

# "House of Stones": History of Great Zimbabwe

Medieval Africa was home to great empires. When people saw the ruins of one, they thought King Solomon himself built the incredible stone structures. Great Zimbabwe thrived from the 12th to 15 centuries. The capital city, named after its stone dwellings ("zimbabwe" means "houses of stone"), had as many as 20,000 people. It was a trading hub, dealing in gold, ivory, and other goods with Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Droughts, overgrazing, and changing trade routes led to its decline. Its ruins, the largest sub-Saharan archaeological site, remain as a reminder of the great empire.

## Medieval Africa

Medieval Africa was home to several great empires benefiting from prime natural resources and locations ideal for trading. Geography played a central role in their success.

We have discussed three West African kingdoms. Let us move to the southeast and examine Great Zimbabwe, a kingdom that thrived from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries.

## Beginnings

The first inhabitants of Great Zimbabwe were Shona-speaking peoples who likely settled in the region as early as 400 C.E. Shona are the primary ethnic group in Zimbabwe today.

The land was fertile. The people farmed, fished, and raised cattle. Cattle became a primary source of wealth, including as a form of money. Many people did not want to kill and eat the cattle since that was like eating money. Cattle remain precious to the people today.

Mwari was their creator god. He supplied rain and was fundamental for life. Kings became his representative on earth. They had both political and religious power.

The land was also rich in minerals. Gold, iron, copper, and tin were among the most common. Riverbeds were a great place to find minerals. Ivory was also a significant trading good.

By 1000, the once simple farming community had become a prosperous kingdom. The people became separated by wealth and power. Peasants did most of the work.

## Zimbabwes (Stone Dwellings)

There is masonry within and without, built of stones of a marvelous size, and there appears to be no mortar joining them.

- Portuguese explorer Joao de Barros

People originally built houses from wood. Kings and other elites started to build their houses with stone. They were "zimbabwes" or stone dwellings.

The stone dwellings and walls built later were impressive feats of architecture. The people used heavy granite rocks carefully packed together. They used iron tools to cut the blocks.

Nonetheless, they did not use mortar. People later were amazed at the skills required to build such remarkable structures. Europeans later could not believe that "primitive" people constructed these architectural masterpieces. Were they the site of King Solomon's Mines?!

## **Great Zimbabwe**

The Kingdom of Zimbabwe arose in the area. It thrived from between the 12th and 15th Centuries. Its capital city, near modern-day Masvingo, Zimbabwe, was Great Zimbabwe.

Great Zimbabwe today are the most extensive stone ruins in sub-Saharan Africa. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The modern-day nation of Zimbabwe celebrates it as a symbol of its great pre-colonial past. The local population honors it as a part of their heritage.

It was a thriving kingdom for hundreds of years. Archaeologists have found pottery from China and Persia and Arab coins in the ruins there. Great Zimbabwe was a trading hub. A brisk trade arose from the coast of Africa to the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.

## **A Snapshot of the City**

The Great Zimbabwe archaeological site covers 1,779 acres.

The Hill Complex is the oldest part of the city. Pottery and burial mounds suggest settlements back to the fifth and sixth centuries. Its elevated position made it a perfect defensive location. The people made their homes from dried earth, mud, and gravel.

A granite wall composed of local granite, 37 feet in height and 328 feet in length, surrounded the complex and demonstrates the military and political importance of the city.

The Great Enclosure is the most impressive. The remains of its outer wall measure over 800 feet long and up to 32 feet high. Archaeologists believe the enclosure was the royal residence.

The Valley Ruins has mud-brick houses (*daga*) near the Great Enclosure. The houses suggest the capital city had twenty thousand people at its peak.

There are also many soapstone bird sculptures. Some are 14 inches high and sit atop three-foot-tall columns. The birds have different patterns. They do not look like any of the native birds. They are likely to have religious significance.

## **Decline of Great Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe's prosperity began to decline in the 15th Century.

Why did the empire decline? Like all great empires, there are a variety of interrelated reasons.

The people mined most of the gold. Droughts parched the land. Overgrazing of livestock exhausted the farmland. Trade routes changed, depriving Great Zimbabwe of much of its wealth. People began to move elsewhere. The city was largely empty by 1700.

The stones remained as a reminder of a once great kingdom.

## **QUESTIONS**

1. What role did geography play in the success of Great Zimbabwe as a trading hub during the medieval period?
2. How did the religious beliefs and practices of the Shona-speaking peoples influence the political and social structure of Great Zimbabwe?
3. What were the primary sources of wealth and trade for the Kingdom of Great Zimbabwe, and how did these resources contribute to its prosperity?
4. What architectural techniques and materials were used in the construction of the stone dwellings and walls in Great Zimbabwe, and how did they contribute to the city's impressive structures?
5. What evidence exists to support the idea that Great Zimbabwe was a significant trading hub with connections to regions as far as China, Persia, and the Middle East?
6. What were the key features of the Great Zimbabwe archaeological site, and how do they provide insight into the city's layout, defensive capabilities, and social structure?
7. What were the primary factors that contributed to the decline of the Kingdom of Great Zimbabwe, and how did these factors lead to the city's eventual abandonment?
8. In what ways do the ruins of Great Zimbabwe serve as a reminder of the kingdom's once prosperous and influential status, and what significance do they hold for the modern-day nation of Zimbabwe?