

## Zimbabwe's "Stone" Civilization

By the Middle Ages an advanced and complex African civilization existed in the southern African region where modern Zimbabwe is situated. This is evidenced by ruins of unique, carefully hewn, dry boulders at the site commonly referred to as the *Great Zimbabwe* (or "stone buildings") as well as at other smaller sites in Regina, Dhlo-Dhlo and Nalatale. Named after the ruins, the modern nation, Zimbabwe essentially means, "House of Stone" and is derived from the Shona phrase *dzimba dza mabwe*. Aside from these outstanding stone constructions, stone-age implements and pebble tools have also been found in the area, further indication of human habitation for many centuries.

Located near Masvingo on the Zimbabwean plateau in the southeastern region, the Great Zimbabwe ruins remain the most impressive of these sites. The word "Great," which sets it apart by the terrific scale of its structure, distinguishes this architectural marvel from the hundreds of other small ruins (known as *Zimbabwes*) that are scattered across the Highveld. It is estimated that these stone edifices were built and expanded sometime between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. by indigenous Africans who migrated from the north around the 10<sup>th</sup> century. These Bantu-speaking ancestors of the Shona established trading contacts with commercial centers on Africa's southeastern coast.

The ruins of the massive stone walls of Great Zimbabwe are spread out over a 1,800 acre area and cover a radius of 100 to 200 miles. They are among some of the oldest and largest structures located in Southern Africa and can be broken down into three distinct architectural groups. These are: the Hill Complex, which was used as a temple; the Valley Complex, which was inhabited by the citizens and the famous Great Enclosure (the most formidable building), which was specifically for the king's use. With walls as high as 36 feet and extending approximately 820 feet, the Great Enclosure is the largest ancient construction south of the Sahara Desert. Over 300 structures have been found so far in the Great Enclosure, including elaborate edifices built for the king.

At its peak it is estimated that the city of Great Zimbabwe had as many as 18,000 inhabitants, most of whom were descendants of Bantu ethnic groups. But by the 16<sup>th</sup> century the city was almost completely abandoned. Historians disagree on the cause of the

Great Zimbabwe's fall and desertion, with theories ranging from drought and disease to decline in the gold trade and depletion in agricultural resources.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European travelers from Germany, Portugal and Britain were astonished to learn of this powerful African civilization in the interior of southern Africa; one of the earliest being a German geologist, Carl Mauch, in 1871. He, like others before him, refused to believe that indigenous Africans could have built such an extensive network of monuments made of granite stone and reliant on advanced masonry. Instead, they speculated, rather improbably, that the constructions had been carried out by the Portuguese, the Chinese, Arabs, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Hebrews, Persians, biblical characters from the north or other Mediterranean civilizations. This falsification strategy was sustained by British imperialist and colonizer Cecil Rhodes and the likes of British archaeologist Richard Hall, who deliberately suppressed and distorted information about the ruins in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. British imperialists would be infuriated, however, when in 1905 another British archeologist, David Randall-Maclver, studied the mud dwellings within the stone enclosures and became the first European researcher of the site to assert that the dwellings had unquestionably been built by Iron Age black Africans. In 1929, another British archeologist, Gertrude Caton-Thompson, examined available archeological evidence – including artifacts, nearby dwellings and the oral tradition of the modern Shona-speaking people – to determine the African foundation of the Great Zimbabwe.

Ian Smith, the former self-declared prime minister of Southern Rhodesia\*, which in November 1965 declared its independence from the British homeland government, was the last European of prominence to reinforce the colonial falsification of Great Zimbabwe's origins. He developed a policy of making sure that school books taught the misconception and that official guide books for tourists showed images of Africans bowing down to foreign innovators who allegedly built the structures. It was not until 1980 that the native Zimbabweans overthrew Smith's minority government and ended the colonial era. In that year, Robert Mugabe became president and the country was renamed "Zimbabwe" in honor of the Great Zimbabwe civilization of the past.

\*Former colonial label given to Zimbabwe, which was named after Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902) who conquered a large portion of Southern African in 1890.



Sections of *Imba Huru* (The Great Enclosure)

Source: "Great Enclosure and Chiefs House." View of the World. 2008. Web. 4 Apr. 2013.

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