

## Ruins of a Fabled City

- <sup>1</sup> The African country of Zimbabwe took its name from the Shona word meaning “stone enclosures” or “venerated houses.” In fact, today dozens of stone ruins are scattered throughout Zimbabwe and other areas in southeastern Africa. One of these ruins, known as Great Zimbabwe, was once a fabled city that inspired tales that circulated throughout Europe. Where was this remarkable city, and who had built it? For centuries the mystery occupied the minds of explorers and treasure seekers.
- <sup>2</sup> The first reports to Europeans of Great Zimbabwe were spread a thousand years ago by Arab traders sailing between the Middle East and the east coast of Africa. The traders told of the fabulous wealth of a mysterious stone city in the African interior. In the trader’s tales, that city became associated with the Europeans’ understanding of Middle Eastern history—the Queen of Sheba, King Solomon and his legendary gold mines, long since lost to the world. By the sixteenth century, Portuguese explorers regularly visited East Africa, searching for King Solomon’s gold, but they never found Great Zimbabwe. In 1552, a Portuguese historian, João de Barros, recorded a story told by Arabs about a city with a “square fortress of masonry within and without, built of stones of marvelous size, and there appears to be no mortar joining them.”
- <sup>3</sup> In fact, Great Zimbabwe *was* a marvel. In one area a massive wall more than thirty feet high and twenty feet thick created a great enclosure. Another area contained a fortress-like series of walls, corridors, and steps built into the bluff that overlooks the ruins. Throughout the city, each stone was precisely fitted to the others without the use of mortar.
- <sup>4</sup> In the 1870s Karl Mauch, a German geologist, was the first European to see Great Zimbabwe, by then in ruins. Mauch realized that he had “rediscovered” the fabled city from de Barros’s story. He jumped to the conclusion that Great Zimbabwe had been built by the Queen of Sheba. British authorities sent a British journalist, Richard Hall, to Great Zimbabwe to investigate Mauch’s report. Archaeology was still in its infancy, and Hall, convinced that the structures had been built by ancient people from the Middle East, dug up and discarded archaeological deposits that would have revealed much about the true history of Great Zimbabwe. Later European excavations destroyed even more valuable evidence.
- <sup>5</sup> In the twentieth century, after excavating areas that had not been disturbed, David Randall-MacIver, a Scottish Egyptologist, and Gertrude Caton-Thompson, an English archaeologist, concluded that the ruins were unmistakably African in origin. Great Zimbabwe was most likely built during the fourteenth or fifteenth century by the ancestors of the present-day Shona people. Recent carbon-14 dating supports their conclusion. Great Zimbabwe was once home to an estimated 20,000 people, the center of a great Shona kingdom. Wealthy Shona kings traded their ivory and gold in coastal towns for other goods, thus accounting for the discovery of beads and other foreign wares in the ruins.
- <sup>6</sup> One mystery of Great Zimbabwe had been solved. Another mystery remains: why was the settlement at Great Zimbabwe abandoned, leaving the magnificent stone architecture to fall into ruins?