

Great Zimbabwe

Great Zimbabwe is a ruined city and perhaps the most famous site in southern Africa. It is one of the oldest and largest structures in southern Africa, a monumental city built of stone. Located about 150 miles from the modern Zimbabwean capital of Harare, Great Zimbabwe was the capital of a medieval kingdom that occupied the region on the eastern edge of Kalahari Desert.

The Rise of Great Zimbabwe

We know little about the people who inhabited Great Zimbabwe. They have left us no written records, so we are dependent on archaeology to understand their culture. Small farming and iron-mining communities began to appear in the area between the fourth and the seventh century AD. They seem to have been cattle pastoralists who moved to the region from the south, and continued to be dependent on cattle for their way of life. However, a new form of wealth was soon discovered: gold. Indeed, it is gold that seems to have been responsible for the rise of the Great Zimbabwean city-state. New mining techniques allowed the people to exploit the gold mines, and so the local leaders traded the gold (as well as ivory) with the caravan merchants to the north. As the leaders became rich from trade, they grew in power and apparently created a centralized state.

They began building the city of Great Zimbabwe between 1100 and 1400 as a massive capital city. It was built using granite with no mortar. This required a high level of masonry expertise, and some parts of the site incorporate natural rock formations into the design. There are stone structures linked by passageways, and one of the buildings is thought to be the royal residence. The city must have been home to a strong government that was able to direct the monumental construction work. The city itself could sustain a massive population of around 10,000 to 18,000 people within its walls.

For most of the people, cattle herds were still the major source of wealth, and the city, when it was populated, would have been filled with cattle and the huts of poorer residents. Outside the city, the surrounding land would have been occupied by poorer people, many of whom could not afford cattle. Indeed, Great Zimbabwe shows a high degree of social stratification, characteristic for centralized states. For the elite, there seems to have been a great deal of wealth. Plentiful pottery, iron tools, copper and gold decorative items, and soapstone sculptures—mainly of birds—have been found on the site. Some of the artifacts on the site, such as ceramics and glass vessels, appear to have come from Arabia, India, and even China, suggesting that Great Zimbabwe was a major trade center, part of an extensive global exchange network.

Many similar but much smaller stone settlements, called *zimbabwes*, can be found nearby. Most of these smaller settlements could sustain only about thirty people—who must have been the elites—and the settlements would have been surrounded by farmers who supported them. These *zimbabwes* were probably seats of authority for local governors acting under the authority of the king in Great Zimbabwe.

Decline and Legacy

By 1500 Great Zimbabwe was abandoned. We do not know what caused Great Zimbabwe to decline and eventually be abandoned, but there are a number of theories. One theory is that overgrazing by the city's cattle herds exhausted the land, making it impossible to continue raising cattle there. Another is that drought resulted in famine, and thus the abandonment of the site. Yet another theory holds that a decline in trade caused the site to be abandoned, or that the people moved to be closer to the gold-trade network, going on to found the later Mutapa and Torwa states. Indeed, according to traditional stories, the kingdom of Mutapa was founded by a prince from Great Zimbabwe. Zimbabwean culture would continue in Mutapa, centered on the city of Sofala.

The site of Great Zimbabwe is considered a great monument and a source of pride in the region. The modern nation of Zimbabwe derived its name from the site. Nonetheless, when European colonizers first found the ruins in the late nineteenth century, most did not believe that the site could have been built by indigenous Africans. Up until Zimbabwe's independence in the 1960s, historians and archaeologists were pressured to deny that Great Zimbabwe was built by black Africans. Instead, they postulated that it had been built by Egyptians, or Arab or Phoenician traders. It has now become clear, however, that Great Zimbabwe was a product of a distinctly African civilization of the Middle Ages, part of the crucial trade routes that linked the Asian and African worlds.

Summary:

- Small cattle-herding communities began to appear in the vicinity of what would become Great Zimbabwe from the fourth to the seventh century AD.
- As the people began to exploit the nearby gold mines, their leaders became very rich and were able to form a centralized state.
- Great Zimbabwe was built between 1100 and 1400 as a massive capital city, home to the king and capable of sustaining a population of 10,000 to 18,000 people.
- The elites of Great Zimbabwe traded extensively with the caravans of foreign merchants, trading gold and ivory for goods from places as distant as Arabia, India, and China.
- By 1500 Great Zimbabwe was abandoned, either because of changes in the environment or as a result of changes in trade networks.
- Though European colonists long attempted to deny that Great Zimbabwe had been built by native Africans, it is now clear that it was, and it is a major cultural landmark in Africa.