

Exploring the Seat of Kings:
An assessment of interpretations at Great Zimbabwe.

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Situated on the southern edge of the Zimbabwe plateau between two rivers, Great Zimbabwe is the largest and most impressive iron-age site in sub-Saharan Africa. Constructed between A.D. 1100 and 1600 by an early Shona culture, this precolonial city consists of three main structural stone groupings: the Hill complex, the Great Enclosure and the smaller Valley Ruins. Unfortunately, due to looting and gross mismanagement of the site in the late nineteenth century, much of the in situ cultural material has been lost. What has been discovered, however, shows that Great Zimbabwe was a significant cattle-herding site and came to be an established trading community. Its large scale also suggests it was the area's economic and political centre. Interpretations of the site has given archaeologists much insight into the rise and fall of a complex medieval city in southern Africa with as much as 18000 inhabitants. Its contribution to contemporary archaeology lies in the application of cognitive archaeology, a new subspecialty of the field.

Accurate interpretation of Great Zimbabwe today is difficult due to the loss of in situ cultural material at the site. In the late nineteenth century the site was subject to looting and second-rate archaeology. Gold and other artefacts of value were taken by looters, while potsherds, pots and clay figurines were discarded. European settlers in Zimbabwe believed the stonework was too sophisticated to be built by Africans (some believed it was the site of the fabled King Solomon's mines). So-called archaeologists at the time believed Great Zimbabwe to be of Phoenician or Arabian origin. The stratigraphy around the conical tower in the Great Enclosure was destroyed. Clay and metal artifacts, including trade beads, were deemed insignificant and thrown away. As the

curator of the ruins at the time stated, they merely wanted “to free it [Great Zimbabwe] from the filth and decadence of the Kaffir occupation” (McIntosh, 46).

The true date and African origin of Great Zimbabwe was first established in 1905 by Egyptologist David Randall-MacIver. His excavations revealed artefacts similar to those used by the contemporary Shona people. He drew on the lore and knowledge of the local people for cultural interpretation and analogy. Furthermore, he proved that “the Arab and Persian beads were no older than the 14th or 15th century and thus did not date back to biblical times and King Solomon” (Ngoro, 97). Randall-MacIver argued that Great Zimbabwe was built by native Africans. Subsequent archaeologists expounded upon his work and supported his conclusion, despite rejection of the record by European settlers and suppression of the research by a racist government.

Great Zimbabwe’s prime geographical location was a major factor in its successful cattle herding and establishing of trade links. The initial prosperity of the city’s founders appears to have been based solely on cattle herding. Great Zimbabwe’s location between two distinct savannah environments (highveld and lowveld) made this site “an ideal base from which to exploit the seasonal changes” (Garner, 40). Also, its high position on the highveld plateau kept cattle safe from the disease-carrying tsetse flies that bred in lower elevations. In addition to this, the city’s location between the goldfields in the west and the eastern seaboard ensured contact with the Arab trade merchants that operated on the east coast. Glass beads, glazed ceramics, porcelain and cloth from India, Persia, China and Egypt were traded for ivory, rhinoceros horn, and gold panned from the Limpopo River. The trade artefacts recorded at the site show that Great Zimbabwe was

well established as a trading community by the 14th century. Archaeologists suggest Great Zimbabwe was abandoned by the late 16th century due to overpopulation, a depletion of natural resources, overgrazing and a succession of severe droughts. Also, by this time the rivers had been panned clean and the gold trade began to move west. Whatever the reason, it appears this site was largely empty by 1700.

It has been suggested that cattle wealth and trade alone could not have supported such a large-scale human habitation site. Although ideal for cattle grazing, the poor soil on top of the plateau would not have supported agriculture. This would mean relying on food import to support Great Zimbabwe's huge population. Furthermore, it is now believed the plateau's gold deposits were not exploited until a century after the city's founding. Perhaps a unique political or religious ideology unified and structured these people. Cognitive archaeology involves determining the religion, ideology and politics of a past culture through space use, material symbolism and historical accounts. There is much argument among archaeologists when it comes to defining prehistoric ideology, but it does give us further insight into the reasons that Great Zimbabwe was built. Those who have examined the site using cognitive archaeology - Archaeologist Thomas Huffman, political historian David Beach and historian Eugenia Herbert, offer three differing interpretations.

Huffman contends that religious ideology was a critical factor in Great Zimbabwe's development. He suggests the site was the seat for a King who held political and economic power through his importance as a religious leader. Huffman examines the symbolism imbued in the site's architecture and use of space to show religious

significance. There was a clear distinction between male and female at Great Zimbabwe: features such as turrets, towers and monoliths occur in male and female pairs. Symbolic motifs and designs of crocodiles and snakes on the stones represent religious beliefs associated with the royal lineage. Certain passageways and entrances are extremely narrow, suggesting restricted access for the elite and the buildings richest in religious symbolism are the most restricted. Huffman also places great significance in a unique and enigmatic group of soapstone birds found at the site that are unlike any sculptures found elsewhere. He uses published Portuguese documents, Shona oral traditions and Venda anthropology to support his theory.

Beach criticizes Huffman for overreliance on analogy with practices of the Venda, an uncritical reading of Shona myth to recent to be applicable before A.D. 1550 and misinterpretations of Portuguese misunderstandings of later Shona society. He dismisses Huffman's interpretations of space use as guesswork based on erroneous oral traditions. As for the soapstone birds, he correctly states that we simply do not know what they meant. He suggests that "they would not have strained the capacity of a single carver working over a few years" (Beach, 60) and may simply be an individual initiative. The fact that they were left at the site suggests that they may not have been as crucial to the thinking of Great Zimbabwe people as they are to that of archaeologists. Beach puts forward a model that interprets Great Zimbabwe as a political centre. He contends that the success of the site was due to a succession of charismatic Shona leaders who knew how to manipulate Shona rules of statecraft and were able to use the city's manpower to

dominate the gold trade. Each structural grouping is a symbol of legitimacy and was built successively over three or four generations.

Herbert highlights the important role of metal and metalworking at Great Zimbabwe - a role that Huffman and Beach fail to address. Remains of utilitarian objects such as hoes, axes and chisels as well as goods such as beads and bangles fashioned out of iron, copper, gold and bronze have been found at the site. Other discoveries include a store of unworked ore, smithing and smelting debris and metalwork - all found in certain areas of the site. These areas also have the most restricted access, suggesting a link between metalworking and the elite members of Great Zimbabwe society (McIntosh, 49). Herbert suggests gold was only important in African metallurgy after contact with the Indian Ocean traders. Iron, however, has associations with occult power and was important in the Kings mediation of his people and their gods.

Great Zimbabwe has been designated a world heritage site by UNESCO and is an important monument to Shona culture. Early interpretations of Great Zimbabwe a century ago were ethnocentric and politically skewed. Even in recent years this site has been politically controversial - from 1965 to 1980 all research available on Great Zimbabwe was banned by an apartheid based government (Ngoro, 97). This site has been plagued by looters and has been subject to biased and unscientific archaeology. Despite this loss of cultural material, conventional archaeology through excavation, dating, classification, sequencing and environmental analyses has uncovered Great Zimbabwe's origin and history. From its early beginnings as a cattle encampment, to its rise as a trading community and its abandonment after four centuries of occupation, a diachronic analysis

of Great Zimbabwe has given us a glimpse into the city's functions. Further analysis through cognitive archaeology tries to define the inhabitant's religious and political ideologies in an attempt to answer the question of development. Despite these analytical contributions, further archaeological research still needs to be done in and around Great Zimbabwe to fully interpret its place in sub-Saharan history. Currently Zimbabwe (along with most of Africa) lacks the funds to support archaeology. Until the situation changes interpretation of Great Zimbabwe will remain in the realm of cognitive archaeology.

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