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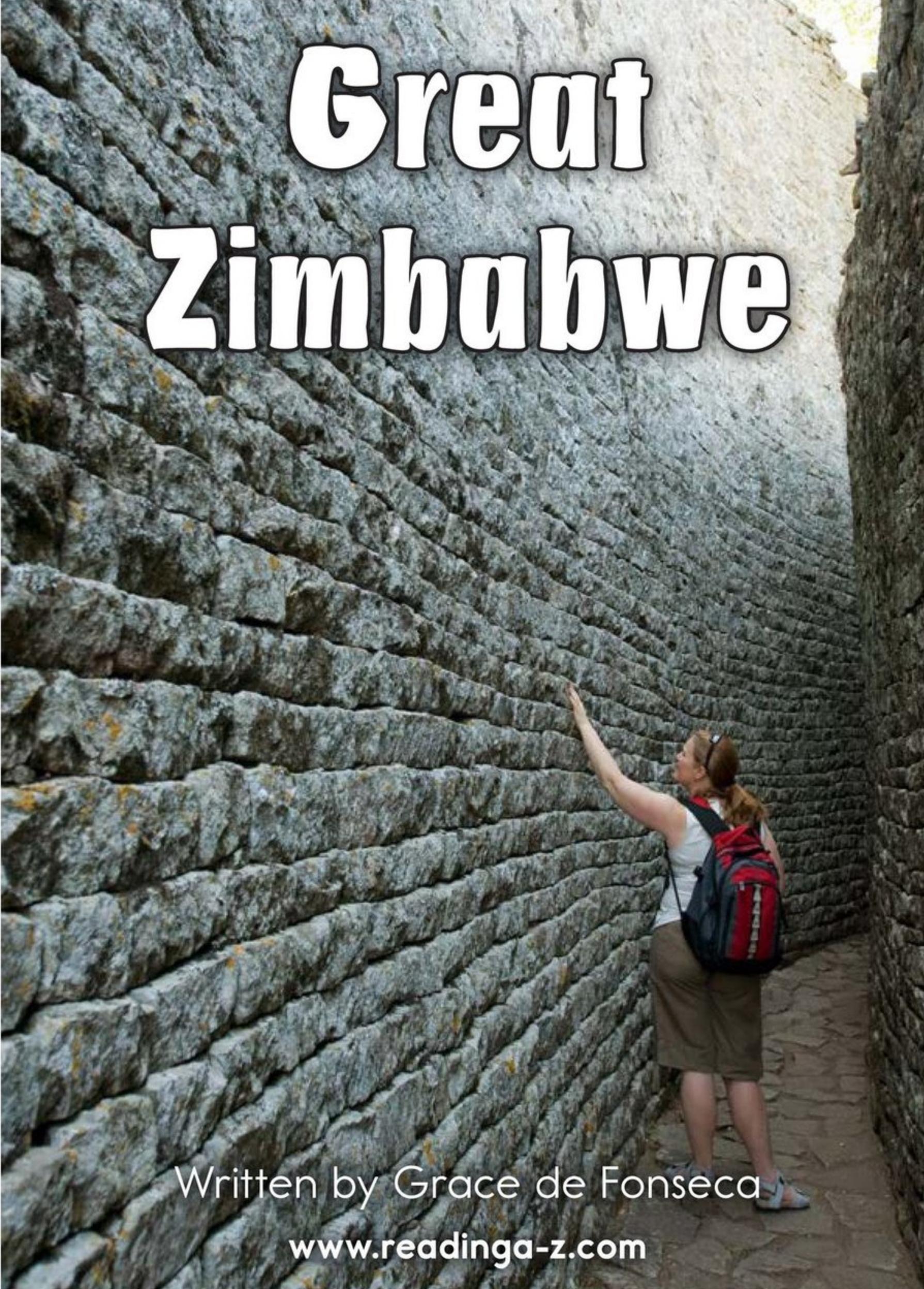
Great Zimbabwe



Written by Grace de Fonseca

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Great Zimbabwe

A photograph showing a person from behind, wearing a white tank top, brown shorts, and a red and black backpack, standing next to a massive, ancient stone wall. The wall is constructed of large, rectangular, greyish-green stones stacked in a dry, overlapping fashion. The person's right arm is extended, pointing upwards towards the top of the wall. The scene is outdoors, with sunlight casting shadows on the wall.

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Focus Question

What is the significance of Great Zimbabwe's design, and what is the purpose of its structures?



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The ruins of Great Zimbabwe cover a large area.



A Giant Place

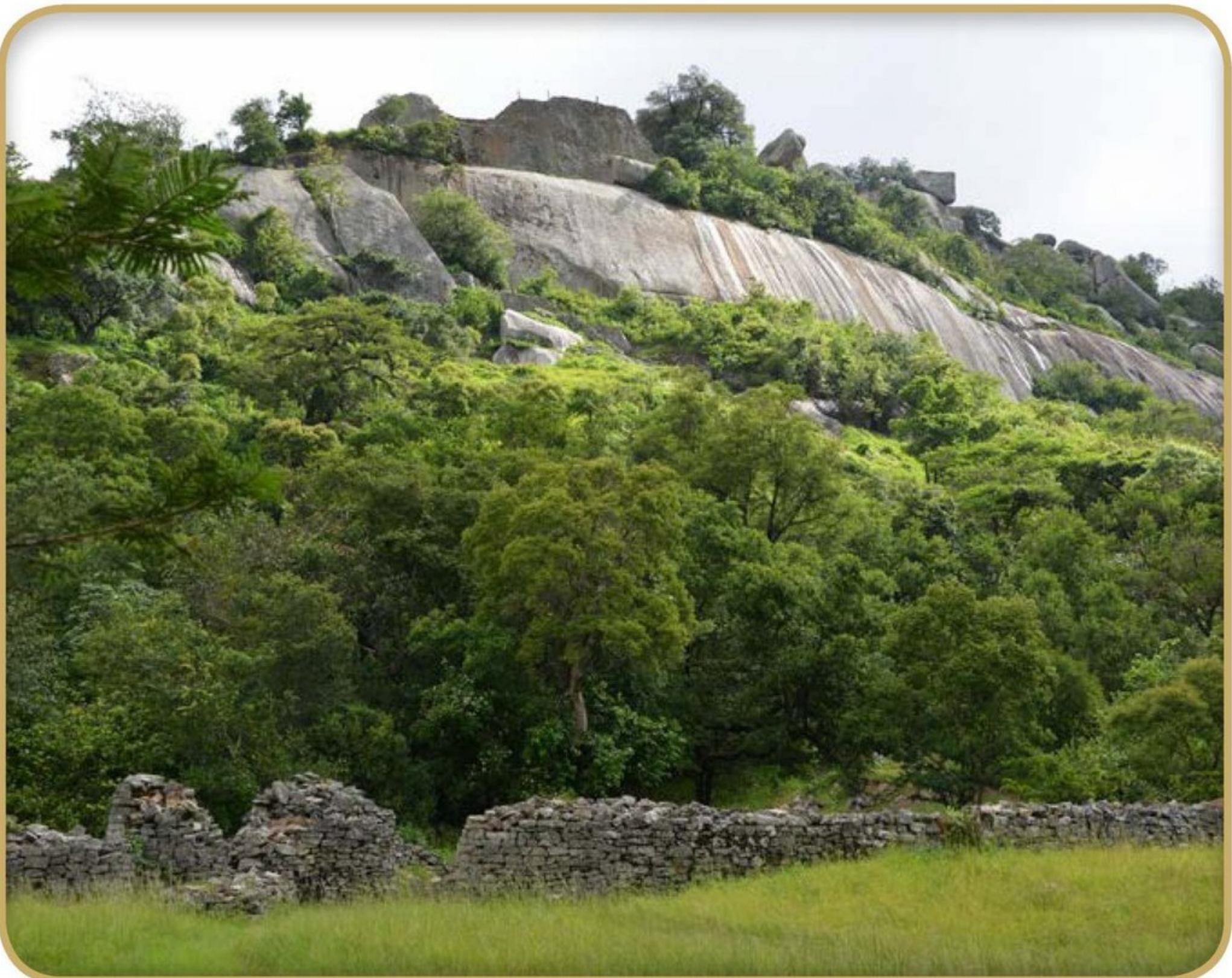
The **ruins** of the once-magnificent city of Great Zimbabwe lie in an area with rolling hills and many huge piles of boulders. Massive stone walls dot the landscape. In some places, the walls stand as high as 11 meters (36 ft.) tall. The ruins cover an area measuring 728.4 hectares (1,800 acres)—almost as large as 1,400 American football fields. The ruins of Great Zimbabwe give us a glimpse into what life was like there from the eleventh to fifteenth centuries. The abandoned city also contains many unsolved mysteries.

The Pride of a Nation

This mysterious city's ruins are located in the southeastern part of Zimbabwe, a nation in southern Africa. Its neighbors include Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia, and Botswana. Nearby landmarks include Lake Mutirikwi and the town of Masvingo.

In the late 1800s, the country we now know as Zimbabwe was a British-controlled colony called Southern Rhodesia. When Zimbabwe gained its independence from Britain in 1980, the people needed a new name for their new country. Since the city of Great Zimbabwe had long been a source of national pride, they chose to name their country after the famous ancient city.



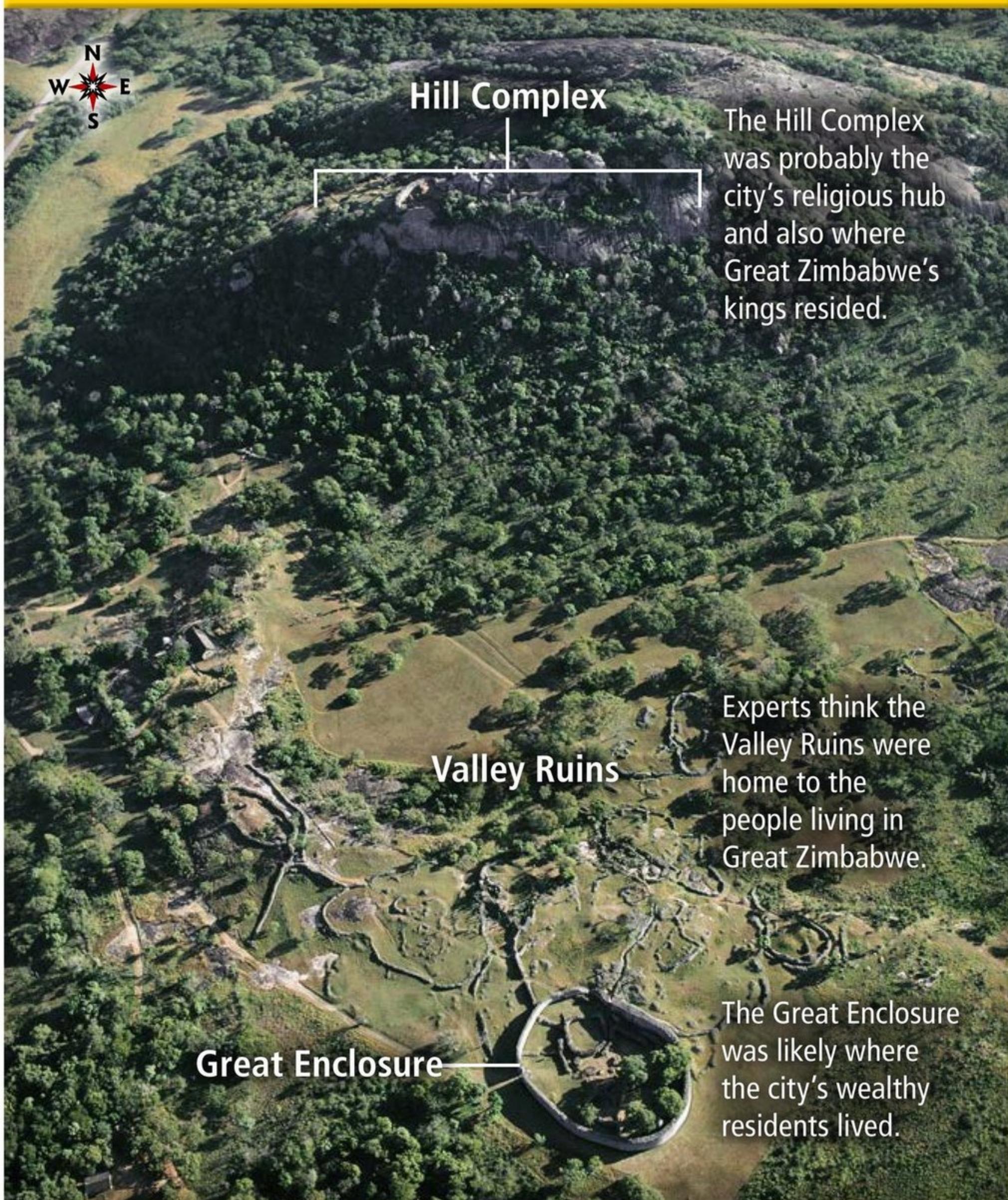


The Hill Complex is located at the northern end of the city.

Stone City

Three main sections span the ruins of Great Zimbabwe: the Hill Complex, the Great Enclosure, and the Valley Ruins. Approximately 100 meters (328 ft.) long by 45 meters (148 ft.) wide, the Hill Complex sits high on a steep hillside on the northern edge of the site with a beautiful view of the rest of the city and the surrounding valley. Six upright posts topped with sculptures of birds have led experts to think that the Hill Complex may have functioned as the city's spiritual center or the home of the kings of Great Zimbabwe.

Great Zimbabwe



The walls of Great Zimbabwe were:

- 11 meters (36 ft.) high in some places—as tall as a three-story building
- up to 6 meters (20 ft.) thick in some places
- continuously curving
- quite smooth and decorative in some places



The curved walls of the Great Enclosure reveal that the builders favored rounded shapes over angular ones.

The Great Enclosure is located in the southern area of the site. Built in the 1300s during the height of the city's success, it is the largest ancient African structure south of the Sahara Desert. The Great Enclosure is an oval that measures 250 meters (820 ft.) around the outside. The builders used approximately one million stones to build it. Just inside the Great Enclosure's outer wall is an inner wall that forms a narrow passage to a cone-shaped tower. **Archaeologists** do not know what the purpose of the tower was or even why the Great Enclosure was built, but it's possible that it was a royal palace.

The Valley Ruins lie between the Hill Complex and the Great Enclosure. They are composed of a large number of smaller houses that are made of a mixture of clay and gravel called **daga**.



This soapstone carving of a female figure might have been made in Great Zimbabwe.

A Booming Empire

By the fourteenth century, Great Zimbabwe was a city at the heart of a powerful empire. More than ten thousand people may have lived there. Some researchers estimate that the population was as high as twenty thousand. The empire's wealthy people may have lived in the stone buildings of the Hill Complex and the Great Enclosure. The peasants likely lived in the daga structures throughout the valley.

Great Zimbabweans grew crops and raised cattle. They were also involved in a large trade network. The city was located along a busy trade route that connected other regions of Africa with ports along the Indian Ocean. The people of Great Zimbabwe traded the gold they mined from the surrounding hills for goods from West Africa, the Middle East, and even China.

This sculpture, possibly from Great Zimbabwe, combines features of an eagle with those of a person.



Although the city was very rich and powerful at one time, by the middle of the fifteenth century it lay abandoned. Some people think the land around the city was ruined from too much farming. Others think the people may have moved to follow changing trade routes. Scholars still do not know why the great city fell.

A National Symbol

The most famous works of art recovered from Great Zimbabwe are a set of eight soapstone bird statues found

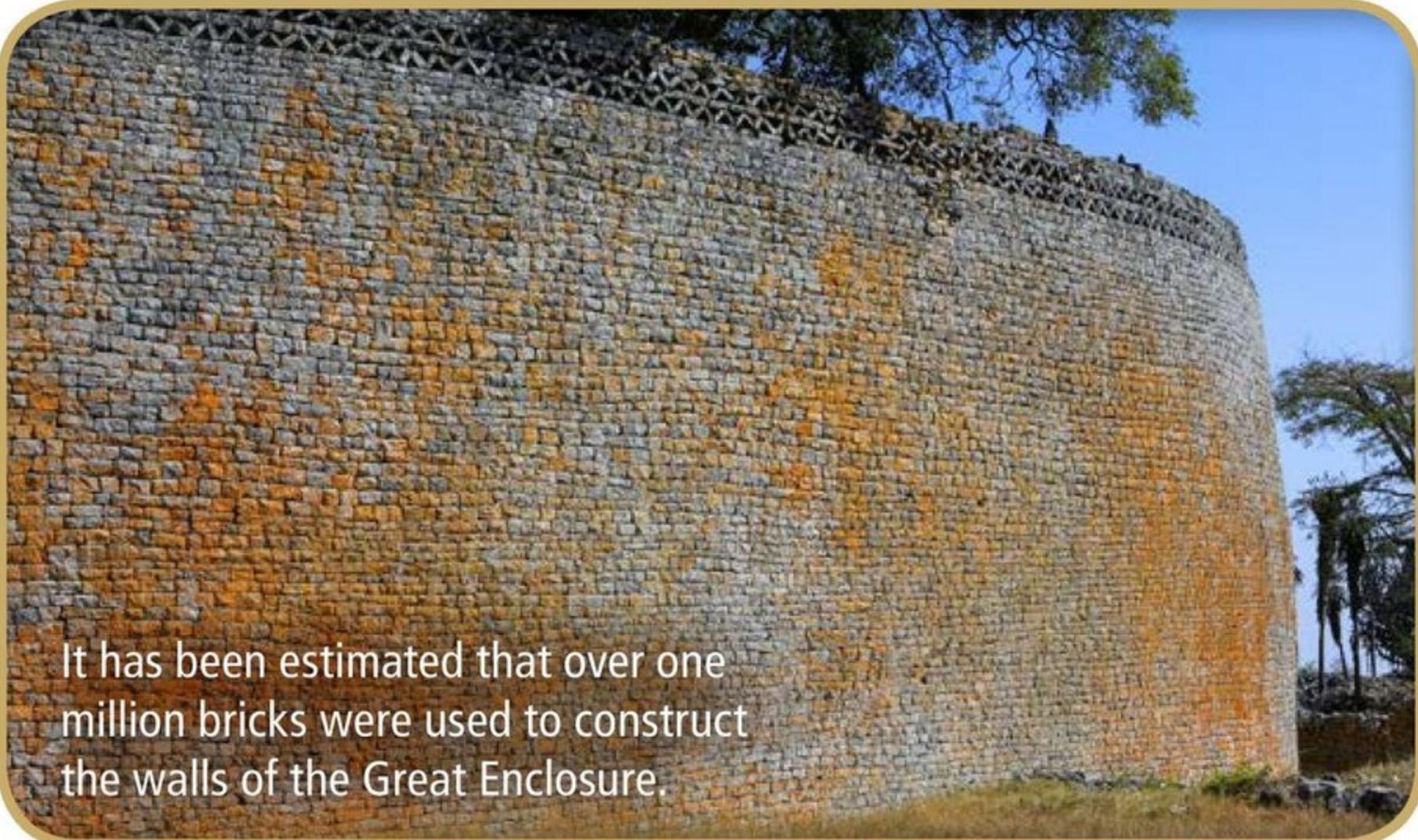
in the Hill Complex. The sculptures may have represented royal authority or perhaps the ancestors of Great Zimbabwe's kings.



The bird statues sat atop columns and likely served as protectors.



Zimbabwe's national symbol was inspired by the sculptures and appears on its flag and coins.



It has been estimated that over one million bricks were used to construct the walls of the Great Enclosure.

Building the Walls

Most of the walls of Great Zimbabwe are made of brick-shaped stones. The people who built them cut the stones from the huge boulders surrounding the city. To do this, they heated the boulders with fire. Then, they poured cold water on the stones. This process caused the stones to split. The types of granite boulders they used naturally split into straight lines. Therefore, they were excellent for shaping into bricks.

The builders stacked these brick-shaped stones on top of one another to build the walls of Great Zimbabwe. In most modern brick walls, a cement-like substance called *mortar* holds the bricks together. The people who built Great Zimbabwe did not use mortar. They made the base of each wall a little thicker than its top. This made the towering walls stable.



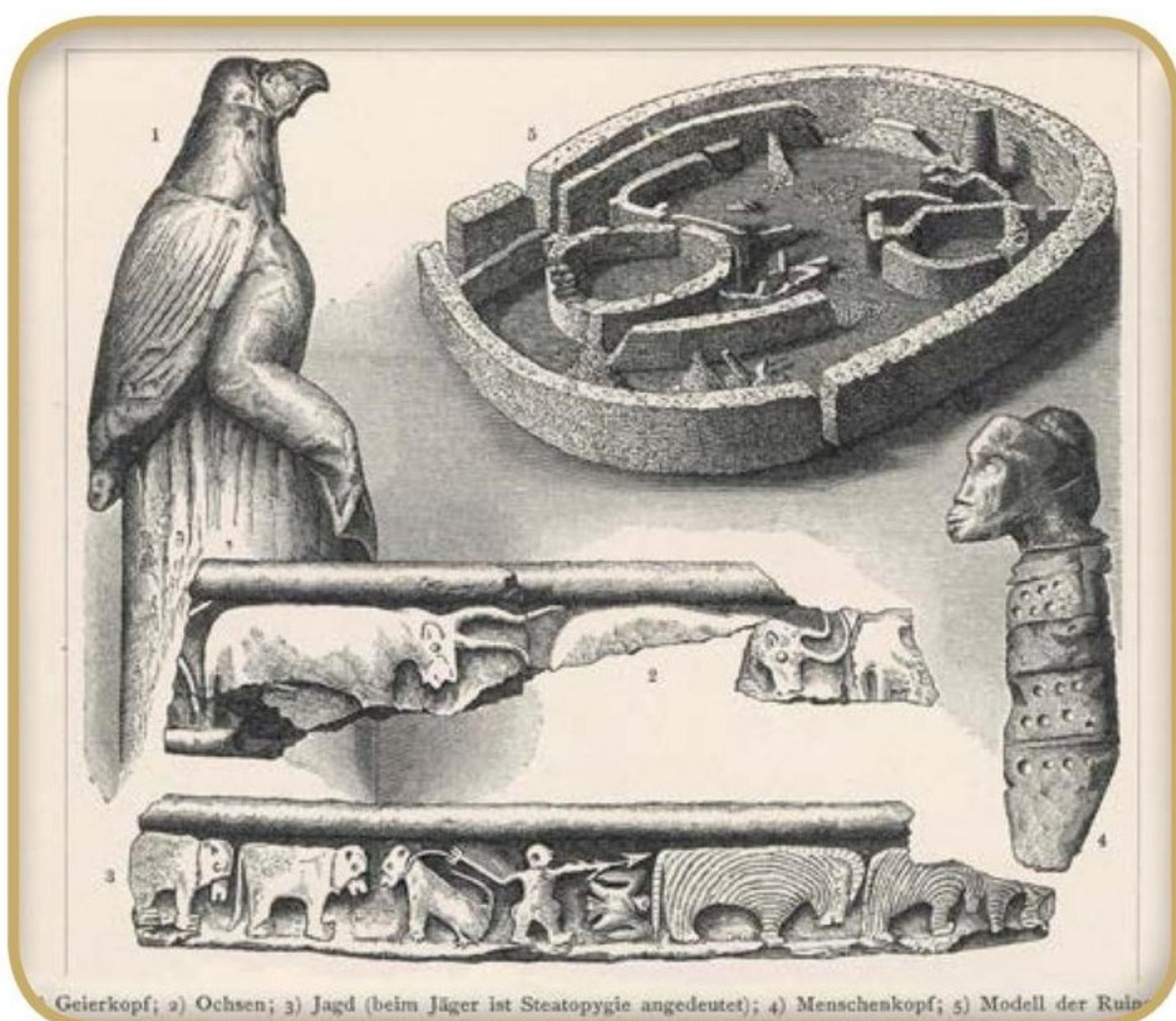
The people of Great Zimbabwe used both boulders and cut stones to build the walls of the Hill Complex.

In addition to using brick-shaped stones, the builders also used huge boulders to make some of Great Zimbabwe's walls. Some of the more carefully constructed walls are as smooth as those we make today. Another interesting **characteristic** of the ancient city's walls is that they form curves rather than straight lines.

Researchers aren't sure why the people of Great Zimbabwe built such massive walls. It seems clear that they did not design the walls to support weight. They may have built the walls to help defend the city from enemies, to give the city's ruling class more privacy, or to stand for the king's authority.

Who Built It?

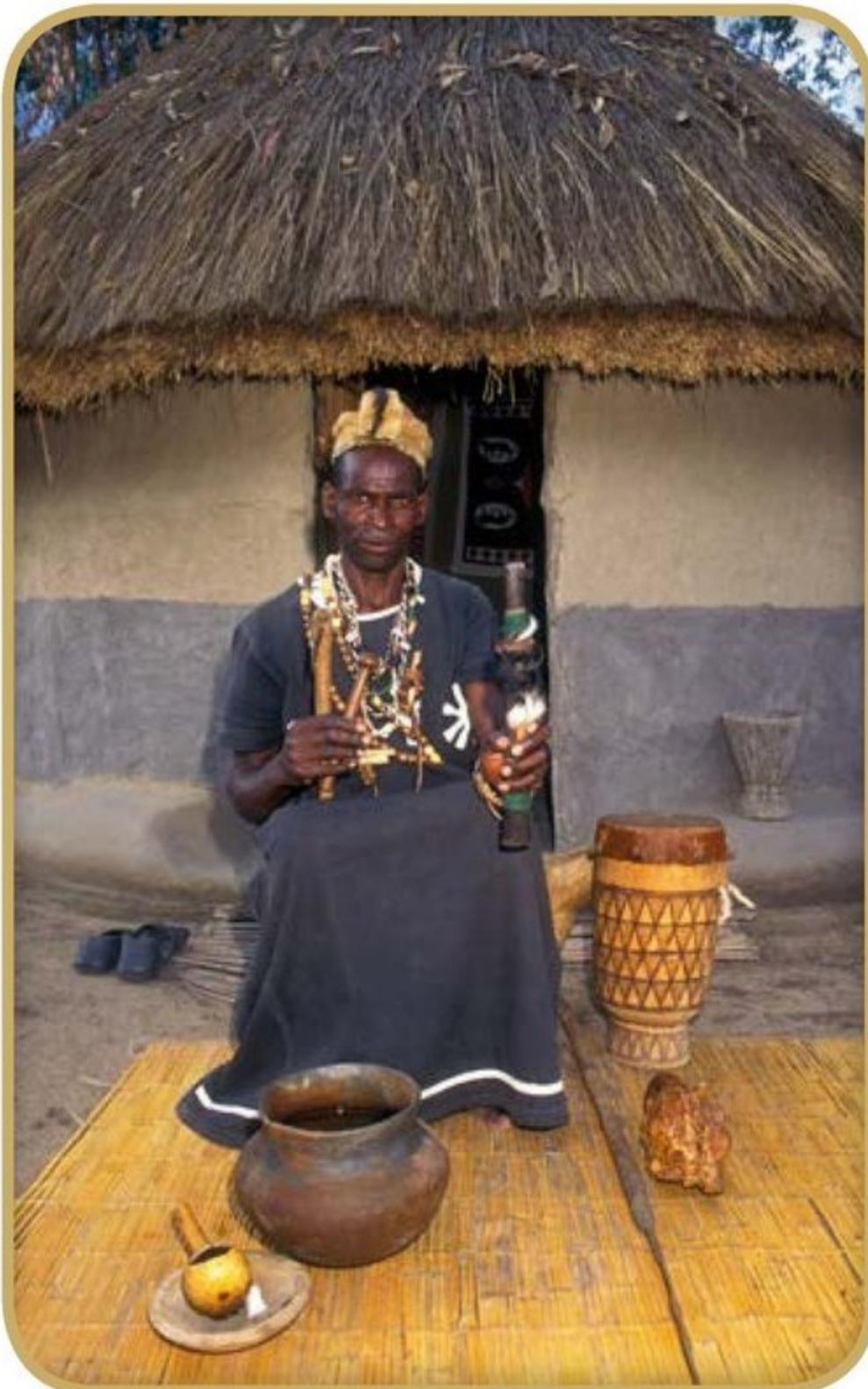
Europeans began to explore the ruins of Great Zimbabwe in the late nineteenth century. They doubted that local African builders could have built the great city. Wood found at the site from the far north led some Europeans to think that another civilization, such as people living along the Mediterranean Sea, had constructed it. For decades they tried to prove that idea. They ignored items found at the site that suggested local people had built the city. They even damaged or destroyed parts of the site while they searched for signs of a foreign **culture**. Finally, in 1905, an archaeologist examined the **artifacts** found at the site and was able to prove that local Africans built Great Zimbabwe.



Drawings made in 1892 show the floor plan of the Great Enclosure and artifacts found near the site.

Geierkopf; 2) Ochsen; 3) Jagd (beim Jäger ist Steatopygie angedeutet); 4) Menschenkopf; 5) Modell der Ruine

A few different tribes claim to be the **descendants** of the people of ancient Great Zimbabwe. However, most people today believe that the Shona people built the ancient city. The Shona have been living in that area for many centuries. Some of the artifacts, such as tools found in the ruins by archaeologists, are very similar to items that the Shona people were using during the nineteenth century. In addition, many people think that the word *Zimbabwe* comes from a Shona phrase that means “stone houses.”



Modern Shona people wear traditional dress.



Stars light up the ruins of Great Zimbabwe at night.



Protecting Great Zimbabwe

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated the ruins of Great Zimbabwe a World **Heritage Site** in 1986. This means nearly all the countries in the world recognize the site as worthy of admiration and protection. However, the site has been damaged over time. People from around the world visit the site, adding to the need for repair. Plants threaten to grow over many of the remaining structures. Weather has also taken a toll on the site. More funding and staff are needed to study and preserve the ruins. Great Zimbabwe's oldest walls have stood for roughly one thousand years. With proper care, they may stand for a thousand more.

Glossary

| | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| archaeologists (n.) | scientists who study the remains of ancient cultures (p. 8) |
| artifacts (n.) | any objects made or used by humans long ago (p. 13) |
| characteristic (n.) | a feature that helps to identify a thing or group of things (p. 12) |
| culture (n.) | the ideas and customs of a certain group of people (p. 13) |
| daga (n.) | a mixture of clay and mud used as a building material (p. 8) |
| descendants (n.) | the offspring of a particular person or group that lived in the past (p. 14) |
| enclosure (n.) | an area that is surrounded and sealed off by something (p. 6) |
| functioned (v.) | fulfilled a task or purpose; served (p. 6) |
| heritage (n.) | a way of life, tradition, or feature passed down from generation to generation (p. 15) |
| ruins (n.) | the remains of old buildings or other structures (p. 4) |
| site (n.) | the location where something is found or took place (p. 6) |
| spiritual (adj.) | related to spirit, soul, or a divine being (p. 6) |

Words to Know

archaeologists

artifacts

characteristic

culture

daga

descendants

enclosure

functioned

heritage

ruins

site

spiritual

Front cover: Statues of birds found in Great Zimbabwe indicate the importance of birds to the people who once lived there.

Title page: Towering walls form a narrow passage.

Page 3: The view from a wall in the hilltop section shows the stunning landscape around Great Zimbabwe.

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