

Great Zimbabwe

The ancient ruins of Great Zimbabwe are to be found 150 miles from the present day capital city of Zimbabwe, Harare. The ruins are located 1,100 metres above sea level looking down on the Shashe-Limpopo river basin on the Harare Plateau. They also lie 300 miles south of the Zambezi River and 250 miles west of the Indian Ocean. The solid structures of Great Zimbabwe were built over quite a long period from approximately 1200 years AD to 1450 years AD. It is thought that Great Zimbabwe was ruled over by the Karanga people who are an off-shoot of the Shona people. Similarities exist between the ceramics produced by the Karanga and those which have been unearthed at the site of Great Zimbabwe. Other archaeologists and historians are of the opinion that the people who once lived in and around Great Zimbabwe might have originated from a community which came from Leopard's Kopje. This is about 100 miles from Great Zimbabwe and close to the city of Bulawayo. Traces of a wealthy iron age community have been discovered in this locality, where wealth and status was measured by the number of cattle one had.

These hill fortresses could have their roots in ancient communities. Such a community has been found in Northeast Zambia at the rock shelter of Makwe. This lies 130 miles northeast of Zumbo on the side of a hill 80 ft above swamp land and close to a southward flowing river. It was occupied between 4000 Years BC and 3000 Years BC. This was then reoccupied in the 1st Millennium AD and had a large entrance hall plus a main living area. A cave at the southern end of Great Zimbabwe fortress possessed acoustic properties which enabled one's voice to be carried right to the bottom of the valley. Maybe the ruling king spoke to his people from that cave and gave himself an air of mystique.

The historic site of Great Zimbabwe consists of 12 groups of buildings covering an area of 3 square miles. Its outer wall was constructed from 100,000 tons of granite bricks. At its height it was said to be a 14th Century walled city occupied by 18,000 people. In close proximity 4,000 gold mines were said to have existed and there were facilities for iron smelting and the manufacture of copper and bronze artifacts. Imports of stoneware and glazed dishes from China, coloured glass from the Near East and painted bowls from Persia have been found at the site. What European city in the 14th Century could boast of such wide trade links? The temple complex in the Central Enclosure was 35 ft high and in places 17 ft thick. The

circumference of the temple was 830 ft and the bricks were put in place without mortar. The floor was formed from powdered granite cement and drainage systems existed. The Great Western Enclosure covered an area of 11,000 square ft. It was a 5 sided irregular figure with tall walls on the inside built on top of high boulders. The West Wall at Great Zimbabwe is comprised of 6 conical stone turrets built at regular 12 ft spaces with large 5 ft 9 ins stone uprights placed between them. This construction has the widest summit of any known wall built in Africa with a width of between 12 ft to 14 and a half ft. The top could easily have been patrolled on foot and the original height probably was between 20 ft and 25 ft. The Western Enclosure could have been a guard house which was able to control all of the main entrances leading to the centre of the fortress. Troops lived within the complex. They held parades and conducted war dances. The earliest possible date for its construction was around 1190 AD. The Eastern Wall is said to represent the seat of authority. The Great Enclosure or Great Wall was 830 ft in circumference and its height varied from a height of 16 ft to that of 35 ft.

To build the Great Wall 1800 work days would have been required to quarry, transport and construct the 182,000 cubic ft of stone work of the Great Wall. With a workforce of 150 men the wall could have been built in a year. The building work seems void of geometric planning which is a unique aspect of this historical complex and makes it completely different from all other pre-historic buildings in existence. In the 270,000 miles of walls no mortar was used to secure the brickwork. The walls in Zimbabwe were uniform in shape, size and weight which gave each wall a regular finish. Each piece of stone was slightly larger than an average block of stone and were each cut to a deliberate size.

Small circular houses built inside and outside the perimeter wall had straw thatch roofs and were circular in design. Their 12 ins to 18 ins thick walls were made from 'daga', which was a mix of clay and gravel. Daga was also a material commonly used in the construction and making of objects such as fire places, beds and tables. The finish was a highly smooth glaze effect. These cottages had wooden beams and painted walls sometimes decorated with images of animals, birds or people. Some of the cottages had wooden, carved and ornate doors.

Peter Garlake a former inspector of monuments writes,

‘The daga structures in the ruins were in fact structural accomplishments of the same order as masonry walls. Yet fundamentally they are only developments and refinements of traditions that were almost ubiquitous in the cultures of this area and time. Both reflect a concern for appearance, ostentation, even luxury, achieved regardless of the cost in labour or material.’

The ruins of Great Zimbabwe represent just one of a large number of ruins spread over a terrain of 270,000 square miles found in this region. Ruins have been found in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Mozambique and the northern half of South Africa. There exist over 600 listed stone ruins in Zimbabwe between Zambezi River and Limpopo River. Across the border in South Africa there are over 7,500 ruins in the northern area of this country in the Transvaal and Orange Free State. Between 18,000 and 20,000 ruins are to be found in southern Africa alone which indicates that a developed culture existed. Some of these ruins are thought to be between 1,500 and 2,000 years old. In West Europe there only exist 4,000 monuments which are over 2,500 years old. With European occupation many of these existing ruins were severely damaged by people looking for treasures.

Gertrude Caton Thompson believed that the foundations of Great Zimbabwe could be found in the 8th and 9th Century. This fits in with the theories of the bead expert Horace Beck who saw similarities with South Indian and Malay beads of the same period. He believed that trade with India was the catalyst for the expansion and growth of Zimbabwean culture. Kathleen Kenyon who was Gertrude Thompson’s assistant is convinced that by the 10th Century a 4 way trade system existed which economically linked Africa, Arabia, India and China and that this has its origins in the expansion of Islam during the 7th Century. She was also convinced that the buildings at Great Zimbabwe were of African origin and not constructed by people from another continent. Links have also been established between the gold mines of Zimbabwe and the Indian goldfields of Kolar and Mysore by the historian Roger Summers. Great Zimbabwe may have developed as a direct result of the Arab gold trade. It is also thought that a link existed between Great Zimbabwe and the stone built city in the area of the Mysore gold mines in the south Indian kingdom of Vijayanagar.

At the site of Great Zimbabwe luxury items and glass beads from India have been found as well as pottery from China. Imported cloths and beads were used as a means to accumulate wealth and to build up ones prestige within the community.

Great Zimbabwe's sphere of influence covered a wide and expansive area between the Limpopo River and the Zambezi River and extending to areas within Mozambique and Botswana and the Transvaal region in the northern parts of South Africa. The remains of the palace of Great Zimbabwe were made out of granite. This rock can be sourced locally. Dry stone wall techniques were used in the construction of the building. Skilled masons would have been employed to put the walls in place while some of the building is formed out of the natural rock structures, a technique used in the building of the 11th Century rock churches in Ethiopia. The surrounding wall of the fortress like complex was 20 metres high. Its interior had a number of concentric passageways as well as a number of walled enclosures. Many gold and ceremonial battleaxes have been found on the historical site. There also was thought to have been a gold workshop and shrine which even today is seen as sacred to the people of Zimbabwe. Remains of stone buildings, a palace which was built on the hillside and the high walled great enclosure and low walled houses are still to be viewed.

It is thought that Great Zimbabwe started off as a hilltop settlement sometime around the beginning of the 13th Century. The hilltop itself could have held some kind of religious significance in the same way as Glastonbury Tor. It is quite possible that the Shona god, Mivan could have been worshipped at the site. The site of Great Zimbabwe also had a number of political and economic advantages. The actual land around Great Zimbabwe was rich and fertile and had access to water sources. Also it was strategically placed being situated at the beginning of the Sabi River valley which was placed halfway between the gold fields of the Western Plateau and the East African coast. Cattle were of great symbolic and economic importance and played a crucial role at the heart of the state's power.

The plateau was ideal for the rearing of cattle. There was suitable grass for grazing in the lowlands as well as in the uplands. There was plenty of wood available for firewood, building shelters and for the production of charcoal which was needed for iron smelting. Hunters were able to obtain ivory from the plentiful herds of elephants which roamed in the region. During this

period there was an expansion of the gold trade and the port of Sofala was built in order to cope with this increase. This could have comparisons with the rise of the English ports of Liverpool and Bristol which expanded as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the triangular trade between these ports and others where items such as glass beads were shipped out to Africa. The boats then sailed across the Atlantic to the Americas with a cargo of slaves and on the return journey to England their holds were filled with products such as sugar and rum. On the East African coast Swahili traders exchanged pottery and other luxury items for gold. At its height this Mivene-Mutapa Empire's spheres of influence went from the banks of the Zambezi River to the desert of the Kalahari on to the Indian Ocean and the Limpopo River. Also this period saw the early development of East African literature.

During the 14th Century it is estimated that 11,000 people inhabited this impressive dry stone wall city of Great Zimbabwe though some historians put this figure as high as 30,000 for people living in and around the outskirts of the city walls. Each stone was shaped to fit exactly with no mortar used. The Great Enclosure was constructed sometime between the 14th and the 15th Century and could have been built to enhance the prestige of the reigning monarch. Suddenly around the middle of the 15th Century the population left the buildings which comprise Great Zimbabwe. It is not known exactly what led to this exodus but quite possibly it could have been due to the over exploitation of the surrounding natural resources. The mass exodus could also have been caused by the inhabitants trying to maximize the profits which could be accrued from the highly lucrative gold trade. By the year 1500 AD the whole area had become totally depopulated. Today all that is left to remind one of this bygone era are the ruins of the buildings. Today the environment is still bare.

The gold mines were often worked by women and children. Shafts were sunk to a depth of 30 metres. Annual gold exports at their peak amounted to 1000 kilograms. Great Zimbabwe controlled this lucrative trade which peaked early in the 14th Century. This was during the same period when the port of Kilwa dominated the Sofala coast. Chinese, Persian and Islamic goods have been found at the site of Great Zimbabwe.

The Kingdom of Great Zimbabwe was replaced by the Mutapa Kingdom. This was Shona led and based at the head of the Mazoe River. During the

15th and 16th Century this Mutapa Kingdom controlled the regional slave trade which existed between the high plateau area, the Zambezi River and the Swahili towns of Sena and Tete. The Mutapa people successfully resisted armed interventions by the Portuguese right up until the middle of the 17th Century. To the west of the plateau the kingdom of Torwa or Butua was formed in the 15th Century. At its main city of Khami, stone walls similar to that found at Great Zimbabwe were constructed. In the ruins of Khami Wan Li blue and white porcelain from China, stoneware from Portugal and Germany and North Africa and silverware from Iberia have been found dating back to the late 16th Century and the early part of the 17th Century. In 1670 a military leader called Changamire, whose followers were called Rozwi stormed and captured Torwa. The Portuguese retreated from the plateau region in 1693 and the Rozwi or Changamire Empire was formed.

These two kingdoms were formed through two mass movements of people. Firstly there was a movement northwards which led to the formation of the Kingdom of Mutapa. This kingdom covered an area which included modern day Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa and controlled trade going to the ports along the Indian Ocean coast as well as the gold mines. The other mass migration of people went south and from this emerged the Kingdom of Torwa. After the exodus from Great Zimbabwe the Mutapa people continued to construct stone buildings which bore a close resemblance to that of Great Zimbabwe but after the civil war which brought into power the Rozvi Kingdom a new capital city, Danangombe, built in the centre of Zimbabwe was constructed with what was said to be magnificent buildings. This kingdom finally collapsed in the 1830's after been overpowered by the Ngumi people.

The history of Zimbabwe did not just start with the building of Great Zimbabwe in the 13th Century. Archaeologists have found evidence to suggest that permanent farming communities were in existence in the region from as early as 200 AD. These rural communities spoke a language now spoken by the Shona people. Sites have been discovered which indicate links existed between Zimbabwe and the Indian Ocean coast. Beads have been found which originated from this coastal region. Beads and ivory dating back to the 9th Century have been unearthed which suggest that beads and ivory helped to form the wealth of these communities. By the first millennium AD there were working gold mines along the high ridges of the plateau. The Arab travel writer Al-Masudi writing in 916 AD describes gold

arriving at the Indian Ocean coast from the interior. The roots of present day southern Africa can be found over a thousand years ago. Around the beginning of the 11th Century at Leopards Kopje cattle herds were expanding which might indicate better knowledge of animal husbandry and a new style of ceramics was occurring in the region.

The migrations of the Bantu people also played an important role in the early historical development of Southern Africa and the rise of individual states. By around 650 AD the Bantu people had moved across all of Southern Africa except for the extremely dry regions of Western Botswana, Namibia and the Cape of Good Hope. In these dry areas the Khoisan or San hunters and gatherers and herdsmen dominated. It was from the Khoisan herdsmen that some of the Bantu migrants learnt the techniques needed to successfully herd cattle in this area.

From the beginning of the 7th Century the keeping of cattle was associated with the rise of chiefs. Owners of large herds of cattle had the capability to loan out their cattle to poorer people for milk as well as been able to exert power and influence over the local population. Communities were formed on flat topped hillsides where enclosures were constructed capable of holding hundreds of cattle. Each of these large hill colonies acted as the capital of the many small kingdoms which dotted the landscape. Down on the plains around these hillside towns lived the peasantry. They were employed to look after the cattle herds and to work the land. Quite probably they were Khoisan. Collectively these states were known as the Toutwe Culture, named after Toutswemogola, one of the many hills in the region. Through the Limpopo Valley, commercial and trading links were established with the East African coast. On the southern bank of the Limpopo at Mapungubwe in the 10th Century a settlement was established based around a massive cattle pen. Mapungubwe became a vibrant, vital and important trading centre. Cattle and gold exports helped to establish this settlement as a major regional power base. Goods such as ivory were exchanged for imported glass beads. In 1075 AD the court moved to the summit of a sandstone hill. Large stone walls were constructed around this hillside and for the first time cloth was known to have been manufactured in the interior of Africa. People of nobility were buried alongside gold plated goods. A hierarchy of communities existed which seemed to indicate a stable political entity not subject to the repeated segmentation of previous models. In the 13th Century Mapungubwe was abandoned and power moved to Great

Zimbabwe but the former could have provided the model for this new power base.

For unknown reasons the Toutwe Hills became totally depopulated and abandoned in and around 1300 AD. Similar cultures sprang up in the Lake Nagmai area of northeast Botswana and a cattle based system on the western Zimbabwe plateau existed in an area around Bulawayo during the 10th Century reaching its peak between 1100 AD and 1300 AD. The hillsides were terraced and gold was mined in the area.

Coupled with the spread of an expanded pastoral lifestyle which flourished during the 10th to the 12th Century along the Zimbabwe plateau to its northern and most eastern edge went a new style of ceramics. Earlier cultures that fused a pastoralist way of life and ceramics had flourished in earlier periods in Southern Africa. For instance the Gokomere culture which flourished in the first and second century along the Zimbabwean plateau and down south and across the Limpopo River produced pottery which had basic designs, decorative patterns and whose shape and technique was quite simple and had distinct patterns around the neck. This culture was based around agriculture. They constructed granaries for storing grain and had small clay furnaces which were used for smelting iron. They grew millet and sorghum but also existed through hunting and gathering.

Communities around Leopards Kopje in the 7th Century produced vast quantities of ceramics. They also mined for minerals and had the skills and ability to smelt metals. Metal was used to produce arrow and spear heads as well as hoes and ornaments. They were agriculturally diverse communities. Grain was grown and stored and flocks of sheep and herds of cattle formed part of the landscape. Villages were built close to water and the huts were circular with pole walls, 10 to 12 feet in diameter with walls smoothed with daga plaster. Originally they had migrated from the north but on arrival and inter-married with the local Khoisan people but with time became more dominant.

The Karanga people of Zimbabwe were both adept mining practitioners and skilled metal workers. They found new gold, copper and iron mines and also exploited the local population. The Zimbabwean mining industry started nearly 2000 years ago and came to an end in the 19th century with European colonialism. The Shona language became the dominant language spoken in the region. The gold dust mined was placed in porcupine quills

and exchanged for salt, beads, iron and cloth. As well as being skilled miners and metal workers they also manufactured some fine pottery.

The community at Ingombe Ilede was first established in 680 AD. They made basic pottery and hunted elephants for their ivory. There was a port on the Zambezi River and was a vital trading link with the Indian Ocean. As farmers they grew millet and sorghum as well as looking after herds of goats and cattle. They had dogs and their houses were built of wood, grass and straw. By the beginning of the 10th Century this community had become the best potters in the whole of Southern Africa. Their pottery was hand painted with intricate patterns and their firing processes were highly skilled. Imports reached Ingombe Ilede from great distances. The dead were buried with shells that came from the Indian Ocean and necklaces of glass beads and gold. They were very prosperous and part of a wider trading network where gold and copper amongst other products was bartered for ivory and salt.

The terraced landscapes of Southern Africa represent a separate culture from that of Great Zimbabwe. Historically they were built before the arrival of Europeans. Around the Inyanga district which is north of Mutare and in the high mountains close to the Mozambique border there are vast areas of terraced hillsides. The stonework of these terraces was undressed and random. Any gaps in the stonework were filled with small stone chips and wedges. They are in complete contrast to the uniform coursed, dressed and brick like masonry of the ruins of great Zimbabwe. These terraced hillsides possibly covered an estimated area of 3000 square miles and approximately 5,200 million tons of earth could have been removed in the building process. This was all done manually and without the aid of any wheeled vehicle. The terraces were maintained in an immaculate condition right up until the time that they were abandoned. No one seems to know where the population vanished to and why the terraces were kept in such good condition until the moment of departure.

Apart from these terraces there are other signs of a landscape that was once inhabited. Simple fort like structures have been found on some hills. Some bricks were used in the construction but no use was made of natural rock formations. Sometimes there was a simple enclosure around the central enclosure while others had a number of enclosures surrounding the main one. Some of these structures had loop holes built into the wall some 2 ft to 4 ft above the ground. Possibly they could have been emergency shelters and not built for permanent use.

On other hillsides sunken pits have been revealed. They were circular stone platforms around a sunken pit which was 20 ft to 25 ft in diameter and around 8 ft in depth. Usually they have been found on hillsides with the pit entered through a covered passageway from the uphill side with the drainage system installed on the downhill side. The side of the pit was lined with stone and the floor area was paved. These sunken pits could have been for sheep, goats or small cattle as the passageways were only between 1 ft and 3 ft high.

All of the stone ruins located in Southern Africa are found between the Zambezi and the Orange Rivers. They are capable of being reached by the 5 rivers which flow east towards the Indian Ocean. Much mineral wealth exists in this region and has been exploited for many thousands of years. A hematite mine in Swaziland in the mountains close to the Maputo River dates back to 40,000 Years BC and could possibly have been mined first in 80,000 Years BC. Hematite is a red, grey or black mineral and is a source of iron. Other similar mines have been found further inland and were in active use until the late 19th Century. The Iron Age reached this area around the birth of Jesus Christ and copper is found north and south of the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers. Between 4000 gold mines and 500 copper mines were opened between 600 Years AD and 1500 Years AD. Quite often gold mines which were either dug underground or were open cast were found close to these stone ruins. At Gwanda a 120 ft deep mine shaft was found with the tunnels measuring 3 ft high and in some places less. They were dangerous places to work in. No means existed to pump out any water. Miners often suffered a fatal injury and the skeletons of young girls have been found at the bottom of these ancient mine shafts.

Lastly folk lore of the Balemba people who live in South Africa along the southern edge of the Limpopo River and who have connections to Zimbabwe culture tell of an ancient homeland situated in the north which they had to leave. This mass movement and migration was caused by political and religious events causing them to eventually settle in Vendlan which lies 100 miles west of Mozambique. The folk tale describes their original land as having many rivers and lakes with thick forest and jungle. Many fruits like banana and tubers and peanuts were grown. The country was named Vha Senzi or Vha Venda. Their king was called Mivali and was seen as a king god who was able to perform miracles with the massive drum of the gods, Ngoma-Lungundu. The king lived in a large village on the top

of a mountain. The walls were built with enormous stones and could not be broken into. No one was allowed to see the king. Only his voice could be heard, when on occasions he spoke to the High Priest in an extremely loud voice. Any individual who accidentally glimpsed the king was executed immediately. Everyone was in dread of Mivali and he was seen as ancestral. When he died his succession led to a bitter dispute and became very violent and as a result a massive migration to the south occurred. The population left with their cattle, sheep, goats and dogs. Eventually they managed to cross the Limpopo River and reach their current homeland. They constructed the city of Dzata in the Nzhelele River valley and the Vha Lemba have refused to this day to become assimilated. They adhere strictly to their own laws and customs. They exist as nomadic traders and have Semite traits. They are circumcised and only consume meat that has been ritually slaughtered and end prayers with an Amen and possibly have a Hebraic or Islam ancestry but their ancestors could once have inhabited Great Zimbabwe.

Classroom Activities for Great Zimbabwe

- 1.** Map out the location of Great Zimbabwe and place the map within present day Zimbabwe. Put in the major river systems. Also when ever new and relevant information emerges about Great Zimbabwe such as trade routes put this information onto the map.
- 2.** In small groups discuss the various possible reasons for the rise and fall of Great Zimbabwe. Take notes and then write these out formally.
- 3.** Write a newspaper/magazine article on life in Great Zimbabwe from the point of view of a visiting journalist based upon interviews that he may have had with various people living in Great Zimbabwe.
- 4.** What do you think were the environmental causes that led to the depopulation of Great Zimbabwe? Can you compare this event to other recent environmental disasters such as for example the recent earthquake in Haiti. What other major environmental disasters have there been in the last 100 years.
- 5.** Create your own Zimbabwean myth about Great Zimbabwe or about the people who constructed the terraced hillsides in this region of Africa.
- 6.** Design your own Zimbabwean styled piece of pottery, jewelry or article of clothing.
- 7.** As a reporter or travel writer write an article about life in Great Zimbabwe or about your travels and experiences in Southern Africa at a date of your own choosing. You could also write a series of articles which look at Southern Africa over a number of centuries highlighting significant changes that have occurred over time. For instance, life in Great Zimbabwe and life a few centuries later when the whole area has become depopulated.