

Fact Sheet 4: Great Zimbabwe

Time Period: c. 1100 – 1500 CE

Location: Southern Africa – in present-day Zimbabwe

Introduction: A City of Stone and Power

Great Zimbabwe was one of the most powerful and sophisticated cities in southern Africa during the Middle Ages. Built by the ancestors of the **Shona people**, it was a centre of trade, politics, and culture — a place of wealth, innovation, and international connection. At its height, Great Zimbabwe controlled a vast region and linked Africa's interior to distant lands such as China, Persia, and the Middle East.

Its impressive stone structures, advanced society, and global trade links show that Africa's history is rich with achievements — long before European colonisation.

The Rise of Great Zimbabwe

Great Zimbabwe began as a small settlement around **1100 CE**, but its location made it ideal for growth. It sat between gold-rich regions to the south and major trade routes leading to the Swahili trading cities on Africa's east coast, such as Kilwa and Sofala. As gold, ivory, and other goods flowed through the region, the settlement grew into a powerful city-state.

By the **14th century**, Great Zimbabwe was the heart of a vast kingdom, home to an estimated **15,000–20,000 people** — a large population for the time. Its rulers controlled trade, collected tribute from surrounding lands, and commanded loyalty from smaller towns and villages across the region.

Architecture and Engineering: The City of Stone

One of the most striking features of Great Zimbabwe is its architecture. The city's name comes from the Shona phrase *dzimba dza mabwe*, meaning “houses of stone.” Unlike most other African cities of the period, Great Zimbabwe was built almost entirely from stone — without the use of mortar.

The city was divided into three main areas:

- **The Hill Complex:** The oldest part of the city, built on a rocky hill, probably served as a royal residence, religious centre, or fortress.
- **The Great Enclosure:** A massive, circular stone wall — up to 11 metres high and 250 metres in circumference — that surrounded royal buildings, courtyards, and towers. Its scale and complexity demonstrate advanced engineering and planning.
- **The Valley Ruins:** A residential area filled with stone houses and smaller enclosures where nobles, traders, and skilled workers lived.

The sheer size and quality of these structures amazed early European explorers, who wrongly assumed they must have been built by outsiders. Archaeological evidence has since proven they were the work of **African builders, architects, and engineers** — a powerful reminder of the continent's ingenuity.

Trade, Wealth, and Global Connections

Great Zimbabwe's wealth came from trade. Its rulers controlled the region's **gold mines** and traded gold, ivory, copper, and animal skins with merchants from the Swahili coast. From there, goods were shipped across the Indian Ocean to Arabia, Persia, India, and China.

Archaeologists have discovered artefacts such as **Chinese porcelain**, **Persian glassware**, and **Arabian coins** in Great Zimbabwe — clear evidence of long-distance trade networks. These discoveries prove that the city was part of a global economy and that African civilizations were connected to the wider world centuries before European exploration.

Society, Power, and Culture

Great Zimbabwe was the centre of a complex and well-organised society. At the top was a **king** (sometimes called a *Mambo*), who was both a political and spiritual leader. The king's power came from controlling trade and resources, as well as from the belief that he was chosen by the ancestors to lead.

The society beneath him included nobles, traders, artisans, and farmers. People farmed crops such as sorghum and millet, raised cattle, and crafted goods from iron, copper, and gold. Religious beliefs centred on **ancestral spirits** and the natural world, with ceremonies and rituals performed to ensure prosperity and balance.

Decline and Legacy

By the **15th century**, Great Zimbabwe's power began to fade. Historians believe that a combination of factors — such as overgrazing, soil exhaustion, climate change, and shifts in trade routes — led to its decline. Many of its people migrated north and west, founding new states such as the **Mutapa Empire**, which continued the legacy of trade and power in the region.

Although the city was eventually abandoned, its legacy lived on. Great Zimbabwe became a symbol of African achievement and civilisation. In fact, the modern country of Zimbabwe takes its name from this ancient city, recognising it as a source of national pride.

Why Great Zimbabwe Matters

Great Zimbabwe challenges outdated myths about Africa's past. It shows that:

- African societies built **complex, urbanised cities** with sophisticated architecture and engineering.
- African rulers controlled **vast trade networks** that connected them to the Middle East and Asia.
- African people developed **powerful political systems, rich cultural traditions, and global influence** long before colonial rule.

Its monumental stone structures still stand today — a powerful symbol of resilience, creativity, and pride.

Key Takeaways

- Great Zimbabwe was a major African city-state built by the ancestors of the **Shona people**.
- Its people were skilled builders, creating massive stone structures without mortar.
- The city thrived on global trade, exchanging gold and ivory for goods from as far away as China and Persia.
- Great Zimbabwe was a political, economic, and cultural centre — proof of Africa's sophistication and global importance.
- Its legacy continues to inspire pride in African history and identity today.