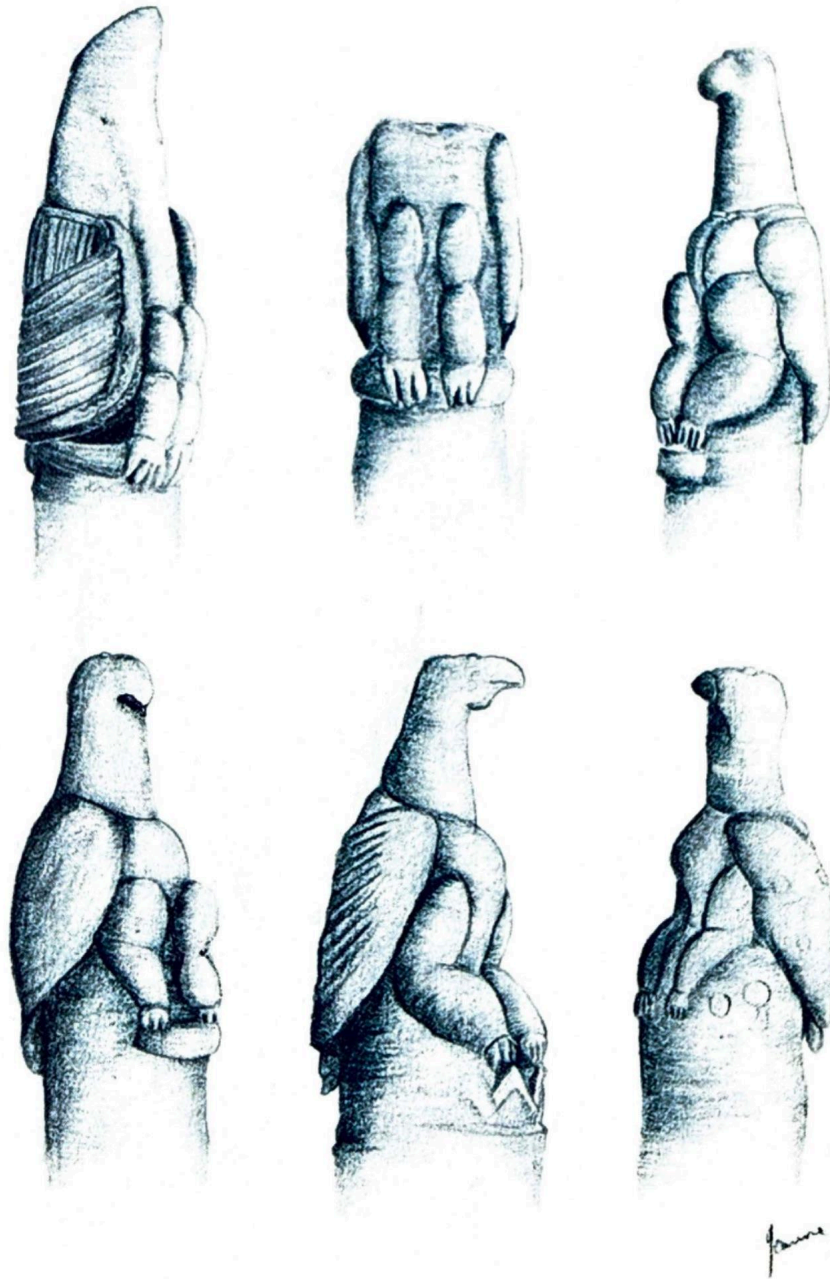
The archaeological object does not simply provide access to the past. It produces an encounter with the unknowable. This is what fascinates Vera. The miner cannot tell whether the birds are fish eagles or bateleur eagles. He cannot tell one from another. He cannot know why they were buried. He cannot know the sculptor. Zakes Mda's *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* offers an interesting literary companion here, precisely because Mda's novel also places the sculptor and the act of making at the centre of a precolonial southern African world. Mda's novel asks questions about artistic creation, imitation, imagination, and the relationship between art and social identity. The connection I am trying to make here is not that Mda explains Vera's birds, but that both works resist treating African sculpture as merely archaeological evidence detached from the imaginative and social worlds that produced it.

The miner in *Obedience* cannot even be sure that bringing them into sunlight was permissible. Instead, he asks: 'Who was he?' This is an extraordinary question because the miner moves immediately from object to the maker, from material evidence to imagination. The bird becomes a trace of another human being. He tries to imagine the state of mind of someone who made more than one hundred and fifty birds. Vera therefore gives us archaeology that does not end in knowledge. I suppose that Stacy Hardy's *An Archaeology of Holes* offers a suggestive contemporary literary metaphor. Hardy describes archaeology through holes in bodies, ransacked earth, erased lives and memories. I am not suggesting a direct influence, but the phrase helps articulate what Vera's excavation does: the hole is not

simply a route into the past; it is also evidence of what has been removed, lost, or made inaccessible. As such, *Obedience* begins in uncertainty.

The birds are evidence, but they are not transparent evidence. They do not tell us everything about themselves. They resist the desire to turn the past into an intelligible sequence of facts. This is particularly significant because *Obedience* itself is concerned with the relationship between history and excavation. Historically, for example, scholarship generally identifies eight Zimbabwe Birds that were removed from the Great Zimbabwe site in the 1890s. The historical record, however, is complicated by removal, fragmentation and incomplete documentation because we only know the number of the objects that could be traced as they moved, as they passed from one person to another, as they nest in different places. It is against that relatively small and uncertain number that Vera gives us more. The multiplication changes the scale of the encounter. Eight birds can become a collection, a finite archaeological category. One hundred and fifty becomes something closer to a population, a swarm, a multitude. The number exceeds the logic of the museum catalogue. It also makes the miner's discovery feel less like a single sacred emblem and more like the opening of an entire buried world.

The opening date, 1890, is therefore not incidental. It places Vera's fictional excavation at the threshold of colonial occupation, precisely when Great Zimbabwe was being drawn into European systems of exploration, archaeology, collecting, and imperial fantasy. The argument is that the majestic stone town is not designed and dreamed by the local natives but a misplaced civilization left behind by some biblical people, or travellers from the Middle East. Vera's miner enters this complicated history as a strange figure. We are not told who he is, we are not told his name, we're not told where he is coming from, we just meet him there looking at the spectacular flock of birds. He does not seem to possess the confidence of the colonial archaeologist. He cannot classify what he has found. His uncertainty becomes an alternative to the classificatory impulse of colonial archaeology. This becomes even more striking when we place Vera's fictional excavation beside the actual history of the Great Zimbabwe Birds.



Sketches of the Zimbabwe Birds discovered in the 1890s

The so-called Zimbabwe Birds are among Great Zimbabwe's most famous surviving objects. Their exact meaning remains debated, but scholarship has connected them to spiritual and ancestral meanings and, particularly, to the figure of chapungu, the bateleur eagle. They are also strikingly unbirdlike: their legs, bodies, necks, and beaks do not simply reproduce an ornithological specimen. They occupy a space between recognizable animal form and something more composite and supernatural. The birds are not simply representations of

birds. They are soapstone birds from a site whose monumental identity is itself inseparable from stone. Great Zimbabwe is famous for its massive dry-stone architecture. The birds therefore participate materially in the same broader world of stone-making. The choice of soapstone is interesting because it is a soft rock that could easily be carved into a form that resembles a living creature. Stone also gives the carved bird some weight, some permanence and duration. This makes the relationship between bird and stone especially important. The bird is a creature associated with flight, movement and the air, but it has been made out of a material associated with endurance, weight and the earth.

The Great Zimbabwe site was already understood locally as a sacred landscape in the nineteenth century, but accounts of its desecration are dominating the discourse. The archaeological excavation of the site was therefore never simply the neutral recovery of a vanished civilization. Excavation altered the relationship between objects and the place in which they had meaning. This is precisely why the history of the Zimbabwe Birds matters to Vera's fictional scene. The miner is not simply an archaeologist. He is a participant in an ethical problem. He is holding something that may be beautiful, but beauty does not erase the possibility of violation.

In an interview about *Nehanda*, her first novel, Vera described her writing as a form of remembering that exceeded conventional historical records. She said:

Nehanda (published 1993) was my first novel, and it came out of me almost like a dream. It has the feeling of a dream when I look at it now. And that suited it, because it concerned a myth, a legend. It was a story of spirituality, of ancestors, a mystic consciousness and a history... so it was much better to write it almost intuitively, out of my consciousness of being African, as though I were myself a spirit medium, and I was just transferring or conveying the feelings, symbols and images of that. I wrote it at a time when I could write it, the way one might write a folk-song. Today I would probably spoil it. I wrote it from remembrance, as a witness of my own spiritual history. By history, I simply mean a record. I felt I had an internal, intimate knowledge of our ancestors, and how they impact on our relationship with ourselves, to death, to life, to time, to sky, to rock... I had just become aware that I understood this, but somehow it wasn't anywhere in a book where I could read it, and I didn't know why, except maybe the knowledge had become discredited by other ways of

seeing. History begins in 1896 when the Europeans came here, and it continues like this... because as Africans, our history is there to serve us, not us to serve it. ... history is created in the mouth, and therefore survival is in the mouth.

The problem is not simply that colonial history got certain facts wrong. It is that colonial ways of knowing established which kinds of knowledge could count as history in the first place. Vera's birds exist precisely at that threshold. They are archaeological evidence, but they also resist just being merely evidence. They are sculptures that are also connected to ancestral worlds. They are objects that possess presence or force. And they are historical artifacts that have been made to carry enormous political meanings. The bird therefore becomes a problem for the archive because it is simultaneously too material and too elusive. The archive can tell us where the bird was found, who removed it, who purchased it, where it was displayed, and eventually where it was returned. But it cannot easily tell us what the bird knew, or what relations the bird made possible.

Great Zimbabwe is such a compelling place for Vera to return to in what became her final novel. It is almost the myth of myths about Zimbabwe. It is the archaeological site from which the modern nation takes its name, dzimba dzemabwe, house of stone. It is the site around which colonial fantasies about African incapacity were constructed. But Vera does something interesting before the bird becomes the Zimbabwe Bird. She returns it to the ground. Before the bird becomes an emblem, it is a thing beneath the earth. Before it becomes a political and national symbol, it is something whose meaning is uncertain. Before it becomes a museum object, it is held in a palm. Before it becomes a story of repatriation, it is a story of excavation. This may be why the opening of *Obedience* feels like an archaeological dream. Vera goes to the origin point of a national myth but does not begin with the nation. She begins with a bird.

In fact, the novel opens at the moment when the bird is about to enter the colonial archive. Vera gives us the bird before its history has hardened into categories. And she gives us many birds where history gives us only a small number. The multiplication is important. The eight historical birds are singular, countable, and museumable. Vera's more than one hundred and fifty birds begin to behave differently. They suggest abundance, replication, fertility, perhaps even a buried flock. Vera's birds multiply beyond the limits of the archaeological record.

There is therefore an important paradox at the centre of these stone birds. Historically, the Zimbabwe birds did what the birds in Vera's opening cannot do: they travelled. They travelled without wings. They were carried, transported and displayed on different perches. They moved from Great Zimbabwe to Cape Town, to London, to Berlin and other European cities. The birds were turned into museum objects and colonial possessions. And in recent years they have begun to travel back. This gives the birds another kind of migration. It is not the seasonal migration of an animal, and it is not voluntary. It is a history of forced movement, circulation and repatriation. The bird that is physically fixed in soapstone acquires a migratory history through human hands. These birds have therefore migrated historically even while remaining pieces of sculpture. And when they return to Zimbabwe, the return is not just a physical reversal. The birds carry with them the history of everywhere they have been.

This is where Bessie Head offers an unexpected companion to Vera's birds. Head writes of Botswana, her adopted country: 'The thing about Botswana is that it is a vast, semi-desert, and drought stricken land, and all through its history it attracted few settlers. A bit of ancient Africa was left almost intact to dream along in its own way. In South Africa the white man took even the air away from us, it was his air and his birds and his land. In Botswana, I have a little bird outside my window every morning. No one laid any particular claim to him, so I am able to confide, to the whole world, that he sings like this, and he sings like that, without some white man or woman snickering behind my ear: 'why, you people don't appreciate things like that!'

Head's bird is not an archaeological artifact. It is not a national emblem. It is simply a bird outside her window. And yet the simplicity of this everyday moment is politically charged. 'The white man took even the air away from us.' Head's sentence makes colonial possession extend beyond territory into atmosphere, animal life, perception itself. The bird outside her window marks a space that has not been completely enclosed by ownership. This gives us an interesting counterpoint to the Zimbabwe Bird that has been claimed repeatedly while remaining materially fixed.

The Zimbabwe Birds have survived through radically different forms of transmission. They survive as stone. As archaeological evidence. As museum objects. As photographs. As national emblems. As contested possessions. As returned artifacts. As literary images. As

stories. The bird survives by changing form, and by moving. The stone itself does not change. What changes is the relation around it. The Zimbabwe Bird has survived because it has repeatedly been made to signify something different depending on who is encountering it: sacred presence, archaeological evidence, colonial possession, national identity, cultural heritage, restitution, ancestral return. But the birds in Vera's story do something beyond just being symbols. They provoke touch. They provoke imagination. They provoke anxiety. They provoke questions about the dead. They provoke historical investigation. They provoke struggles over ownership. They provoke acts of return. Their significance lies partly in their capacity to generate relations.

What does it mean to lift a bird made to endure in stone out of the earth that has held it? What does it mean to separate the carved bird from its enclosure, from Great Zimbabwe itself? The colonial history of the Zimbabwe Birds repeatedly turns a relation between bird, stone, site and community into a portable object. The material contradiction is striking: the bird is made from stone precisely so that it can endure, yet the history of its endurance has depended upon its movement.

The bird moves because someone carries it. It moves because someone steals it. It moves because someone collects it. It moves because someone returns it. Vera's multiplication of the birds into a flock prevents the birds from settling too comfortably into the category of the museum object. The colonial museum wants to count, and to catalogue. Vera gives us birds that exceed counting. They are sculptures that have histories of migration. Their movement unsettles the colonial museum's attempt to fix them in place, turning the collected object back into something that carries histories of movement, possession, and displacement.