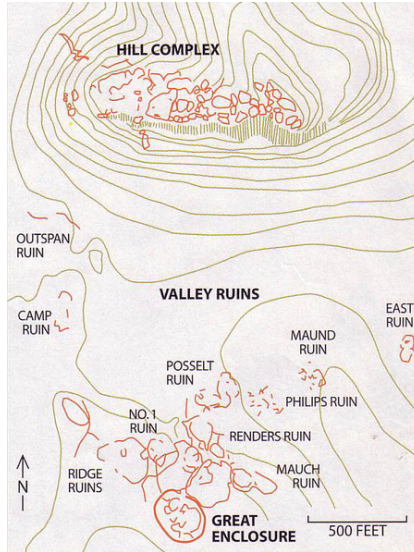


# H.P. LOVECRAFT AND GREAT ZIMBABWE

**F**rom December 1925 the horror author H. P. Lovecraft added the hilltop stone ruins at Great Zimbabwe to his pantheon of weird places. Later, in 1929, he wrote a long weird poem set there. Great Zimbabwe was a large African medieval trading town of about 18,000 people, and in its heyday would have been the major centre in its region. It once controlled a richly productive gold-mining and refining plateau, located a safe 200 miles inland from the great Arab trading cities of the East Coast of Africa. This ancient site is most noted for its carefully laid and tall stone masonry work, built without mortar by using small local slabs and the dry-stone wall method — the stone type found in the area is such that it virtually forms ready-made bricks and slabs. The main remains are of an elite hilltop structure made of this stone, divided between a palace and a sacred area of unknown use, plus two curious conical Arabian-like solid stone towers. Intense attention was given by the builders to their site's defensibility, using defensive architecture of the type recognized as standard by military experts. Around a dozen large stylized carved stone bird sculptures were found on the temple site, probably representing eagles. Strong evidence of gold refining was found in subterranean chambers under the hill ruins, including crucibles still containing flecks of gold. The site was completely abandoned in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, probably due the water-table making it impossible to add any further depth to the area's exhausted gold mines. After its fall, the hilltop site was greatly feared by the locals until found by a western 'big-game hunter' in 1870 — by which time it was almost wholly overgrown with immense trees and vegetation.

The site is still essentially a mystery. The mystery has been amplified by the site's hopeless politicization over the last 120 years, something continued today by Zimbabwean socialist nationalists and by western advocates of lost African-led civilizations. Carbon dating has at least established a few firm dates. Wood shards found deep within the thick walls have given a sure date for the construction of major stonework at around the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century.



Topographic location map of the Great Zimbabwe site.

Some 300 other similar but smaller stone structures, using much the same construction techniques, can be found around the same plateau as the main site.<sup>1</sup> Few are as finished or as well-fashioned as the main site. When modern Imperialists arrived, none of the natives knew how to build in stone.

H.P. Lovecraft actually had a detailed account of visiting these very ruins, heard face-to-face from his friend Edward Lloyd Sechrist,<sup>2</sup> who visited

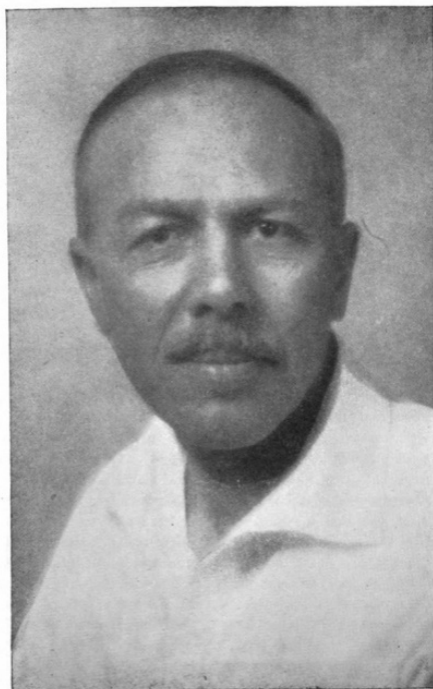
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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent short and even-handed survey of these see *The Zimbabwe-Monomotapa culture in southeast Africa* (1941), available in full on HathiTrust.

<sup>2</sup> According to the de Camp biography of Lovecraft, "Edward Lloyd Sechrist, an anthropologist of the Smithsonian Institution." This appears to be incorrect, although one wonders if he might have had a sideline in sending back notes on local folkways during his stays in exotic parts of the world. By 1940s he was actually one of the top U.S. authorities on bee-keeping and a commercial honey-farmer. The editor of *American Bee Journal* wrote of him, in 1944, that he was... "a commercial honey producer who has kept bees for profit under the four suns, California, Ohio,

Lovecraft in New York in mid December 1925 to tell of the experience. Predictably, Lovecraft could not attribute the building of these enigmatic stone ruins to native African builders. Like the early discoverers, he yearned for the site to have an origin in deep antiquity, preferably one that would make the site a mysterious outpost of a white race. In a letter Lovecraft sent to his aunt, about Sechrist's verbal account, he casually and briefly speculated about a variety of races from classical antiquity as the potential builders of those stone ruins — while ignoring the possibility of African masons. He specially noted Sechrist's observation of...

“...repairs [to the ruins over the centuries] showing less & less skill, as the white man faded and mixed with the black tribes”<sup>3</sup>



EDWARD LLOYD SECHRIST

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Maryland, Africa, Haiti, and Tahiti in the South Seas; long one of Uncle Sam's beekeeping aces in the Office of Bee Culture, Bureau of Entomology, United States Department of Agriculture; the first to study costs in relation to crops, locations and management.” At that time he had also been employed for a period in the U.S. Bee Culture Laboratories.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of 22<sup>nd</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> 1925, in *The Lovecraft Letters: Letters from New York*, p.256.

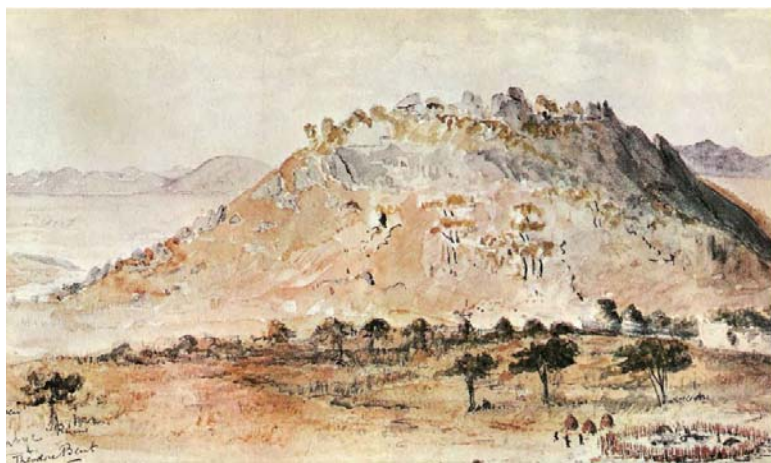
In this Lovecraft was simply following and confirming the ideas established by all white discoverers and excavators of the Zimbabwe ruins. The first serious authority on the ruins, J. Theodore Bent,<sup>4</sup> established that the fine stone fortification work marked the site as a probable Arabian trading fortress, at the centre of a large native African trading and gold refining settlement. The site was abandoned in the later 15th century, soon after the wider region's gold mines were played out, and in the early 1890s Bent had been the one who discovered the site engulfed in huge trees and rampant vines. Bent noted the apparent incorporation of astronomical features in the hilltop stone structures: the Arabian nature of the conical towers there; the regular occurrence of "points orientated to the [solstice] sun, and built on definite mathematical principles" as consistently surveyed in the architecture by his cartographer E.W.M. Swan. Also found during initial excavations were Chinese ceramics, Arabian glass with post-Islamic designs, and other Arabian and ceramic trade goods. He made the central and obvious point of asking how such a mature architectural style could suddenly appear out of nowhere, with absolutely no predecessors, to be followed by an equally obvious and consistent decay in the later workmanship. By 1902 Bent favoured the idea of several thousand members of... "a Semitic race and of [southern] Arabian origin" of "strongly commercial" traders living in and around the palace district perched above a client African tribe. Bent had recently travelled for about five years through Southern Arabia and Persia, so might have been primed to see the link with the Zimbabwe—Southern Arabia trade routes that are known to have been established by sea in the 10<sup>th</sup>-11th century if not much earlier.

But, like Lovecraft, J. Theodore Bent obviously yearned for more fanciful possibilities that would establish a deeper antiquity for the site. He therefore refused to consider that the walls could have been built quite late in the medieval period, although he acknowledged a later medieval Arabic trading outpost there. He even admitted the possibility of African stone

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<sup>4</sup> J. Theodore Bent, *The ruined cities of Masbonaland*, Longmans, 1902. Third edition.

construction, in passing. But only in terms of ancient Arab traders having trained the locals in the basics of stone masonry, and then the locals building as they saw fit. It seems that Bent's clinging to his earlier speculations — of Phoenicians, Egyptians, Sabeans from the Yemen, and speculations on the geometry and stellar orientation of the site — caused him to be increasingly questioned by other scholars. His illness and then death in 1897 left him unable to defend his ideas or to challenge younger colleagues, who wanted a medieval date for the fortress. As a consequence the 1911 *Britannica* (a favourite Lovecraft source) article on “Rhodesia: Archeology” strongly warned readers that Bent's *The ruined cities of Mashonaland* had been superseded, at least in terms of his wealth of initial speculative ideas. Interestingly the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* further noted, as evidence against any strong Arabic influence on Zimbabwe's stone architecture, the lack of an architectural attempt... “to solve the problems of supporting weight and pressure by the use of pillar, arch or beam”, the lack of any real masonry skill beyond that of very precise dry-stone walling aided by the nature of the stone, and also the lack of any stone aqueducts of a sort that a strong Arab influence might have brought to a very major gold mining and refining region. These points certainly undermined Bent's claims for any advanced application of mathematics and geometry at the site.



J. Theodore Bent's watercolour of the hilltop fortress at Great Zimbabwe, 1891. His summer excavation camp is seen in the bottom-right corner.

Yet Bent's account appears to be basically how the world and Lovecraft preferred to understand the Zimbabwe site in the mid 1920s.<sup>5</sup> Lovecraft's understanding probably also leaned heavily on Sechrist's initial conversational account of the ruins, a visit undertaken within a visitor framework of strong interpretation established by the Rhodesian authorities.<sup>6</sup> As far as I can tell the 'external origin theory' favoured in Rhodesia remained the orthodoxy for most of the 1920s, and especially so in South Africa and Britain, since there was no real evidence one way or the other. Admittedly Lovecraft's letter seems to imply he had not read too deeply about the site by 1925, perhaps not even a few half-remembered book reviews. This lack of wider reading on African history, and his race prejudice, thus allowed him to easily steer his idle speculations toward one of the classical Mediterranean peoples as the stone masons at Zimbabwe. Though interestingly he *doesn't* suggest Phoenicians as possible builders in his 1925 letter. So one wonders if he may have been warned off that especially ambitious early theory by talking and corresponding with Sechrist?

Perhaps Lovecraft then read up on the site while in New York in early 1926, since he had access there to the excellent public libraries. In that way he may have learned more of one of Bent's initial theories, that of a Phoenician outpost — and mused on its fictional possibilities. I suggest this because in one letter of late 1929 Lovecraft implies a slightly increased level of familiarity with the site, when he tells Moe of his new long poem...

“The Outpost” [26<sup>th</sup> November 1929], and the scene is the celebrated continent of Africa — in the days when great cities dotted the eastern coast, and smart Arab and Phoenician Kings reign'd within the walls of the great Zimbabwe”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Later buttressed by Richard Nicklin Hall's book *Great Zimbabwe, Mashonaland, Rhodesia; an account of two years' examination work in 1902-4* (1905).

<sup>6</sup> Rhodesia was efficiently British and run on racialist lines, suggesting the Anglophile Lovecraft might have favoured its approaches.

<sup>7</sup> *Selected Letters* III, p.55.

This statement might be taken as implying that Lovecraft knew enough to distinguish the early fanciful speculations about Phoenician traders (their status boosted to “Kings” by Lovecraft’s fertile racialist imagination) from the then-more-probable circumstance of a large medieval Arab outpost trading for gold and slaves, integrated into a local tribal centre. Also that he was aware there had been extensive coastal trade since antiquity. Evidently he preferred the more romantic Phoenician option, since he goes on in the letter to name the poem’s king as K’nath-Hothar, son of the...

“great King Zothar-Nin, was born in Sidon [Lebanon] of pure Phoenician stock”

Lovecraft’s poem names... “ancient Fishers from Outside”<sup>8</sup> as the monsters found lurking by K’nath-Hothar, a place the letter states is... “far, far in the interior” behind Great Zimbabwe. One wonders of it is possible that his setting of this... “swamp that serpents shun” arose from Sechrist’s account of the topography of the actual site at Great Zimbabwe...

“All around [Great] Zimbabwe is far too well watered to be pleasant; long stretches of unhealthy swamps fill up the valleys; rivers and streams are plentiful, and the vegetation consequently rich. Owing to the surrounding swamps we had much fever in our camp during our two months’ stay...”<sup>9</sup>

But it seems that Lovecraft actually had Uganda in mind. Since he used the “Fishers from Outside” again, circa summer 1932, in his “Winged Death” ‘revision’ story. In this he placed the “Fishers” *very* “far, far in the interior”. 600 miles north of Zimbabwe in British Uganda, indeed...

“The local blacks couldn’t be hired to come near the region after the talk of what had happened to Mevana. This jungle is a pestilential place— steaming with miasmatic vapours. All the lakes look stagnant. In one spot we came upon a trace of Cyclopean

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<sup>8</sup> Lin Carter later wrote a Mythos story of this title, in *Crypt of Cthulhu* #54.

<sup>9</sup> Bent, *The ruined cities of Masbonaland: being a record of excavation and exploration in 1891*, p.55.

ruins<sup>10</sup> which made even the Gallas run past in a wide circle. They say these megaliths are older than man, and that they used to be a haunt or outpost of “The Fishers from Outside”— whatever that means— and of the evil gods Tsadogwa and Clulu. To this day they are said to have a malign influence, and to be connected somehow with the devil-flies.”

As for Great Zimbabwe, I wonder if a reading of the “Mystic Zimbabwe” second chapter of Richard Nicklin Hall’s book *Great Zimbabwe* (1905) could have inspired Lovecraft, with its amply romantic and sensitive account of the nature of the site as seen in moonlight and at sunset, thus spurring the blazing sunset motif that opens and closes the Lovecraft poem “The Outpost”...

When evening cools the yellow stream,  
And shadows stalk the jungle’s ways,  
Zimbabwe’s palace flares ablaze  
For a great King who fears to dream.

Nicklin Hall’s vivid second chapter evokes and names, in passing, Rider Haggard’s famous adventure novel *She*. Lovecraft wrote to August Derleth in late October 1926 that he had...

“Recently begun reading the work of Sir H. Rider Haggard, for the first time. ‘She’ is very good, & if the others are all commensurate, I have a treat ahead [during his annual winter hermitage]”<sup>11</sup>

Then in late summer 1929 the modern archeologist Gertrude Caton-Thompson tried to pop the world’s romantic bubble around Great

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<sup>10</sup> Possibly Lovecraft had heard of the mysterious astronomical megalithic site at the south end of Lake Turkana, just over the border of Uganda into Kenya. “One site has an arrangement of nineteen basalt pillars oriented toward the same set of stars and constellations as those used by the Konso (Eastern Cushitic speakers) of southwest Ethiopia for calculating their calendar. This is the first archaeoastronomic megalithic site in sub-Saharan Africa. [it has] no accompanying grave goods. [and there are] no habitation sites in the Turkana area which are known to be contemporary [with it]” (from *The Archaeological and Linguistic Reconstruction of African History*, University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Given in S.T. Joshi, *Lovecraft’s Library* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), p.71. Letter dated 31<sup>st</sup> October 1926.



Zimbabwe. She publicly suggested the Zimbabwe walls were of local tribal Bantu origin. Caton-Thompson's claim of Bantu origin was met with skepticism and division in the wider academic community.<sup>12</sup> Her claims<sup>13</sup> had extensive press publicity, and provoked ferocious debates in the letter pages of newspapers such as the London *Times*.<sup>14</sup> One then wonders if Lovecraft was spurred to write his late 1929 poem "The Outpost" by reading of Caton-Thompson's claims made in summer 1929?<sup>15</sup>

Lovecraft's revision story "Medusa's Coil" (written summer 1930) also used Great Zimbabwe, albeit only in passing and as a rather ineffective bit of 'deep background'...

"The boy wrote me a good deal about him [from Paris], and I didn't see any especial harm when he spoke of the group of mystics Marsh [a decadent artist] ran with.<sup>16</sup> It seems there was some cult of prehistoric Egyptian and Carthaginian magic having a rage among the Bohemian element on the left bank—some nonsensical thing that pretended to reach back to forgotten sources of hidden truth in lost African civilisations—the great Zimbabwe, the dead Atlantean cities in the Hoggar region of the Sahara<sup>17</sup>—and that had a lot of gibberish connected with snakes and human hair."

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<sup>12</sup> At just twelve days with a three-person team, her excavations appear to have been remarkably short and also distinctly unproductive, which may have been a factor in her reception.

<sup>13</sup> By 1932 Caton-Thompson had modified her Bantu claim, accepting the possibility of the Arabic stylistic influence on the towers at the site, due to the site's established gold-trade connections with the Arabic coastal cities. She hedged with: "...Persian or Arab, gave the idea for the Conical Tower, easily enough executed by natives".

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed account of her reception see Henrika Kuklick, in *Colonial Situations: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> R. E. Howard's *Solomon Kane* tales, with their rich African horror settings, also began to get underway at this time, although his substantial use of Africa in these is not until "The Moon of Skulls" in June-July 1930. The Lovecraft-Howard correspondence did not start until August 1930. These facts suggest that "The Outpost" (26<sup>th</sup> November 1929) was not influenced in that manner.

<sup>16</sup> One wonders if this is an echo of Galpin's time as a student in Paris?

<sup>17</sup> Lovecraft refers here to the... "Discovery of a great Sahara Desert tomb treasure by the Count de Prorock-Beloit College expedition now near Mount Tamarraset of the Hoggar Mountains" (*Banta's Greek Exchange journal*, 1926) which was announced to the world by telegram in late 1925.

“All of you had better look out if ever I chant the old rites or try to call up what lies hidden in Yuggoth, Zimbabwe, and R’lyeh.”

If Lovecraft had lived, one wonders if he might have worked up “The Outpost” poem into a full Roman-era horror story in Great Zimbabwe. Since in his 19th December 1936 letter to Fritz Leiber Jr. he talked of his imaginative love of the idea of civilised...

“Roman navigators in strange & distant parts ... penetrating south into Africa beyond the mark set by Maternus,<sup>18</sup> skirting the Niger, threading through steaming jungles, fighting savages, pygmies, & apes, killing lions & rhinoceroses, & finally coming upon that Kingdom of Elder Horror whereof there survives today only the ruined masonry of the Great Zimbabwe”<sup>19</sup>

The late Lovecraft/Barlow poem “Beyond Zimbabwe” (23<sup>rd</sup> May 1934) is a slight effort, but seems to be set in the tribal re-occupation period, between the site’s 15<sup>th</sup> century abandonment and the late 1800s clearing of the jungle. This was the period Lovecraft had evoked in his letter of December 1925...

“Crude heaps of stone & obeah-altars<sup>20</sup> tell of the white man’s passing & the black’s long reign. The jungle had come back ... the Bantu’s chants and tom-toms sounded from afar...”

One even wonders if his 1935 *Commonplace Book* entry...

“214. Talking rock of Africa—immemorially ancient oracle in desolate jungle ruins that speaks with a voice out of the aeons.”

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It turned out to be the tomb complex of a 4th-century Tuareg desert matriarch. Possibly Lovecraft intends the educated weird reader to scoff at the silly French bohemians who believe that the watery Atlantis was located 800 miles due south of the Mediterranean coast, deep in their Algerian desert (France was the colonial power running Algeria as effectively a French province).

<sup>18</sup> Julius Maternus (c. 25-50 B.C.) He appears to have ventured as far south as Lake Chad.

<sup>19</sup> *Fritz Leiber and H.P. Lovecraft: Writers of the Dark*, p.47. Possibly this idea was influenced by reading the likes of Robert E. Howard’s “Red Shadows” (August 1928 in *Weird Tales*).

<sup>20</sup> This word may further indicate Lovecraft’s hazy understanding of the site. Obeah is a West Indian slave magic belief and is derived from West Africa.

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... could also have also eventually contributed to a Lovecraft story set in Zimbabwe.

Finally, one can perhaps see a transfigured and partial use of Great Zimbabwe in Lovecraft's most famous ruined stone city, depicted in *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931). Admittedly Lovecraft himself compares the ruins, in the *Mountains of Madness* text, to a wide variety of similar real structures. But there are many points of close comparison. Like Zimbabwe, the city found in *Mountains of Madness* is on... "a high continental plateau". There is an initial broad similarity to the sparse and only decoration at Zimbabwe... "With the field glass we could barely make out [from the air] what seemed to be sculptural decorations in horizontal bands". There are "pylons" in *Mountains* that recall the tall thin megaliths at Zimbabwe... "The headlands at the stream's entrance had been boldly carved into Cyclopean pylons", though Lovecraft's narrator probably had Ancient Egyptian pylons vaguely in mind, which have a somewhat different size and shape. Like Zimbabwe, the stone is laid without mortar... "mortar-less Cyclopean masonry". Like Zimbabwe, mysterious cones are prominent... "There were geometrical forms for which an Euclid would scarcely find a name — cones of all degrees of irregularity and truncation". Like Zimbabwe the engineering principles of the *Mountains of Madness* city are obscure... "We cannot yet explain the engineering principles used in the anomalous balancing and adjustment of the vast rock masses". Though Lovecraft does note "arches" in the city, early in the tale, so as not to have his educated readers imagine the ruins were made by a barbarian race who had no mathematics. Zimbabwe's almost paranoid defensive layout and extreme fortification suggests extreme fear among the original inhabitants, and this too is reflected in *Mountains of Madness* ...

"the denizens of that city had themselves known the clutch of oppressive terror".

As was thought to occur at Zimbabwe, there was a training of slaves in stone work...

“These [Old Ones] workers brought with them all that was necessary to establish the new venture [a “new sea-cavern city”] — Shoggoth tissue from which to breed stone lifters ... The newly bred Shoggoths grew to enormous size and singular intelligence, and were represented [in the wall carvings] as taking and executing orders with marvelous quickness.”

Like Zimbabwe there is a well-preserved conical stone tower in the *Mountains of Madness* city, of a shape that recalls those of the classical world...

“But the salient object of the place was the titanic stone ramp which, eluding the archways by a sharp turn outward into the open floor, wound spirally up the stupendous cylindrical wall like an inside counterpart of those once climbing outside the monstrous towers or ziggurats of antique Babylon. ... Pabodie might have been able to tell what sort of engineering held it in place, but Danforth and I could merely admire and marvel. ... The thing was excellently preserved up to the present top of the tower— a highly remarkable circumstance in view of its exposure”.

Finally, again like Zimbabwe, there is the evidence of the obvious and rapid decline in the ability of the masons...

“in this deeper section beyond the cavern, there was a sudden difference wholly transcending explanation — a difference in basic nature as well as in mere quality, and involving so profound and calamitous a degradation of skill that nothing in the hitherto observed rate of decline could have led one to expect it. This new and degenerate work was coarse, bold, and wholly lacking in delicacy of detail. ... seemingly more like a parody than a perpetuation of that tradition”.