

GREAT ZIMBABWE



Great Zimbabwe: A History Almost Forgotten

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MEANING: *The name "Zimbabwe" is variously translated from the Shona language to mean "sacred house," "venerated houses," "houses of stone," "ritual seat of the king," "court," or "home or grave of the chief."*

Political Background

The civilization of Great Zimbabwe was one of the most significant civilizations in the world during the Medieval period. European travelers from Germany, Portugal, and Britain were astonished to learn of this powerful African civilization in the interior of southern Africa. The first European to visit Great Zimbabwe was a German geologist, Carl Mauch, in 1871. Like others before him, Mauch refused to believe that indigenous Africans could have built such an extensive network of monuments made of granite stone. Thus, Mauch assumed that the Great Zimbabwe monuments were created by

biblical characters from the north: "I do not think that I am far wrong if I suppose that the ruin on the hill is a copy of Solomon's Temple on Mount Moriah and the building in the plain a copy of the palace where the Queen of Sheba lived during her visit to Solomon." Mauch further stated that a "civilized [read: white] nation must once have lived there."

Later Europeans also speculated that Great Zimbabwe was built by Portuguese travelers, Arabs, Chinese, or Persians. No consideration was given to the possibility of local indigenous Africans having built the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, because European writers generally agreed that Africans did not have the capacity to build anything of significance, particularly not monuments made with skilled stone masonry.

In 1890, British imperialist and colonizer Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902) conquered a large portion of southern African and had the region named after himself. Northern Rhodesia (modern Zambia) and Southern Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe) came under British control and Rhodes echoed the theme of Mauch as he argued that the Great Zimbabwe monuments were built by foreigners. To promote his goal of misrepresenting the origins of Zimbabwe, Rhodes established the Ancient Ruins Company and financed men such as James Theodore Bent, who was sent to Zimbabwe by the British Association of Science, and sponsored by Rhodes. After his investigation Bent concluded in his book, *Ruined Cities of Mashonaland* (1892), that items found within the Great Zimbabwe complex "proved" that the civilization was not built by local Africans.

In 1902, the British continued with their falsification agenda as British archaeologist Richard Hall was hired to investigate the Great Zimbabwe site. Hall asserted in his work, *The Ancient Ruins of Rhodesia* (1902), that the civilization was built by "more civilized races" than the Africans. He argued that the last phase of Great Zimbabwe was the transitional and "decadent period," a time when the foreign builders interbred with local Africans. Hall went out of his way to eliminate archeological evidence which would have proven an indigenous African origin of Great Zimbabwe. He removed about two meters deep of archeological remains, which effectively destroyed the evidence that would have established an indigenous African origin of the site. He condescendingly stated that his goal was to "remove the filth and decadence of Kaffir occupation."

In 1905, soon after Hall's destructive activity, British archeologist David Randall-Maclver studied the mud dwellings within the stone enclosures, and he became the first European researcher of the site to assert that the dwellings were "unquestionably African in every detail." After Maclver's assertion, which was almost equivalent to blasphemy to the British imperialists, archeologists were banned from the Zimbabwe site for almost 25 years!

It was in 1929 that British archeologist Gertrude Caton-Thompson led the first all-female excavation. Caton-Thompson investigated the site and was able to definitively argue in her work, *The Zimbabwe Culture: Ruins & Reactions* (1931), that the ruins were of African origin. She assessed the available archeological evidence (artifacts, nearby dwellings), and the oral tradition of the modern Shona-speaking people, and compared them to the ancient sites to determine the African foundation of Great Zimbabwe. Despite Caton-Thompson's conclusive evidence, the myth of a foreign origin of Great Zimbabwe continued for another half a century until Zimbabwe's independence in 1980.

Ian Smith was the last major British colonial figure to falsify evidence of Great Zimbabwe's origin. In November 1965, Smith had established a white minority government that declared its independence from the British homeland government, and thus this colony broke away from Britain to form an independent regime under Smith. Ian Smith became "prime minister" of Southern Rhodesia. He continued the colonial falsification of Great Zimbabwe's origins by developing a fake history and a policy of making sure that the official guide books for tourists would show images of Africans bowing down to foreign innovators, who allegedly built Great Zimbabwe. It was not until 1980 that the native Zimbabweans overthrew Smith's minority government and ended the colonial era. In that year, Robert Mugabe became president and the country was renamed "Zimbabwe," in honor of the Great Zimbabwe civilization of the past.



President Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe

This distortion of the history of Zimbabwe has had an enduring legacy. The colonial era (1890 – 1980) had a destructive impact on the daily lives of native Zimbabweans. Not only was their heritage stolen, but the best farmland and resources were also taken by British colonists. This 90 years of domination and oppressive colonial rule was fueled by the ideas of Cecil Rhodes, who had the greatest colonial scheme of any modern imperialist. Rhodes envisioned the British control of Africa from the Cape of Good Hope in the south to Cairo in the north, thus the slogan from “Cape to Cairo.” His goal was to colonize the entire African continent and “to paint the [African] map [British] red.”

Rhodes stated his colonial goals in his 1877 “Confession of Faith”:

“We know the size of the world we know the total extent. Africa is still lying ready for us it is our duty to take it. It is our duty to seize every opportunity of acquiring more territory and we should keep this one idea steadily before our eyes that more territory simply means more of the Anglo-Saxon race more of the best the most human, most honourable race the world possesses.”

http://husky1.stmarys.ca/~wmills/rhodes_confession.html

Unfortunately, despite Rhodes’ disastrous impact on the southern African region, he is buried (as he requested in his Will) in the peaceful area of Matopos National Park in Zimbabwe. The local Ndebele people call this area Malindidzimu (“the place of benevolent spirits”). However, there is a current effort to have Rhodes’ remains removed from the park. In 2004, Zimbabwe is under the control of native Africans, and President Mugabe has instituted a land reform policy to correct the crimes and theft of the past, as the philosophy of “one farmer – one farm” is part of this policy. Nonetheless, this equitable land redistribution program is predictably opposed by imperialists George Bush and Tony Blair, as well as by British settlers such as Ian Smith.



The Five Basic Historical Questions (5 BHQs) on Great Zimbabwe

The five Basic Historical Questions (5 BHQs) are a fundamental set of questions that should be used to summarize and analyze a culture or civilization. The answers to these questions put the civilization in historical context and this gives our research structure and meaning.

1. When Did the Civilization Begin (Time Period)?

The civilization of Great Zimbabwe reached its zenith from 1100–1450 AD, although local Shona-speaking farmers had settled in present-day Zimbabwe nearly a thousand years earlier.

2. Where Was the Civilization Located?

The location of Great Zimbabwe is in south central Africa, in current-day Zimbabwe, between the Zambezi (north) and Limpopo (south) rivers. The Great Zimbabwe site is situated on a high plateau, mostly over 1000 m. (3,250 ft.)

3. Why is the Civilization Important?

The Great Zimbabwe civilization is important for several reasons:

- The Zimbabwe site, featuring the Great Enclosure wall, is one of the most astounding regions with monuments in Africa, second only to the Nile Valley pyramid region. The ancient plan of Great Zimbabwe is in two parts: the hill complex and the valley complexes. The hill complex is where the king kept many of his treasures. Although he lived in the Imba Huru (or Great Enclosure) in the valley, he spent considerable ritual time on the hill. Several important enclosures exist within the hill complex. The principles ones are the ritual enclosure, the smelting enclosure and the iron-keeping enclosure. The valley complexes are dominated by the Imba Huru. The height of the main wall of the Imba Huru is about 32 feet, it is 800 feet long, and utilizes an amazing 15,000 tons of granite blocks. The impressive blocks were constructed without mortar. The building of this complex took skill, determination and industry, and thus the Imba Huru demonstrates a high level of administrative and social achievement by bringing together stone masons and other workers on a grand scale.

- The extensive trading network made Great Zimbabwe one of the most significant trading regions during the Medieval period. The main trading items were gold, iron, copper, tin, cattle, and also cowrie shells. Imported items included glassware from Syria, a minted coin from Kilwa, Tanzania, and Persian & Chinese ceramics from the 13-14th centuries.
- Great Zimbabwe was an important commercial and political center. In addition to being in the heart of an extensive commercial and trading network, the site was the center of a powerful political kingdom, which was under a central ruler for about 350 years (1100–1450 AD). The site is estimated to have contained perhaps 18,000 inhabitants, making it one of the largest cities of its day. The conclusion is inescapable that Great Zimbabwe had a condensed population sufficient for it to be considered a town, or even a city. However, many Western writers have attempted to reduce the significance of Great Zimbabwe by several methods: by estimating low population numbers (e.g. only 5,000 instead of 18,000 inhabitants); calling the dwellings “huts” instead of homes; calling the areas “villages” instead of towns or cities; and identifying the rulers as “chiefs” instead of kings. These writers are well aware that smallness means less significance.



4. How Did the Civilization Begin?

The Great Zimbabwe site was settled around 350 AD by Shona-speaking farmers, who migrated into this elevated plateau region to avoid the tsetse

flies, which can kill both people and cattle by causing “sleeping sickness.” The disease trypanosomiasis, or more commonly sleeping sickness, is transmitted by the various species of tsetse flies, which transmit the disease through their saliva. The Great Zimbabwe site was a safe haven high enough to avoid the flies, and this allowed the Shona-speaking migrants to farm and raise their cattle. Eventually, developments led to the formation of the Great Zimbabwe state at the end of the 11th century. Two general theories (technological innovations and intensified trading activities) have been advanced to explain the rise of the Zimbabwe state.

5. How Did the Civilization Decline?

Great Zimbabwe declined and was abandoned around 1450 AD for unknown reasons. The migrants left Zimbabwe and founded the northern kingdom of Monomotapa and other successor states. There has been much speculation about Zimbabwe’s decline as theories of its fall have ranged from over-farming, the population depleting the land resources, a drastic weather change, and a decline in the important gold trade. Further research will have to provide more information on this question.

Much of the wealth which remained at Great Zimbabwe was removed through the centuries by European explorers, treasure hunters, souvenir seekers, and plunderers such as Richard Hall. The site is but a shell of what it once was, as the artifacts were vandalized by these European groups and destroyed or hauled away by them and eventually sent to various museums throughout Europe, America, and South Africa. Today, there are about 20,000 tourists who visit the site each year and they continue to cause additional damage to the ruins, as these tourists climb the walls for thrills and to find souvenirs.

A Note On Sources

- **Written Sources:** There are no primary written documents available regarding Great Zimbabwe
- **Oral History:** The oral history of the local Shona-speaking people is a valuable source of information on Great Zimbabwe, particularly the information this history provides regarding spiritual beliefs and building traditions.
- **Archeological Evidence:** Most of the physical evidence of Zimbabwe’s history and significance is derived from archaeological evidence from nearby dwellings, and various items on site such as the trading items, daga

homes, granite walls, and soapstone figures of birds (which have become Zimbabwe's national bird and is part of the national flag). Modern Shona pottery has also been a key source of comparison and documentation.

Additional Sources:

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3. Peter Garlake, *Great Zimbabwe* (1973).
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5. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/israel/zimbabwe.html>

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