

Great Zimbabwe

For centuries, this ancient Shona city stood at the hub of a vast trade network. The site has also been at the center of a bitter debate about African history and heritage

By [Webber Ndoro](#) on January 1, 2005

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Photograph by Jan Derk,

On the southern edge of the Zimbabwe plateau in the watershed between the Zambezi and the Limpopo rivers sits the largest and loveliest archaeological site in sub-Saharan Africa. With its high conical tower, its long, curved stone walls and its cosmopolitan artifacts, Great Zimbabwe attests to the existence of a thriving city that may have dominated trade and culture throughout southern Africa sometime between the 12th and 17th centuries. Its unique architecture and sculpture--particularly the enigmatic birds carved from soapstone--bespeak a rich history, one that archaeologists continue to piece together today. The country of Zimbabwe--formerly Rhodesia, until its independence from England in 1980--was named for this site.

Like many ancient cities, Great Zimbabwe has been shrouded by legend. In the 1500s Portuguese traders visiting Angola and Mozambique--where they established colonies--wrote of a kingdom in the interior of Africa. Their descriptions offered many Europeans the promise of King Solomons mines, for according to the Bible, Solomon would send to Ophir for his gold. In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton situates Ophir somewhere near the Congo and Angola. This powerful myth of the city of Ophir, populated by Semitic people, shaped the later cultural and historical interpretations of Great Zimbabwe. The fable is, in large part, the reason so many archaeological mysteries remain about the site. Because whereas the story of Great Zimbabwe is ultimately that of early Shona culture and the African Iron Age, it is also a tale of colonialism and of often shoddy, politically motivated archaeology.

Masterful Stonework

CONSTRUCTED BETWEEN 1100 and 1600, Great Zimbabwe seems not to have been designed around a central plan but rather to have been altered to fit its changing role and population. Its scale is far larger than that of similar regional sites--including Danamombe, Khami and Naletale (in Zimbabwe), Domboshaba and Majande (in Botswana), Manikweni (in Mozambique) and Thulamela (in northern South Africa)--suggesting that Great Zimbabwe was the areas economic and political center. Because it is situated on the shortest route between the northern gold fields, where inland rivers were panned for the precious metal, and the Indian Ocean, the rulers of Great Zimbabwe most likely regulated the thriving medieval gold trade.

Great Zimbabwe covers 1,779 acres, and the central area comprises three main built-up areas: the Hill Complex, the Great Enclosure and the smaller Valley Ruins. The Hill Complex, dubbed the Acropolis by Europeans, forms the oldest part of the site; evidence

hints that farmers or hunters may have encamped there as early as the fifth century. From its position on the rocky, 262-foot-high hill, the Hill Complex's oval enclosure--about 328 feet long and 148 feet wide--would have allowed its inhabitants to see potential invaders. The outer wall, which stands nearly 37 feet high, would also have afforded good protection. Inside the walls, as inside all the other enclosures, stand *daga* houses, curved, hutlike structures made of Africa's most common building material: dried earth, mud and gravel. Below the Hill Complex sits the most stunning of Great Zimbabwe's structures, the Great Enclosure, or Elliptical Building. Called *Imbahuru*, meaning "the house of the great woman" or "the great house," by the Karanga-speaking people who lived there during the 19th century, the Great Enclosure was built at the height of Great Zimbabwe's power. (Karanga is the most common dialect of Shona and is spoken by the inhabitants of south-central Zimbabwe.) The enclosing wall is 800 feet long and stands 32 feet high at some places; an estimated one million blocks were used in its construction. An inner wall runs along part of the outer wall, creating a narrow, 180-foot-long passageway.

The function of the Great Enclosure is not known, although it is thought to have served as a royal palace. Because of the presence of grooves in the walls (perhaps representing the female anatomy) and of phallic structures, some historians have postulated that the compound was used for adolescent initiation rites or for other important ceremonies. It may have also housed the many wives of the ruler. The great conical tower, which stands 30 feet high and is 18 feet in diameter at the base, appears not to have been used for any particular purpose and may have served a merely symbolic function.

In addition to the Hill Complex and the Great Enclosure, Great Zimbabwe is made up of the smaller Valley Ruins. This series of compounds stands in the valley between the two larger structures. The walls seem to be youngest here, suggesting that these structures were built as the population expanded and Great Zimbabwe needed more residential space.

Great Zimbabwe is unusual not only in its size but in its stonework. Many of the structures are made of rectangular blocks cut from nearby granite outcroppings. The city's name derives from the Shona term *dzimbabwe*, meaning "houses of stone." The blocks, set in layers without mortar, form stable free-standing, curved walls that are often about twice as high as they are wide. Although round, buttress-like structures rest along the base of many walls, they have no supportive role. Some archaeologists speculate that these curved extensions may have served to soften the approach to a doorway, or to have made passageways more complicated to navigate or perhaps even to have hidden rooms from direct view. They also may have served to control access to some areas, because people could have moved into the area in single file only.

The stonework is, in certain places, astonishingly sophisticated: rounded steps grace some of the entrances, and chevron designs decorate some of the walls. The walls are also punctuated by drains and occasionally by four-foot-wide doorways, some of which had wood lintels.

A Mysterious Culture

OUR KNOWLEDGE of the people of Great Zimbabwe is complemented by what we know about the site of Mapungubwe, which appears to have been the center of Shona civilization

around 1000. The largest Mapungubwe settlements, found in the Shashi-Limpopo area, are very similar to Great Zimbabwe. Wealth was apparently based on cattle production, ivory trade and gold. The Mapungubwe culture spread into western parts of Zimbabwe as the presence of Leopards Kopje pottery (in Mapungubwe style) attests. With the rise of Great Zimbabwe, it appears that trade shifted and Mapungubwe declined as an important center, becoming abandoned just as Great Zimbabwe prospered.

Artifacts unearthed at Great Zimbabwe have pointed to the social and cultural organization of the settlement, and they have distinguished it from other Iron Age sites. In particular, a group of soapstone birds, many of them 14 inches high and sitting atop three-foot-tall columns, is unlike any sculpture found elsewhere. Each bird has a different pattern or marking; none is identifiable as a local creature. Because of the regard contemporary Shona people hold for their dead and because some Shona tribes use iron rods to mark tallies of their dead, some archaeologists have speculated that the avian icons indicate aggregates of ancestors used in rituals.

Other artifacts indicate that Great Zimbabwe was well established as a trading community by the 14th century. Objects from distant lands made their way to Great Zimbabwe: Syrian glass, Chinese celadon dishes (mostly from the Ming Dynasty, 1368 to 1644), Persian faience bowls, coral, bronze bells and an iron spoon--a utensil not used by the Shona. There is no blue-and-white Chinese porcelain, which became widespread during the mid-15th century; its absence suggests that Great Zimbabwe's economic importance was less by that time. Indeed, it does appear that the site was largely empty by 1700.

There are several reasons Great Zimbabwe may have been abandoned. By the late 1600s the northern rivers had been panned clean, and the gold trade began to move west. No longer centrally located, the city may not have been able to thrive when revenue and trade dried up. Another possibility is that the population became unsustainable. By some estimates, Great Zimbabwe had between 10,000 and 17,000 residents at its peak--a population equivalent to that of medieval London. (Other estimates are more conservative, placing the populace at a maximum of 2,000.)

The area may have become devegetated as huge herds of cattle grazed it or as it was extensively farmed; recent environmental data suggest that a succession of severe droughts caused people to disperse. Or there may have been some other impetus, such as war, although there is no evidence besides minimal weaponry to support this argument. More archaeological clues, further digs at Great Zimbabwe and excavations at other Iron Age sites are needed to resolve the question of decline.

Plunder and Misappropriation

LARGELY ABANDONED for 200 years or so, Great Zimbabwe was probably used only irregularly for religious ceremonies--as it is again today--until the late 1800s. It was then that Europeans arrived, lured by visions of gold from King Solomon's mines, and it was then that the archaeological record became so damaged as to become largely indecipherable.

A German explorer, Karl Mauch, was first to arrive, in 1871. He befriended another German, Adam Render, who was living in the tribe of Chief Pika, a Karanga leader, and who led him to Great Zimbabwe. (Had he known the outcome, Render, who was married to two tribeswomen and well integrated, might have steered Mauch into the Zambezi River.) On seeing the ruins, Mauch concluded very quickly that Great Zimbabwe, whether or not it was Ophir, was most certainly not the handiwork of Africans. The stonework was too sophisticated, the culture too advanced. It looked to Mauch to be the result of Phoenician or Israelite settlers. A sample of wood from a lintel bolstered Mauch's rapid assessment: it smelled like his pencil; therefore, it was cedar and must have come from Lebanon.

Mauch's visit was followed by one from Willi Posselt, a looter, who lugged off a carved soapstone bird and hid others so he could return for them later. Posselt was followed by a series of visitors, some of whom worked for W. G. Neal of the Ancient Ruins Company, which had been created in 1895. Cecil Rhodes, founder of the British South Africa Company, gave Neal a commission to exploit all Rhodesian ruins. Neal and his rogues pillaged Great Zimbabwe and other Iron Age sites, taking gold and everything of value, tearing down structures and throwing away whatever was not valuable to them (pottery shards, pots, clay figurines).

The first official archaeologist to visit the site, James Theodore Bent from Britain, had added to the confusion in 1891 by digging around the conical tower in the Great Enclosure--thereby completely destroying the stratigraphy and making it impossible for later archaeologists to make sense of its age. Bent also threw away clay and metal artifacts, including Persian and Arab trade beads, as insignificant. The archaeologist concluded that Great Zimbabwe had been built by a local bastard race--bastards because their fathers must have been white invaders from the north--because, as Rhodes and most European settlers maintained, native Africans could never have constructed Great Zimbabwe themselves.

A 1902 report written by Neal and a journalist named Richard N. Hall reiterated Bent's conclusions: the architecture was clearly Phoenician or Arabian. This attitude was pervasive in colonialist Africa: the continent had no history, no sophistication; its people and tribes were unchanging, unable to develop, culturally barren.

Archaeologists who suggested otherwise were not well received. In 1905 David Randall-MacIver, an Egyptologist who had studied under the famous William Matthew Flinders Petrie, excavated at the site and uncovered artifacts very similar to the ones being used by Shona, or Karanga, people living in the vicinity. By turning to indigenous people for cultural clues and interpretation rather than just for labor, Randall-MacIver was indeed doing something unprecedented. Had any other investigators of the time drawn on the lore or knowledge of the local people, many of the questions about Great Zimbabwe might well have been answered.

The continuity of artifacts suggested to Randall-MacIver that the site had been built by people whose culture was similar. He also demonstrated that the Arab and Persian beads were no older than 14th or 15th century and thus did not date back to biblical times and King Solomon. And he argued that the stonework was not at all Arabic, because it was curved and

not arranged in geometric or symmetric patterns. Randall-MacIver concluded that native Africans had built Great Zimbabwe.

Two subsequent researchers held the same opinion. In 1926 J. F. Schofield reiterated Randall-MacIvers conclusions, and in 1929 Gertrude Caton-Thompson did the same. Her excavations of the undisturbed Maund Ruin--which lies at the opposite end of the valley from the Great Enclosure--again supported the theory of indigenous construction. Caton-Thompson's detailed drawings and careful stratigraphy have been crucial in piecing together what little is known about Great Zimbabwe.

Despite the mounting evidence and archaeological testimony, most European settlers in Rhodesia rejected the record. From 1965 until independence in 1980, the Rhodesian Front censored all books and other materials available on Great Zimbabwe. This party, established by then prime minister Ian Smith to prevent Africans from gaining power, was based on a system of apartheid. Archaeologists, such as the noted Peter S. Garlake, who were vocal about the native origin of Great Zimbabwe were imprisoned and eventually deported. Africans who took the same view lost their jobs. Displays at the site itself were censored as well, although it hardly mattered because they were in English, and locals were not allowed to use the premises for any ceremonies.

Reclaiming the Past

TODAY GREAT ZIMBABWE is a symbol of African cultural development. Popular books have made the monument somewhat more accessible to the people of Zimbabwe. Yet, at the same time, Great Zimbabwe remains largely inaccessible. Because of past archaeological mistakes, much of the history of the site is elusive. Given the condition of contemporary archaeology in southern Africa, there is little chance this will change soon.

The two archaeologists who are currently stationed at the site are responsible not only for the preservation of the decaying monument but for dealing with visitors and maintenance--and the 5,000 other sites that are under their jurisdiction as well (out of a total of 35,000 recorded sites in Zimbabwe). Although the ruins are protected by the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe and were designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, only two conservators and fewer than 10 archaeologists are available in Zimbabwe to study and look after all the archaeological sites, including Great Zimbabwe.

The situation in other sub-Saharan countries is no better. According to Pierre de Maret of the Free University of Brussels, less than \$150,000 is spent annually on archaeology in 10 sub-Saharan countries--and there are a mere 20 professional archaeologists among them. The sale of African objects abroad, however, reaches into the millions of dollars every year.

It is clear that cultural legacies are being lost as monuments decay and artifacts are taken out of the various countries. If contemporary cultures, fragmented and ruptured by centuries of colonialism, are going to be able to piece together and to reconnect with their severed past, archaeology will need to assume a more important place in African society. Great Zimbabwe is so important not simply because of its masterful masonry but because it is a cultural clue

that survived and has been reclaimed. Now it needs to be fully interpreted and placed within the larger context of sub-Saharan history, a context that still lies hidden.

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