The wealth of Africa
Great Zimbabwe
Presentation

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What can we learn about Great Zimbabwe?
WHAT WAS GREAT ZIMBABWE?

Source 1: Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) banknote, 1955
British Museum
WHAT WAS GREAT ZIMBABWE?

What might this be?

Source 1: Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) banknote, 1955
British Museum
WHAT WAS GREAT ZIMBABWE?

What does the fact that it appears on a banknote tell you about its importance?

Source 1: Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) banknote, 1955
British Museum
WHERE IS GREAT ZIMBABWE?

(For information about Sofala, see the section on Kilwa and the Swahili Coast)

Why might Sofala be so important to Great Zimbabwe?
THE RUINS OF GREAT ZIMBABWE

Source 2: Great Zimbabwe ruins
© Richard Pluck
THE RUINS OF GREAT ZIMBABWE

Great enclosure

Source 2: Great Zimbabwe ruins
© Richard Pluck
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Who might have built them?

Source 2: Great Zimbabwe ruins
© Richard Pluck
THE RUINS OF GREAT ZIMBABWE

Who might have built them?
Why might they have been built?
THE RUINS OF GREAT ZIMBABWE

Who might have built them?
Why might they have been built?
What could they tell us?

Source 2: Great Zimbabwe ruins
© Richard Pluck
HOW IMPRESSIVE WAS GREAT ZIMBABWE?

Source 3
The Great Enclosure is the largest single ancient structure in sub-Saharan Africa. Its outer wall is some 250 metres in circumference, with a maximum height of 11 metres. It is estimated that the central ruins and surrounding valley supported a population of 10,000 to 20,000.
Encyclopaedia Britannica 2010

How impressive was Great Zimbabwe in terms of size?

Source 6: Plan of the site
© Lynda D’Amico
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How impressive was Great Zimbabwe in terms of size?

Source 4
Great Zimbabwe was large enough to be called a town, or even a city, but this was urban living at its most basic and unhealthy. The huts were so close together that their eaves (roofs) nearly touched.
Reader 1997: 314

Source 5
The effect of having so many people on a single site may easily be imagined. A great deal of the valley must have been trampled bare. The noise must have been tremendous. In certain weather conditions the smoke from hundreds if not thousands of cooking fires would have created conditions approaching that of smog.
Beach 1980: 46

What would it have been like to live in?

Source 6: Plan of the site
© Lynda D’Amico
WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE IN GREAT ZIMBABWE?

Some of these traders have come from the Swahili Coast of eastern Africa.

Which items would they be buying?
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Which items would they be buying?

Beads

Source 7: Illustration by Tayo Fatunla
WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE IN GREAT ZIMBABWE?

Some of these traders have come from the Swahili Coast of eastern Africa.

Which items would they be buying?

- Beads
- Ivory

Source 7: Illustration by Tayo Fatunla
WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE IN GREAT ZIMBABWE?

Some of these traders have come from the Swahili Coast of eastern Africa.

Which items would they be buying?

- Beads
- Ivory
- Cloth

Source 7: Illustration by Tayo Fatunla
WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE IN GREAT ZIMBABWE?

Some of these traders have come from the Swahili Coast of eastern Africa.

Which items would they be buying?

- Beads
- Ivory
- Cloth
- Gold

Source 7: Illustration by Tayo Fatunla
WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE IN GREAT ZIMBABWE?

Some of these traders have come from the Swahili Coast of eastern Africa.

**Which items would they be buying?**

- Beads
- Ivory
- Cloth
- Gold
- Pottery

**Source 7:**
Illustration by Tayo Fatunla
HOW WAS SOCIETY ORGANISED AT GREAT ZIMBABWE?

Source 8
Shona rulers had many wives. Oral traditions say that the wives at Great Zimbabwe lived below the hill.
Huffman 1981: 135

Source 9
Cattle were more than food – they also served as a form of wealth and a sign of status. The bones from the best cuts of meat have only been found within the larger, stone enclosures. It appears that the ordinary folk did not eat the best cattle but rather turned them over to the elites – the powerful and privileged classes.
Hall and Stefoff 2006: 27–28

Source 10
Walls were used to enclose or screen the huts of the rulers from the gaze of ordinary people, and these social differences were echoed in the pottery styles in that a special class of pottery was developed for the rulers to keep liquids in – almost certainly beer.
Beach 1980: 42

Source 11
There were other signs of their wealth. There were relatively few huts within the buildings so that the rulers had far more living space than the ordinary people, and an astonishing variety of imported goods... Including the finest silks and embroidered materials.
Beach 1980: 43

How could you tell a powerful from an ordinary person at Great Zimbabwe?
HOW DID GREAT ZIMBABWE BECOME WEALTHY?

Do these items, found at the site, give you a clue?

Source 13: Gold wire
British Museum

Source 14: Gold beads
British Museum
HOW DID GREAT ZIMBABWE BECOME WEALTHY?

Historians cannot agree on why this site should have been so much larger than the other stone towns (zimbabwes) in the region. Here are some of their views.

Source 15
Zimbabwe possesses the most extensive ancient gold-workings known to the world. It is most probable that Great Zimbabwe was the chief metropolitan centre of the ancient miners.
Hall 1905: 295

Source 16
Great Zimbabwe was very probably always a major religious centre. Traditions about the founders of the Shona nation emphasise their religious role and also seem to place Great Zimbabwe in a central position at the time this new society was growing to power.
Garlake 1973: 184

Source 17
For the rulers of Zimbabwe to have gained enough power either to control the gold trade or to control gold production elsewhere, they must already have developed their wealth by other means; and in the Shona economy the only other means was that of cattle herding.
Beach 1980: 37

What different reasons are given for how Great Zimbabwe became wealthy?

Which reason(s) do you think are most likely?

Why do historians disagree on this matter?
WHO BUILT GREAT ZIMBABWE?

From 1895 to 1980, the country where the ruins of Great Zimbabwe are to be found was ruled by white people, and was called Rhodesia (it is now called Zimbabwe). These people denied that Africans could have built Great Zimbabwe.

Source 18: Rhodesian poster, 1938
(the woman standing in the centre of the image is the Queen of Sheba) © Poster Team
WHO BUILT GREAT ZIMBABWE?

From 1895 to 1980, the country where the ruins of Great Zimbabwe are to be found was ruled by white people, and was called Rhodesia (it is now called Zimbabwe). These people denied that Africans could have built Great Zimbabwe.

Source 19
I do not think that I am far wrong if I suppose that the ruin on the hill is a copy of Solomon’s Temple and the building in the plain a copy of the palace where the Queen of Sheba lived during her visit to Solomon.

An archaeologist writing in 1871, quoted in Ampim 2004

Source 20
In 1905, British archaeologist David Randall-Maclver became the first European researcher of the site to assert that the dwellings were ‘unquestionably African in every detail.’

Ampim 2004

Source 22
In recent years, most Africans have not only claimed the ruins as the product of an indigenous African society but have taken pride in them as a reminder of past glories.

Garlake 1973: 12

Which sources say that Africans built Great Zimbabwe?

Why did white people say that Africans couldn’t have built it?
HOW DOES MODERN ZIMBABWE REMEMBER ITS PAST?

Source 23: Zimbabwe ten trillion dollar banknote, 2008
British Museum
HOW DOES MODERN ZIMBABWE REMEMBER ITS PAST?

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HOW DOES MODERN ZIMBABWE REMEMBER ITS PAST?

Name of country (from Great Zimbabwe)

Soapstone bird, Great Zimbabwe

Source 23: Zimbabwe ten trillion dollar banknote, 2008
British Museum
 HOW DOES MODERN ZIMBABWE REMEMBER ITS PAST?

**Name of country** (from Great Zimbabwe)

**Soapstone bird, Great Zimbabwe**

**Conical tower from Great Enclosure, Great Zimbabwe**

*Source 23: Zimbabwe ten trillion dollar banknote, 2008 British Museum*
HOW DOES MODERN ZIMBABWE REMEMBER ITS PAST?

Why might this banknote have so many of these symbols?

Source 23: Zimbabwe ten trillion dollar banknote, 2008
British Museum
THE RUINS OF GREAT ZIMBABWE

How many of these questions have you been able to answer?
Who might have built them?
Why might they have been built?
What could they tell us?

Source 2: Great Zimbabwe ruins © Richard Pluck
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