

Great Zimbabwe

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about Great Zimbabwe, site of one of the largest empires in Africa. You will explore the history of the site and the people who constructed it, known as the Shona, as well as its structure and ultimate collapse. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Great Zimbabwe: History of the Site
 - 1a. Structure
 - 1b. Reasons for Collapse
2. European Misconceptions
3. Colonization and Independence of Zimbabwe

1. Great Zimbabwe: History of the Site

There are around 300 Iron Age sites scattered across the present-day countries of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and the site of Great Zimbabwe is the largest. As early as the 3rd century CE, the people of this region, the Shona, had domesticated sheep, goats, and cattle, and between the 7th and 9th centuries, began to construct more permanent settlements.



Great Zimbabwe

1a. Structure

Great Zimbabwe was built on a hill to provide visibility and easy defense. This settlement was the capital of an empire that reached its height between the 11th and 15th centuries. Originally, it consisted of a loose scattering of structures, but sometime in the 13th century, a wall made of granite was built around it.

There are three levels to Great Zimbabwe: The Hill Ruin, the Great Enclosure, and the Valley Ruins. The Hill Ruin is located on the original hilltop settlement and appears to be where royalty lived. A large, conical structure located near the Hill Ruin appears to have been a granary. The Great Enclosure is a larger, oval-shaped wall around this space. It appears to not be defensive because it has gaps and other structural elements that do not fit this purpose. Its walls are 32 feet tall in some places and were constructed without mortar by placing stones next to one another so that the wall would hold its shape. The Valley Ruins surround the Great Enclosure. Here there is evidence of trade, with items coming from as far away as China.

1b. Reasons for Collapse

It is possible that these different layers of enclosure, that loosely resemble a series of concentric circles, are evidence of population growth and expansion over time. Great Zimbabwe collapsed sometime in the 15th century. The exact reason is not known; however, there are theories that the area, which grew to have a population between 10,000 and 20,000, had more people than could be adequately supported, forcing them to move elsewhere.

2. European Misconceptions

For decades, Europeans refused to believe that Great Zimbabwe had been constructed by the ancestors of the people who still live in the area, the Shona. They developed multiple theories that Great Zimbabwe had been built by Arabs, Phoenicians, Vikings, or really anyone except the people who lived there. After the country attained independence, the name of this site was chosen to be the name of the country. The word “zimbabwe” means “stone houses” or “venerated houses,” according to different translations of the Shona language.

3. Colonization and Independence of Zimbabwe

The country of Zimbabwe was originally named Rhodesia, after British politician Cecil Rhodes, and did not attain independence until 1980. From 1890 to 1965, it was a British colony, or a country led by a white minority. From 1965 to 1980, there was a war for independence between the White minority and the African majority. When they became independent, the people of this region decided to name their country after Great Zimbabwe, site of one of the largest empires in Africa.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **Great Zimbabwe**, the largest Iron Age site in its namesake country, present-day Zimbabwe. You explored the **history of the site**, learning that—despite **European misconceptions** surrounding who built the settlement—it was constructed by the ancestors of the people who still live in the area, the Shona. You examined Great Zimbabwe's **structure**, learning about its three levels: the Hill Ruin, the Great Enclosure, and the Valley Ruins. You also learned about possible **reasons for its collapse**, such as theories that the area had more people than could be adequately supported. Lastly, you learned about **colonization and the independence of Zimbabwe** following a war between the White minority and African majority, after which the people decided to name their country after the site of one of the largest empires in Africa, Great Zimbabwe.

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