

Great Zimbabwe

A Reading A-Z Level Z1 Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,862

LEVELED BOOK • Z¹

Connections

Writing

Compare the building of the walls of Great Zimbabwe with the construction of modern brick walls. Write a comparative essay explaining how the two methods are alike and how they are different.

Social Studies

Research to learn more about how Great Zimbabwe's location helped it develop into a thriving civilization. Create a map depicting features such as areas for farming, livestock, and potential trade routes.

Great Zimbabwe



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Focus Question

What makes Great Zimbabwe worthy of admiration?

Words to Know

conical	monotheistic
elite	mortar
intrigued	prosperous
landlocked	rituals
lucrative	taper
metropolis	thriving

Front cover: The ruins of Great Zimbabwe are spread over 724.8 hectares (1,800 acres).

Title page: A visitor walks among the tall stone walls of Zimbabwe.

Page 3: All of Great Zimbabwe's walls were erected without the use of mortar, including the ruins of the Hill Complex.

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World Landmarks
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Correlation

LEVEL Z1

Fountas & Pinnell	W-X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60

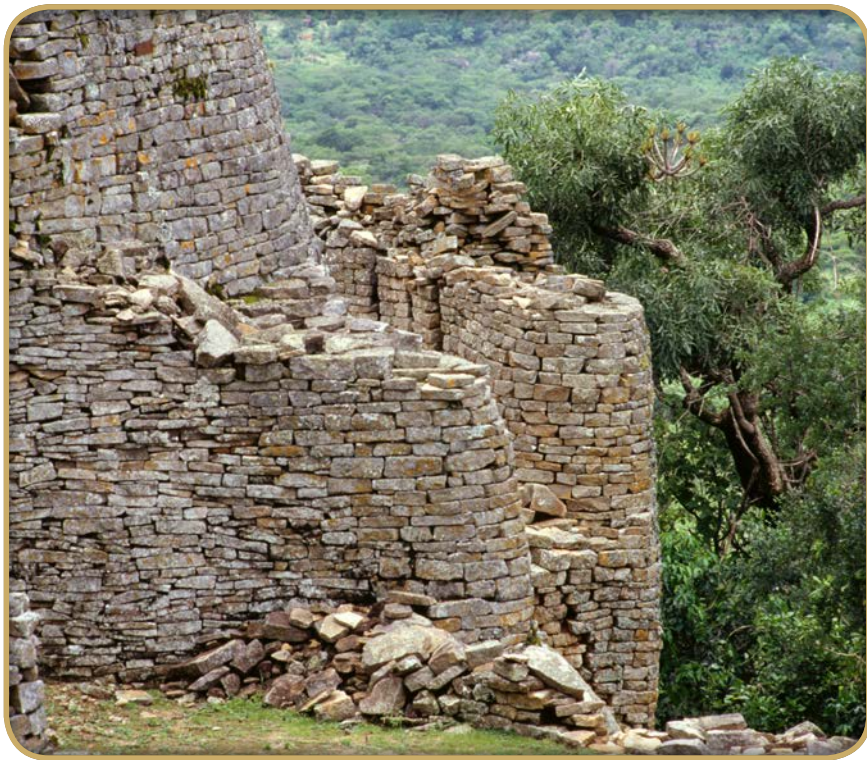


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Sculptures of birds, including this damaged one, suggest that birds were important symbols to the people of Great Zimbabwe.

Mysterious Ruins

Nestled in Southern Zimbabwe is a striking complex of towering stone ruins—all that is left of a once-magnificent city called Great Zimbabwe. The ancient city's mighty walls have **intrigued** Western scholars since Europeans began studying them in the late 1800s. The site offers a fascinating glimpse into what life was like in a **thriving** African civilization between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries. Many aspects of this history, such as why the **prosperous** city was abandoned, remain a mystery.

A Nation's Namesake

The ruins of this ancient city are located in Zimbabwe, a **landlocked** country situated just north of South Africa and west of Mozambique in the southern region of Africa. Its inland neighbors include Zambia and Botswana. The ruins of Great Zimbabwe are located in the southeastern part of Zimbabwe not far from Lake Mutirikwi and the town of Masvingo.

The word *Zimbabwe* is thought to originate from a phrase that means “stone houses” in Shona, one of the three primary languages of Zimbabwe. Great Zimbabwe is such an important source of pride in the area that when Zimbabwe gained its independence from Britain in 1980, the country took its name from the famous ancient city.

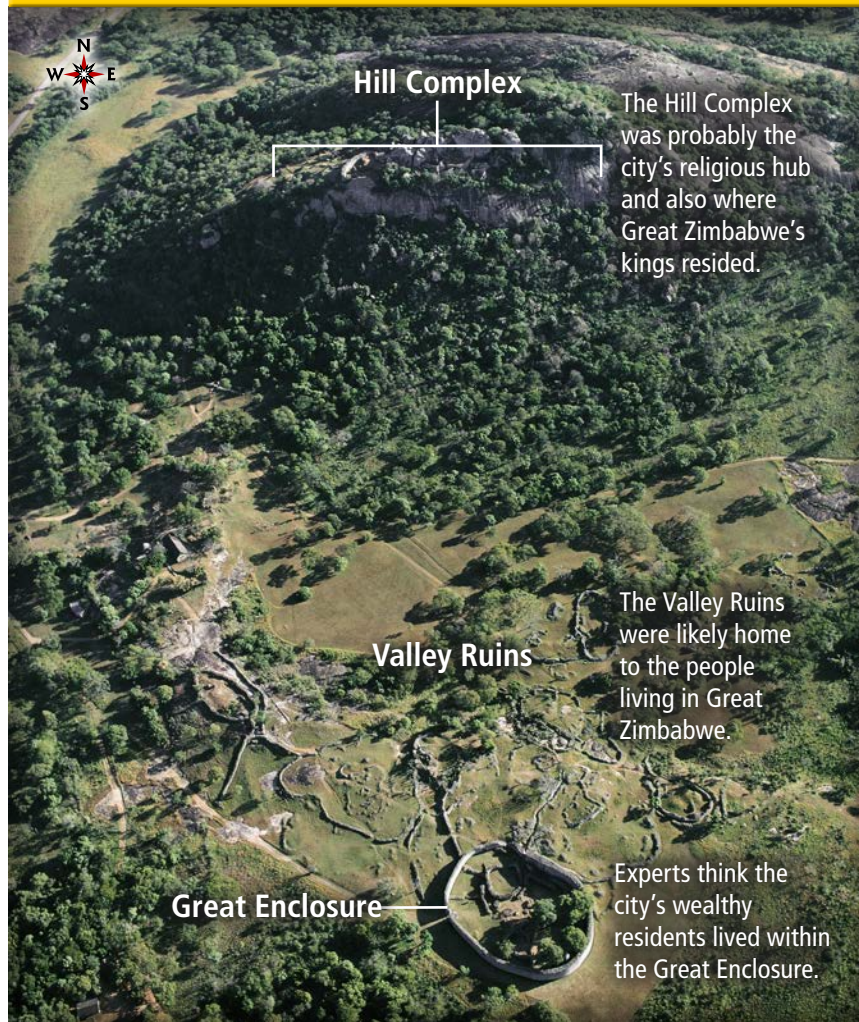


The view from the Hill Complex includes the other sections of the ruins.

City of Stone

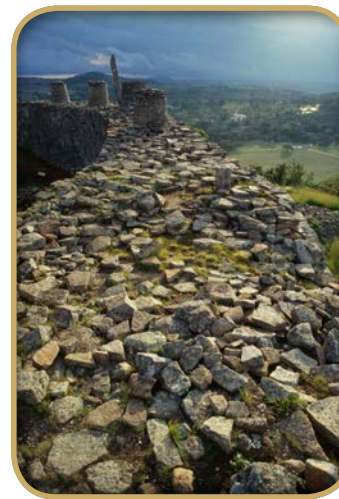
The vast ruins of Great Zimbabwe stretch over nearly 728.4 hectares (1,800 acres) of countryside and include three main sections: the Hill Complex, the Great Enclosure, and the Valley Ruins. The Hill Complex and the Great Enclosure are composed of stone buildings as well as buildings made of a reddish mixture of clay and gravel called *daga*. The Valley Ruins lie between the Hill Complex and the Great Enclosure and feature the remains of a large number of *daga* dwellings scattered throughout the valley.

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 southern view from atop a stone wall in the Hill Complex is spectacular.

The Hill Complex—the oldest section of Great Zimbabwe—is located on a steep hillside in the northern area of the site with a stunning view of the rest of the city and the surrounding landscape. The Hill Complex ruins are about 100 meters (328 ft.) long by 45 meters (148 ft.) wide, with massive stone walls up to 6 meters (20 ft.) thick and 11 meters (36 ft.) high. Six upright posts topped with birds in one part of the Hill Complex lead experts to think this section was the city's spiritual center and may have been used for religious **rituals**. Located at what is thought to have been the city's center, the Hill Complex was also likely the home of Great Zimbabwe's chiefs.



The curving wall of the Great Enclosure exemplifies how the builders of Great Zimbabwe preferred rounded shapes to linear ones.

In the southern area of the Hill Complex lies the Great Enclosure, the largest ancient African structure south of the Sahara Desert. This oval ring of stone spans 250 meters (820 ft.) in circumference, and like the Hill Complex, it is as high as 11 meters (36 ft.) tall in some places. Researchers estimate that the builders used approximately one million stones in its construction. A second wall runs just inside part of the outer wall of the Great Enclosure for about 55 meters (180 ft.), forming a narrow passage. The passage leads to a **conical** tower whose purpose remains a mystery. The remains of daga houses can be found within the walls of the Great Enclosure as well as smaller walls that divide the area into compounds for different families. Scientific dating techniques indicate that the Great Enclosure was built in the 1300s at the height of Great Zimbabwe's power. Archaeologists do not know why people built the Great Enclosure, but it may also have been a royal palace.



The conical tower within the Great Enclosure is completely solid.

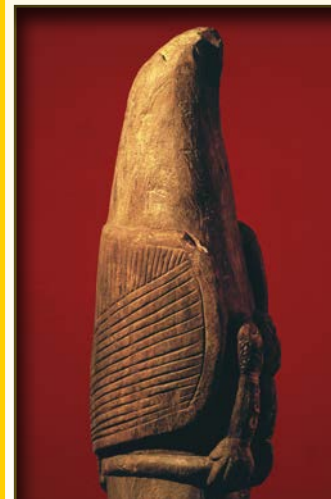
Building the Great City

Rumors of a magnificent sub-Saharan city began circulating among Europeans in the sixteenth century as Portuguese explorers told of the stone walls they encountered in their travels. In the late nineteenth century, Europeans encountered Great Zimbabwe again and began to explore its history. They doubted that local African builders were capable of such fine craftsmanship.

A National Symbol

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

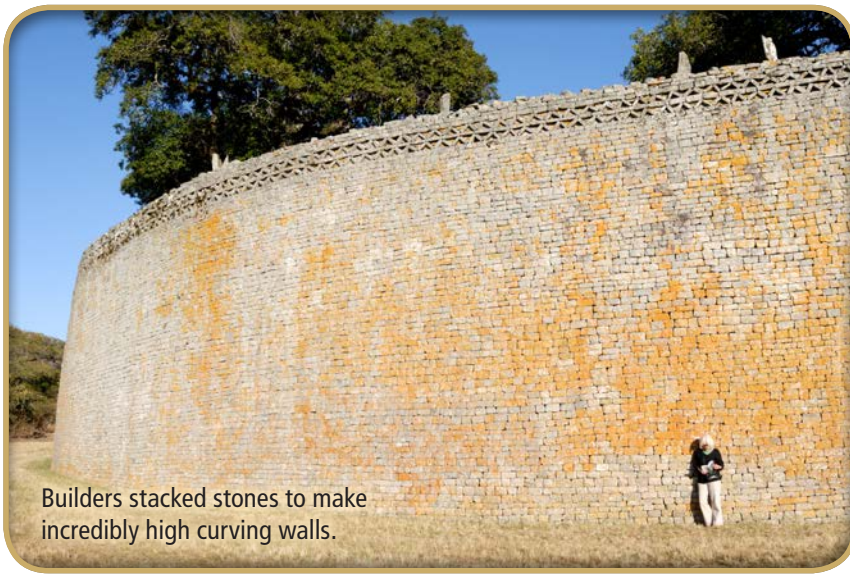
- sat atop columns in the Hill Complex
- measure approximately 41 centimeters (16 in.) tall
- have some humanlike features, such as lips
- may have represented royal authority or ancestry



The soapstone birds were likely thought of as protectors guarding Great Zimbabwe.



The bird statues inspired the design of Zimbabwe's national symbol, which appears on its flag and coins.



Builders stacked stones to make incredibly high curving walls.

Some Europeans thought that samples of wood found at the site were from the north and were convinced that Phoenicians (fi-NEE-shunz) who lived near the eastern Mediterranean must have built the city. Over the years, several amateur researchers attempted to prove that theory. They ignored a host of evidence including pottery, spearheads, and tools that indicated African origin and even damaged or destroyed parts of the site in their quest to unearth a connection to another culture.

Finally, in 1905, British archaeologist David Randall-MacIver examined the site. Based on the artifacts he found and the construction of the daga buildings around the site, Randall-MacIver concluded that Africans built Great Zimbabwe.

A few different African tribes claim that their ancestors were responsible for building Great Zimbabwe. However, most scholars today think the Shona people, who have been living in the area since prehistoric times, built the city. The evidence indicates that people began constructing it about one thousand years ago and that the city was under construction for over three hundred years.

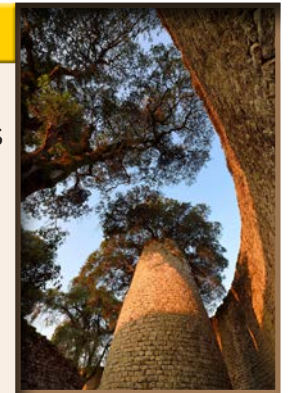
The construction of the site is unique for many reasons. One of the site's distinctive features is that the walls were not built in straight lines but rather in curves across the rolling terrain. In addition, sometimes the builders incorporated enormous boulders into their building plan. The Hill Complex offers a stunning example of this building technique.

Evidence of African Builders

In later investigations of the site, archaeologists confirmed Randall-MacIver's findings that local people built Great Zimbabwe.

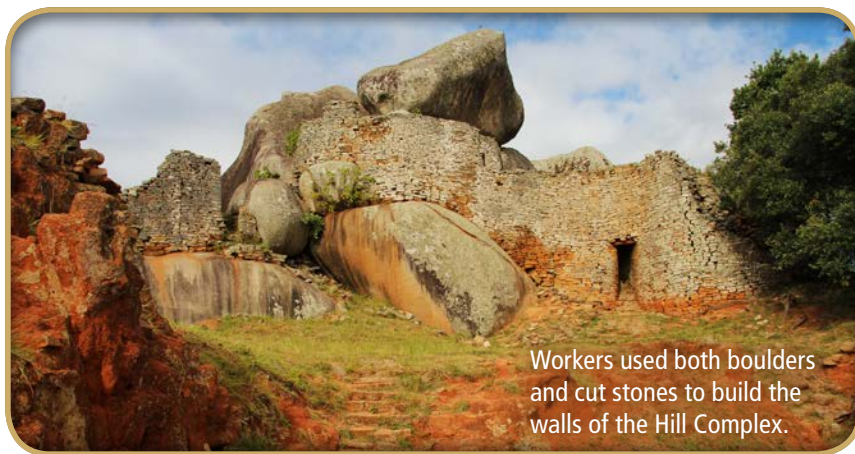
Some artifacts discovered by archaeologists, such as tools, are similar to items used by the Shona people who were living near the site in the 1800s.

The curving stone walls also indicate local design because they are unlike the more geometric designs favored by Arab cultures once thought to have built the city.



The builders of Great Zimbabwe mainly used smaller stones that they cut into bricklike shapes. Stonemasons cut the stones from the large granite boulders that are common around Great Zimbabwe. To make the millions of stone bricks needed to build the walls of Great Zimbabwe, stonemasons used fire to heat the large stones to high temperatures. Then they poured cold water on the red-hot stones. The temperature change caused the stones to split along naturally straight lines.

The builders stacked the stones on top of one another to build the walls. Amazingly, they did not use any **mortar** to hold the stones together. The particular construction technique used at the site is found only in a few other areas in Africa, and many people consider Great Zimbabwe to be the most impressive example.



Workers used both boulders and cut stones to build the walls of the Hill Complex.



Moss grows on the walls inside the Great Enclosure.

The workers made the base of each wall a little thicker than its top so the walls slightly **taper** as they stretch toward the sky. This strategy kept the towering three-story walls of stacked stones from toppling.

The craftsmanship of Great Zimbabwe is quite impressive. While some of the earlier walls are a bit coarse, building techniques improved as time went on. Some of the more carefully constructed walls are very smooth, similar to a modern brick wall.

The purpose of these massive walls is not completely understood, because the walls of Great Zimbabwe were not designed to support weight. Evidence suggests that the people of Great Zimbabwe built the walls as part of the city's defenses. Other evidence suggests that the purpose of the walls was to preserve the privacy of the city's **elite** or that they may have served as a symbol of royal authority.

A Thriving Civilization

The Shona people have been living in the area around Great Zimbabwe since the Iron Age, beginning in the third century CE. The land was ideal for farming and raising livestock, and there were many underground deposits of valuable materials, such as gold, iron, copper, and tin. The people mined these resources for both trade and crafting.

Over time, the simple society of farmers and cattle herders developed more complex social arrangements. Evidence suggests that after around 1000 CE, the Shona people began forming settlements with centralized states. This date corresponds to the time when the Shona were likely building the city of Great Zimbabwe. By the fourteenth century, Great Zimbabwe was a trading city at the heart of a powerful empire.

A modern Shona healer wears traditional clothing.



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

At the height of the empire's power, the population of Great Zimbabwe, including the surrounding valley, was likely over ten thousand people, with some estimates putting it as high as twenty thousand. The empire's elite class owned the resources and took leadership roles. It was most likely this elite group that lived in the city's stone buildings, such as the Great Enclosure. The peasants probably lived in the more modest daga dwellings around the valley.

Cattle, crops, and trade were the backbone of Great Zimbabwe's booming economy. The city was built along a bustling 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 far-flung nations.

Archaeologists have found metal ornaments of West African craftsmanship, glass from the Middle East, and even porcelain from China among the ruins of Great Zimbabwe. These artifacts prove that the empire engaged in extensive trade with other cultures. Works of art likely made by local artists have also been discovered, showing that the people of Great Zimbabwe had their own artistic traditions.

Great Zimbabwe was also likely a major religious center since archaeologists have discovered several stone altars among the ruins. The religion of Great Zimbabwe was probably similar to the **monotheistic** religion still practiced by the modern Shona people.

Despite the evidence of obvious wealth and power in the city, it was largely abandoned by the middle of the fifteenth century. Scholars still do not know why. One prominent theory is that the land around the city became overused from grazing cattle and farming. If the land was depleted of nutrients necessary for crops, it would have been difficult to grow enough food to sustain such a large population. Another theory is that the people of Great Zimbabwe may have moved in order to seek out more **lucrative** trade deals as other geographical areas rose in economic power.

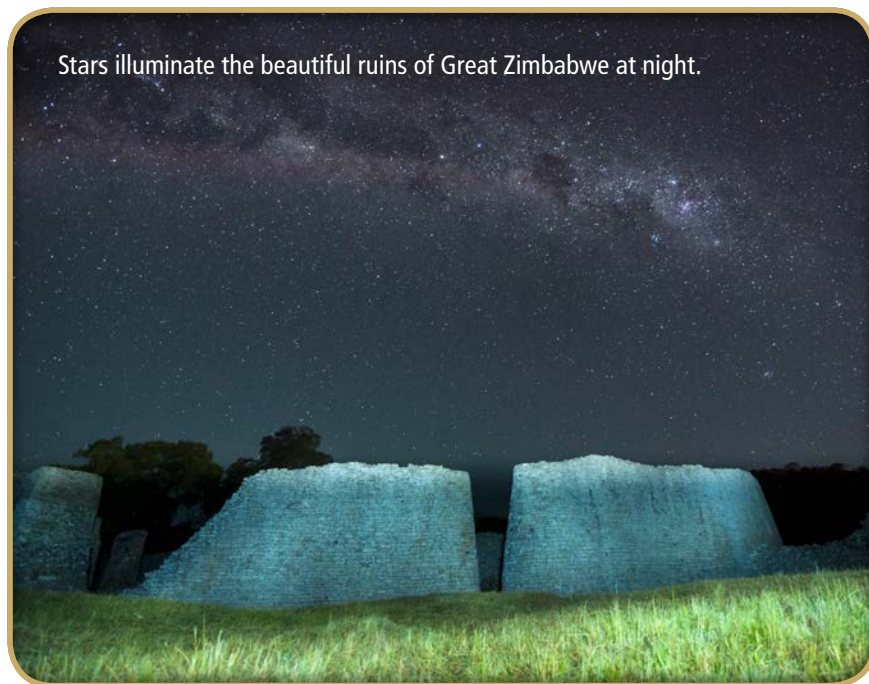
Protecting Great Zimbabwe

Although Great Zimbabwe is no longer the bustling **metropolis** it once was, it still plays a role in modern Zimbabwe. Some modern Zimbabweans use the site for religious practices to this day. It is also one of Zimbabwe's tourist attractions.

Tourist interaction with the site has caused damage, and the ruins need protection if they are to endure another millennium. In addition, environmental factors, such as climate, are taking a toll on the ruins. Finally, invasive plants pose a threat to the integrity of the remaining structures.

Legal protections have existed for Great Zimbabwe since 1893, but more government funding is urgently needed to fully preserve and study the site. In recognition of its historical and cultural importance, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated the ruins a World Heritage Site in 1986, which means that nearly all countries in the world recognize the site as worthy of admiration and preservation.

Preserving the ruins is complicated. It involves studying the factors contributing to Great Zimbabwe's decline, respecting the history of the structures and land, and carefully considering the beliefs of the region's people.



Stars illuminate the beautiful ruins of Great Zimbabwe at night.

Secrets in the Stones

Great Zimbabwe is a site of historical significance. It reveals fascinating and important information about life and global trade in a thriving empire in medieval southern Africa. However, while the ruins have given us captivating glimpses into the past, they continue to keep many secrets. For example, what was the purpose of the conical tower within the Great Enclosure? And perhaps most intriguing of all, why was the great city deserted after centuries of prosperity? With proper care and study, perhaps the walls of Great Zimbabwe will reveal the answers to these mysteries.

Glossary

conical (<i>adj.</i>)	in the shape of a cone (p. 9)
elite (<i>n.</i>)	the most successful, wealthy, or powerful members of a society (p. 14)
intrigued (<i>v.</i>)	drew out the interest or curiosity of others; captivated (p. 4)
landlocked (<i>adj.</i>)	surrounded on all sides by land (p. 5)
lucrative (<i>adj.</i>)	producing a lot of money; profitable (p. 17)
metropolis (<i>n.</i>)	a very large or important city (p. 18)
monotheistic (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to the belief in only one god (p. 17)
mortar (<i>n.</i>)	a liquid mixture of materials that hardens as it dries and is used to hold bricks or stones together (p. 13)
prosperous (<i>adj.</i>)	having success; well-off (p. 4)
rituals (<i>n.</i>)	ceremonies with standard steps or actions (p. 8)
taper (<i>v.</i>)	to become gradually smaller toward one end of an object (p. 14)
thriving (<i>adj.</i>)	growing and healthy (p. 4)