

## **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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and could have been built to enhance the prestige of the reigning monarch. Suddenly around the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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.