Great Zimbabwe is a ruined city that was once the capital of the Kingdom of Zimbabwe, which existed from 1100 to 1450 AD during the country’s Late Iron Age. The monument, which first began to be constructed in the 11th century and which continued to be built until the 14th century, spanned an area of 722 hectares (1,784 acres) and at its peak could have housed up to 18,000 people. Great Zimbabwe acted as a royal palace for the Zimbabwean monarch and would have been used as the seat of their political power. One of its most prominent features were its walls, some of which were over five metres high and which were constructed without mortar. Eventually the city was largely abandoned and fell into ruin.

The ruins were first encountered by Europeans in the late 19th century with investigation of the site starting in 1871. The monument caused great controversy amongst the archaeological world, with political pressure being placed upon archaeologists by the then white supremacist government of Rhodesia to deny that it could have ever been produced by native Zimbabweans. Great Zimbabwe has since been adopted as a national monument by the Zimbabwean government, with the modern state being named after it. The word "Great" distinguishes the site from the many hundreds of small ruins, known as Zimbabwe, spread across the Zimbabwe highveld. There are 200 such sites in southern Africa, such as Bumbusi in Zimbabwe and Manyikeni in Mozambique, with monumental.
mortarless walls and Great Zimbabwe is the largest.[6]

Name

Great Zimbabwe is the Shona name of the ruins, first recorded in 1531 by Vicente Pegado, Captain of the Portuguese Garrison of Sofala, who noted that "The natives of the country call these edifices Symbaœ, which according to their language signifies 'court'."

The name clearly contains *dzimba*, the Shona term for "houses". Apart from this, there are two suggestions for the etymology of the name:

- The first theory holds that the word is derived from *Dzimba-dza-mabwe*, translated from the Karanga dialect of Shona as "large houses of stone" (*dzimba* = plural of *imba*, "house"; *mabwe* = plural of *bwe*, "stone").[7] [8]

- A second theory is that Zimbabwe is a contracted form of *dzimba-hwe* which means "venerated houses" in the Zezuru dialect of Shona, and is usually applied to chiefs' houses or graves.[9]

Description

Settlement

The Great Zimbabwe area was settled by the fourth century. Between the fourth and the seventh centuries, communities now identified as Gokomere or Ziwa culture farmed the valley, mined and worked iron, but built no stone structures.[6] [10] These are the earliest iron age settlements in the area identified from archaeological diggings.[11]

Construction and growth

Construction of the stone buildings started in the 11th century and continuing for over 300 years,[12] the ruins at Great Zimbabwe are some of the oldest and largest structures located in Southern Africa, and are the second oldest after nearby Mapungubwe in South Africa. Its most formidable edifice, commonly referred to as the Great Enclosure, has walls as high as 36 feet (11 m) extending approximately 820 feet (250 m), making it the largest ancient structure south of the Sahara Desert. The city and its state, the Kingdom of Zimbabwe, flourished from 1200 to 1500[13] and its growth has been linked to the decline of Mapungubwe from around 1300, due to climatic change[14] or the greater availability of gold in the hinterland of Great Zimbabwe.[15] At its peak, estimates are that Great Zimbabwe had as many as 18,000 inhabitants.[16] The ruins that survive are built entirely of stone. The ruins span 1,800 acres (7 km²) and cover a radius of 100 to 200 miles (160 to 320 km).
Great Zimbabwe

Features of the ruins

In 1531, Vicente Pegado, Captain of the Portuguese Garrison of Sofala, described Zimbabwe thus:

“Among the gold mines of the inland plains between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers there is a fortress built of stones of marvelous size, and there appears to be no mortar joining them.... This edifice is almost surrounded by hills, upon which are others resembling it in the fashioning of stone and the absence of mortar, and one of them is a tower more than 12 fathoms [22 m] high. The natives of the country call these edifices Symbaoe, which according to their language signifies court.”

The ruins form three distinct architectural groups. They are known as the Hill Complex, the Valley Complex and the Great Enclosure. The Hill Complex is the oldest, and was occupied from the ninth to thirteenth centuries. The Great Enclosure was occupied from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries and the Valley Complex from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries.[6] Notable features of the Hill Complex include the Eastern Enclosure, in which it is thought the Zimbabwe Birds stood, a high balcony enclosure overlooking the Eastern Enclosure, and a huge boulder in a shape similar to that of the Zimbabwe Bird.[17] The Great Enclosure is composed of an inner wall, encircling a series of structures and a younger outer wall. The Conical Tower, 18 ft (5.5 m) in diameter and 30 ft (9.1 m) high, was constructed between the two walls.[18] The Valley Complex is divided into the Upper and Lower Valley Ruins, with different periods of occupation.[6]

There are different archaeological interpretations of these groupings. It has been suggested that the complexes represent the work of successive kings: some of the new rulers founded a new residence.[13] The focus of power moved from the Hill Complex in the twelfth century, to the Great Enclosure, the Upper Valley and finally the Lower Valley in the early sixteenth century.[6] The alternative "structuralist" interpretation holds that the different complexes had different functions: the Hill Complex as a temple, the Valley complex was for the citizens, and the Great Enclosure was used by the king. Structures that were more elaborate were probably built for the kings, although it has been argued that the dating of finds in the complexes does not support this interpretation.[19] Some researchers have presented an argument that the ruins may have housed an astronomy observatory, although the significance of the alignments upon which these claims are based is contested.[20]
Notable artifacts

The most important artifacts recovered from the Monument are the eight Zimbabwe Birds. These were carved from a micaceous schist (soapstone) on the tops of monoliths the height of a person.\cite{21} Slots in a platform in the Eastern Enclosure of the Hill Complex appear designed to hold the monoliths with the Zimbabwe birds, but as they were not found in situ it cannot be determined which monolith and bird were where.\cite{22} Other artifacts include soapstone figurines, pottery, iron gongs, elaborately worked ivory, iron and copper wire, iron hoes, bronze spearheads, copper ingots and crucibles and gold beads, bracelets, pendants and sheaths.\cite{23} \cite{24}

Trade

Archaeological evidence suggests that Great Zimbabwe became a centre for trading, with artifacts suggesting that the city formed part of a trade network linked to Kilwa\cite{25} and extending as far as China. This international trade was mainly in gold and ivory; some estimates indicate that more than 20 million ounces of gold were extracted from the ground.\cite{26} That international commerce was in addition to the local agricultural trade, in which cattle were especially important.\cite{15} The large cattle herd that supplied the city moved seasonally and was managed by the court.\cite{21} Chinese pottery shards, coins from Arabia, glass beads and other non-local items have been excavated at Zimbabwe. Despite these strong international trade links, there is no evidence to suggest exchange of architectural concepts between Great Zimbabwe and centres such as Kilwa.\cite{27}

Decline

Causes for the decline and ultimate abandonment of the site have been suggested as due to a decline in trade compared to sites further north, political instability and famine and water shortages induced by climatic change.\cite{15} \cite{28} The Mutapa state arose in the fifteenth century from the northward expansion of the Great Zimbabwe tradition.\cite{29} Great Zimbabwe also predates the Khami and Nyanga cultures.\cite{30}

History of research and origins of the ruins

From Portuguese traders to Karl Mauch

Portuguese traders were the first Europeans to visit the remains of the ancient city in the early 16th century, and records survive of interviews and notes made by some of them. They mention an inscription above the entrance to Great Zimbabwe, written in characters not known to the Arab merchants who had seen it.\cite{31} \cite{32}

The ruins were rediscovered during a hunting trip by Adam Renders in 1867, who then showed the ruins to Karl Mauch in 1871.
Theodore Bent and the Queen of Sheba

J. Theodore Bent's season at Zimbabwe, under Cecil Rhodes's patronage, resulted in publications which introduced the ruins to English readers. Bent, whose archaeological experience had all been in Greece and Asia Minor, stated in *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland* (1891) that the ruins revealed either the Phoenicians or the Arabs as builders. In contrast, Karl Mauch favored a legend that the structures were built to replicate the palace of the Queen of Sheba in Jerusalem, and claimed a wooden lintel at the site must be Lebanese cedar, brought by Phoenicians. Other theories on the origin of the ruins, among both white settlers and academics, had the common view that the original buildings were probably not made by sub-Saharan Africans. The Sheba legend, as promoted by Mauch, was so pervasive in the white settler community as to cause Bent to say

The names of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba were on everybody's lips, and have become so distasteful to us that we never expect to hear them again without an involuntary shudder.

First scientific site excavations: evidence of Shona and Gokomere culture origin

The first scientific archaeological excavations at the site were undertaken by David Randall-MacIver in 1905–1906. In *Medieval Rhodesia*, he wrote of the existence in the site of objects that were of Bantu origin. In 1929, Gertrude Caton-Thompson concluded that the site was indeed created by Bantu. Examination of all the existing evidence, gathered from every quarter, still can produce not one single item that is not in accordance with the claim of Bantu origin and medieval date.

Since the 1950s, there has been consensus among archaeologists as to the African origins of Great Zimbabwe. Artifacts and radiocarbon dating indicate settlement in at least the fifth century, with continuous settlement of Great Zimbabwe between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries and the bulk of the finds from the fifteenth century. The radiocarbon evidence is a suite of 28 measurements, for which all but the first four, from the early days of the use of that method and now viewed as inaccurate, support the twelfth to fifteenth centuries chronology. In the 1970s, a beam that produced some of the anomalous dates in 1952 was reanalysed and gave a fourteenth century date, as do dated finds such as Chinese, Persian and Syrian artifacts also support the twelfth and fifteenth century dates.

Archaeologists generally agree that the builders probably spoke one of the Shona languages, based upon evidence of pottery, oral traditions and anthropology. They were probably of the Gokomere culture. The Gokomere culture, an eastern Bantu subgroup, existed in the area from around 500 AD and is believed, from archaeological evidence, to constitute an early phase of the Great Zimbabwe culture. The Gokomere culture also likely gave rise to both the Rozwi culture, and the modern Mashona people. The Gokomere were probably related to the ancestors of the people of the Mapungubwe civilization in nearby south eastern South Africa.

The Lemba

The construction of Great Zimbabwe is claimed too by the Lemba, an ethnic group with a tradition of ancient Jewish or South Arabian descent through their male line, which is supported by recent DNA studies and female ancestry derived from the Karanga subgroup of the Shona, the Lemba maintain that their male forebears came in ships from a distant country in order to obtain gold. The Lemba claim to Great Zimbabwe was supported by Gayre, who suggested that the Shona artefacts which were found in the ruins, were placed there only after they conquered the area and drove out or absorbed the previous inhabitants; he added that the ones who remained would have passed some of their skills and knowledge to the invaders. Arguing that the South African Lemba are probably descended from the remnant which fled southwards, Gayre and Murdock point out that the Lemba were esteemed by neighbouring tribes as exceptionally skilled miners and metal workers. A distinct (and partly Semitic) identity for the Lemba is also supported by observations and interviews carried out by van Warmelo. The discovery of models of circumcised male organs in some of the ancient ruins, is interpreted by Gayre as evidence of a direct link between the Lemba and Great Zimbabwe; (that is significant because surrounding tribes
regarded the Lemba as the masters and originators of the art of circumcision). Gayre and Murdock also mention that the Lemba buried their dead in an extended rather than a crouched position, i.e., in the same style as in certain Zimbabwean graves which contained gold jewellery. However, this interpretation is not supported by the more recent work of Garlake, Beach and others and Gayre's work has been heavily criticised. Pikirayi, for example, dismisses Gayre's work on the origins of Great Zimbabwe, criticising some of his architectural comparisons as "simple" and Garlake describes it as "worthless polemic". Parfitt described Gayre's work as having a clear objective to "show that black people had never been capable of building in stone or of governing themselves", although he does add that "The fact that Gayre... got most of his facts wrong, does not in itself vitiate the claims of the Lemba to have been involved in the Great Zimbabwe civilisation".

Recent research

More recent archaeological work has been carried out by Peter Garlake, who has produced the comprehensive descriptions of the site, David Beach and Thomas Huffman, who have worked on the chronology and development of Great Zimbabwe and Gilbert Pwiti, who has published extensively on trade links. Today, the most recent consensus appears to attribute the construction of Great Zimbabwe to the Shona people.

Damage to the ruins

Damage to the ruins has been caused both by the removal of gold and artefacts in destructive diggings by early colonial antiquarians, notably Richard Nicklin Hall, and reconstruction attempts since independence, leading to alienation of the local communities from the site.

Political implications

Martin Hall writes that the history of Iron Age research south of the Zambezi shows the prevalent influence of colonial ideologies, both in the earliest speculations about the nature of the African past and in the adaptations that have been made to contemporary archeological methodologies. When European colonialists like Cecil Rhodes first saw the ruins, it was seen as a sign of the great riches that the area would yield to its new masters and Pikirayi suggests that this presentation of Great Zimbabwe was partly with the aim of encouraging settlement and investment in the area. The official line in colonial Rhodesia was that the structures were built by non-blacks. According to Paul Sinclair, interviewed for None But Ourselves:

I was the archaeologist stationed at Great Zimbabwe. I was told by the then-director of the Museums and Monuments organisation to be extremely careful about talking to the press about the origins of the [Great] Zimbabwe state. I was told that the museum service was in a difficult situation, that the government was pressurising them to withhold the correct information. Censorship of guidebooks, museum displays, school textbooks, radio programmes, newspapers and films was a daily occurrence. Once a member of the Museum Board of Trustees threatened me with losing my job if I said publicly that blacks had built Zimbabwe. He said it was okay to say the yellow people had built it, but I wasn't allowed to mention radio carbon dates... It was the first time since Germany in the thirties that archaeology has been so directly censored. This suppression of archaeology culminated in the departure from the country of prominent archaeologists of Great Zimbabwe, including Peter Garlake, Senior Inspector of Monuments for Rhodesia, and Roger Summers of the National Museum.
To black anti-colonialist groups, Great Zimbabwe became an important symbol of achievement by black Africans. Reclaiming its history was a major aim for those wanting independence. In 1980 the newly independent country was renamed for the site, and its famous soapstone bird carvings was retained from the Rhodesian flag and Coat of Arms as a national symbol and depicted in the new Zimbabwe flag. After the independence of the modern state of Zimbabwe in 1980, Great Zimbabwe has been employed to mirror and legitimize shifting policies of the ruling regime. At first it was argued that it represented a form of pre-colonial "African socialism" and later the focus shifted to stressing the natural evolution of an accumulation of wealth and power within a ruling elite. [77]

Some of the carvings had been taken from Great Zimbabwe around 1890 and sold to Cecil Rhodes, who was intrigued and had copies made which he gave to friends. Most of the carvings have now been returned to Zimbabwe, but one remains at Rhodes' old home, Groote Schuur, in Cape Town.

Great Zimbabwe has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1986.

**Image gallery**

- The Hill Complex
- The Conical Tower
- The Great Enclosure
- The Hill Complex from the Valley
- Stone lintel in doorway
- Passageway in the Great Enclosure
Notes


[17] Garlake (1973) 27

[18] Garlake (1973) 29


[22] Garlake (1973) 119


[34] Pikirayi (2001) p9


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[60] Pikirayi (2001) p23


[63] Garlake (1973)


[74] Pikirayi (2001) p11


Sources


External links

- Great Zimbabwe entry on the UNESCO World Heritage site (http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id_site=364)
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