

## **Note on Hitherto Unpublished Data on the Tati Ruins, 1876**

***Rob S Burrett\****

Near Old Tati 60 kilometres southeast of Francistown there are several dry-stone ruins associated with the ancestral Kalanga and the Butua State (van Waarden 1998:139). The purpose of this short and intentionally descriptive note is to introduce two hitherto unpublished sketches of these ruins in the hope that they may be of some interest to those studying this aspect of Botswana's early history. They are preserved in the field sketchbooks of the Czech traveller Emil Holub, now housed in Náprstek Museum in Prague, Czech Republic.

Given his interest in matters archaeological, Holub spent some time exploring these ruins as well as the nearby precolonial gold workings while visiting Tati in 1876. The description that follows is freely translated from Czech. It differs somewhat from the more widely circulated English edition (Holub 1881). This inconsistency was noticed while visiting the site in 2005 with the then Czech Ambassador, Jaroslav Olša Jr. The English version did not make sense on the ground and we assume that the original translator did not grasp fully what was being described by Holub. This translation (from Holub 1880-81:II: 444-445) is presented to assist future researchers:

I went to the hills the next day and saw a number of pits, some fifty feet deep, that had been made by the miners in their search for gold. On one hill to the north, contiguous to the slope of the Tati Valley, I saw a ruin consisting of the remains of a wall that formed a rampart around the hilltop. A second enclosure, three times its size and a little lower down was adjacent to the next knoll. The walls were over three feet thick, and, like those I had seen previously [the Vukwe Ruin northeast of Francistown. Holub called these the Shasha Ruin], they were made of stones; in this case blocks of iron-mica, piled together without cement. On the inside it could be seen how the erection was made of oblong lumps of various dimensions, but outside, probably with some view to symmetry and decoration, there had been inserted double rows of stone hewn into a kind of tile and placed obliquely one row at right angles to the other.

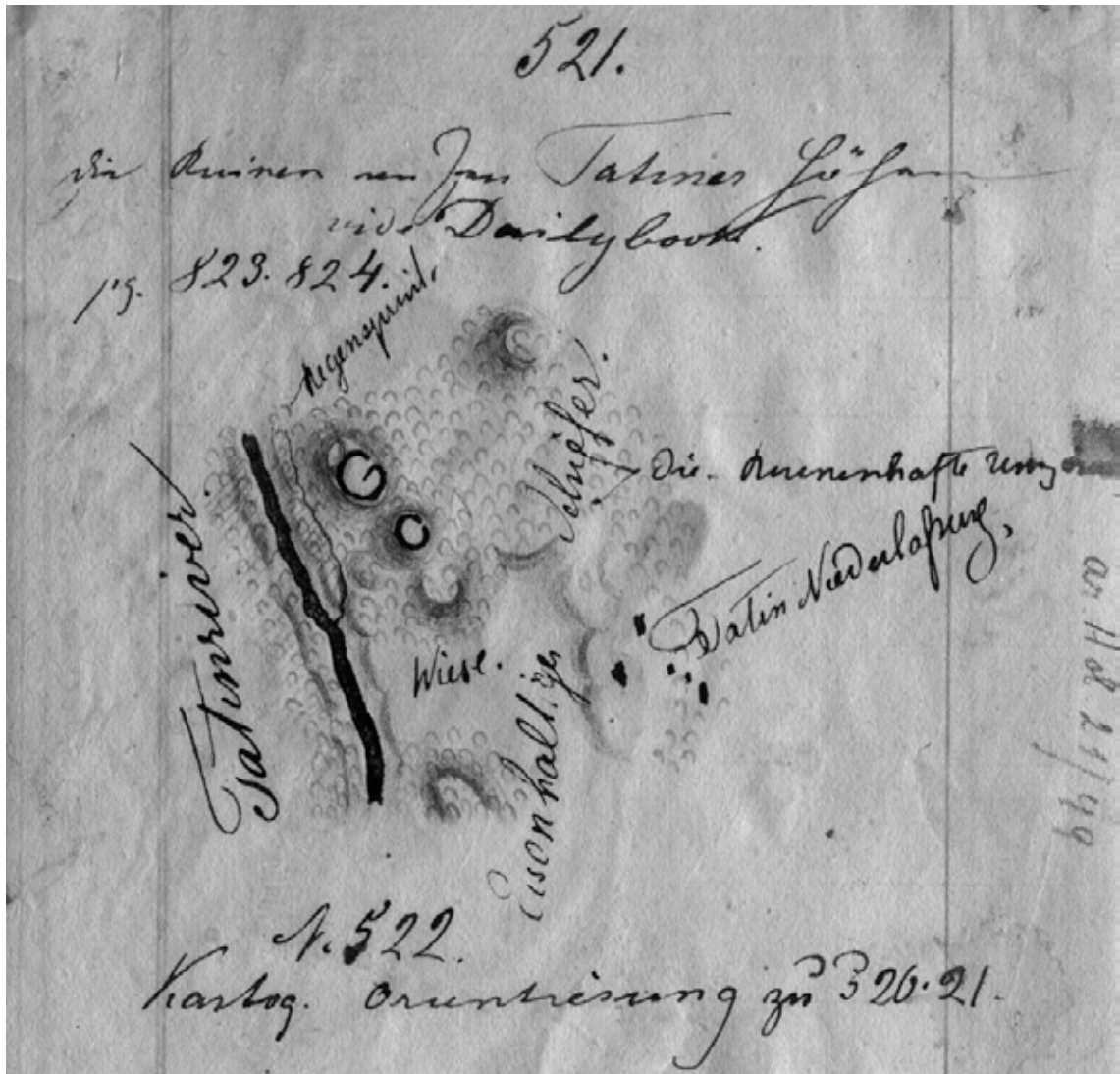
Each enclosure had an entrance facing north, that of the largest being protected by the wall on the right projecting slightly outwards, whilst on the left it curved inwards towards the centre. Altogether the resemblance between these ruins and those we had seen previously on the Shasha [Shashe] was striking. To my mind the building of these walls was originally in some way associated with the gold that was to be found in the locality, but I must look for a future visit, in which I may be able to make such investigations so to settle whether they were erected by the Mashonas in the east or by the people of Monomotapa.

Figure 1 is Holub's original sketch map. It conforms to that described by van Waarden (1999:32). The smaller, eastern ruin is on the crest of a rocky knoll. West of this, slightly lower in a saddle is a much larger circular enclosure approximately 50 metres across. Its walls are better preserved and are decorated around the outer face. On the southwestern face there are several lines of non-adjacent herringbone and chord decoration. A section was described by Holub and is illustrated in the Czech edition of his book, although not in the German, French nor English versions. His original field sketches of a section of this decoration are given in Figure 2.

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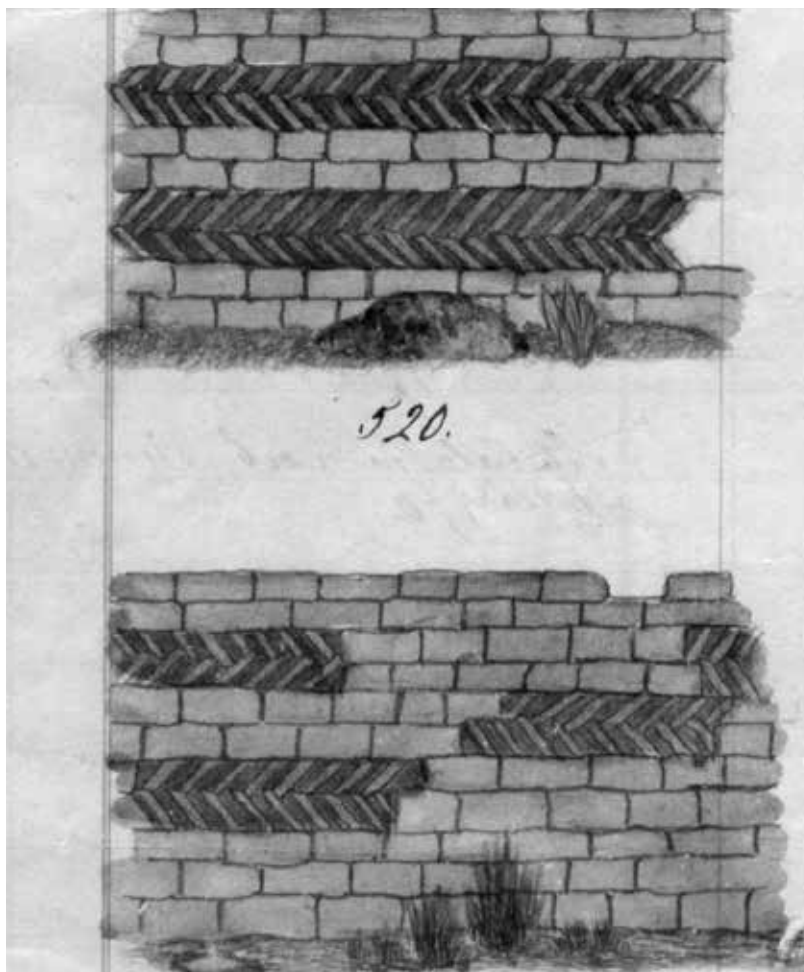
Figure 1: Holub's original sketch map of the Tati Ruins, 1876 (Náprstek Museum Prague)



Holub was the first early traveller who visited any of the Zimbabwe-type ruins who had a background in archaeology. His training and an eye for ethnographic detail saw him coming to conclusions markedly different to most European travellers of the time. He grasped the indigenous origin of the ruins, without having fanciful visions of Sheba and other mythical ‘lost and exotic empires’. He may not have known the exact details of its Kalanga history, but Holub was able to celebrate this local heritage for what it was.

It is a pity that he never returned to Tati to undertake additional research. It is also unfortunate that additional notes made on this, and other archaeological sites, have been lost. His personal papers in the Náprstek Museum would indicate that he indeed prepared something. There is a notebook cover with the German-language title ‘Notes on Archaeology of Southern Africa’, but the contents have been misplaced (Sklenář 1989). The search continues, but it seems appropriate to share at this time these preliminary notes and original sketches.

**Figure 2: Holub's original sketch of the decoration on the outer face of the larger Tati Ruin (Náprstek Museum, Prague)**



### References

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