GREAT ZIMBABWE

The city of Great Zimbabwe existed in the Sub-Saharan region of Africa from the 11th century to the mid-16th century. The city grew from a community of farmers and cattle herders to a major economic center, deriving power and wealth from its proximity to resources of gold and the trading routes along the Indian Ocean. Great Zimbabwe reached its peak with 18,000 residents by the mid-14th century.

The ruins of Great Zimbabwe, some 300 structures, cover more than sixty acres and includes three main areas: the Hill Complex, the Great Enclosure and the Valley Ruins. The Hill Complex is the oldest part of the city with pottery and burials dating to the 6th century. A monumental wall composed of local granite, 37 feet in height and 328 feet in length, surrounded the complex and testifies to the military and political importance of the city.

The Great Enclosure, also known as the Mumbahuru (“the house of the great woman”) housed the wives of the rulers and was a ceremonial site with a monumental wall composed of about one million blocks. Most people of Zimbabwe however lived in daga huts of mud and gravel surrounding the complex.

Among the Zimbabwe ruins, archaeologists discovered local and imported pottery including Chinese celadon wares, glass beads from India, Persian faience, and birds and bowls of soapstone. Flecks of discarded soapstone suggest that the soapstone works reflect the work of local craftsmen. The Chinese and Persian artifacts indicate that Great Zimbabwe was part of an Indian Ocean trading network even though the complex itself is 300 miles from that ocean.

At its peak in the 13th and 14th century, Great Zimbabwe thrived on cattle herding, gold mining and commerce with the Swahili port city of Sofala on the Indian Ocean. It produced cotton and pottery. Because of its strategic location near these resources and trade opportunities, Great Zimbabwe grew larger than any surrounding town and became the capital city of the Karanga (Shona) nation.

Great Zimbabwe declined in power in the early 15th Century. The nearby tributaries of the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers no longer produced gold flakes and nuggets, which had fueled the economy. The exhausted farmland surrounding the city could no longer support the number of residents. Eventually the trade routes in the interior between the Zambezi valley and the ports on the Indian Ocean changed, costing Great Zimbabwe its control over regional commerce. Great Zimbabwe was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1986.

Great Zimbabwe ENDURING LEGACY  

The monument of Great Zimbabwe is the most famous stone building in southern Africa. Located over 150 miles from Harare, it stands 1,100 km above sea level on the Harare Plateau in the Shashe-Limpopo basin. It is thought to have been built over a long period, beginning in 1200 and ending in 1450.

WHO WERE THEY?  
Not everyone agrees who the rulers of Great Zimbabwe were; but there is evidence that they were the Karanga, a branch of the Shona-speaking people. The pottery the Karanga make is very similar to that found in Great Zimbabwe. There is also a theory that the people of Great Zimbabwe may be descended from a community which lived on the site of Leopards Kopje, less than a hundred miles away from Great Zimbabwe, near present day Bulawayo. The remains of a prosperous iron age society, dependent for its wealth on cattle, have been discovered there.

SCOPE  
In terms of political power and cultural influence, the archaeological evidence indicates Great Zimbabwe covered a huge area between the Limpopo River and the Zambezi River, spilling out into Mozambique and Botswana, as well as the Transvaal area of northern South Africa.

BUILDING  
The Great Zimbabwe monument is built out of granite which is the parent rock of the region - i.e. it predominates locally. The building method used was dry-stone walling, demanding a high level of masonry expertise. Some of the site is built round natural rock formations. The actual structure comprises a huge enclosing wall some 20 meters high. Inside there are concentric passageways, along with a number of enclosures. One of these is thought to be a royal enclosure. Large quantities of gold and ceremonial battle axes, along with other objects have been found there. There is also what is thought to be a gold workshop, and a shrine which is still regarded as sacred today.

WEALTH  
The wealth of Great Zimbabwe lay in cattle production and gold. There are a number of mines to the west of Great Zimbabwe, about 40 kilometers away. One theory is that the rulers of Great Zimbabwe did not have direct control over the gold mines, but rather managed the trade in it, buying up huge quantities in exchange for cattle. The evidence suggests that Great Zimbabwe was at the centre of an international commercial system, which on the continent of Africa, encompassed settlements on the East African Coast such as Kilwa, Malindi and Mogadishu. But this trade network also extended to towns in the Gulf, in western parts of India, and even went as far as China.

DECLINE  
There are several theories about the decline of Great Zimbabwe. One is environmental: that a combination of overgrazing and drought caused the soil on the Zimbabwe Plateau to become exhausted. It is estimated that between 5,000 to 30,000 people lived on and around the site. A decline in land productivity would easily have led to famine. The other explanation is that the people of Great Zimbabwe had to move in
order to maximize their exploitation of the gold trade network. By 1500 the site of Great Zimbabwe was abandoned. Its people had moved in two directions: North to establish the Mutapa state and South to establish the Torwa state.