

# THE BRITISH MUSEUM

## The wealth of Africa Great Zimbabwe

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Teachers' notes



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## THE WEALTH OF AFRICA: USING THESE RESOURCES

This educational resource consists of 16 sets of resources on African civilisations, countries and themes.

Each set of resources includes:

- Teachers' notes
- Students' worksheets
- A presentation

Download the resources free at [www.britishmuseum.org/schools](http://www.britishmuseum.org/schools)

### Teachers' notes

These are intended to provide background material for teachers, but can also be referred to by students who want more contextual information.

### Students' worksheets

These are stand-alone worksheets which can be downloaded as classroom resources or viewed on the interactive whiteboard. They are self-contained, with tasks and questions and a limited number of sources in which the language has been slightly amended to make them more accessible to the likely reading ages of the students. They are also designed to be used independently of the teacher, e.g. for homework.

If teachers do not wish to spend more than one or two lessons on Great Zimbabwe, then the sheets will prove ideal for small project work, with groups of students taking one sheet, finding interesting and relevant information, and reporting back to the rest of the class. A specimen lesson plan along these lines is given below.

### Presentation

This provides a simpler and more visual introduction to the civilisation. It contains some of the images and sources found in the other sections, and can be shown on the whiteboard or used at home to give an overview of the main topics covered.

### Your feedback

Please help the British Museum improve its educational resources for schools and teachers by giving your feedback. The first 250 teachers or tutors to complete the online survey before 12.00 on 1 September 2011 will receive a printed set of illustrations of African civilisations by artist Tayo Fatunla. Visit [www.surveymonkey.com/s/wealthofafrica](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/wealthofafrica) to complete the survey and for terms and conditions.

## LESSON SCHEME: GREAT ZIMBABWE IN AN HOUR

### Aim

To decide how advanced the Great Zimbabwe civilisation was.

### Starter: Impressions of Great Zimbabwe

Scroll quickly through the images in the presentation, and get feedback from students on their first impressions, especially on how advanced they consider the civilisation to have been. (10 minutes)

### Research

Divide the class into groups with one group per resource sheet. Each group has to look at the question at the top of the sheet, and decide on the answer by studying the sources. The group should note 5–10 relevant facts that it can feed back to the rest of the class as evidence of its answer. (20 minutes)

### Feedback

Each group feeds back its findings, opinion and evidence to the rest of the class, who could take notes. (15 minutes)

### Discussion

The central question of 'advanced' can be debated; i.e. which aspects reveal Great Zimbabwe to have been a developed civilisation; etc. (15 minutes)

### Homework

e.g. The ambassador for Great Zimbabwe defends his country – pick and explain five details that show how advanced Great Zimbabwe was at this time, or look at the presentation or if not already done in class, or do further research into one of the topics to find more information.

## GREAT ZIMBABWE c. AD 1200–1600: TEACHERS' NOTES

### Introduction

Great Zimbabwe has been the subject of controversy: Colonial settlers were at first amazed, and then perplexed, at the sight of the huge and impressive ruins emerging from the scrub of Southern Mashonaland. Who had built them, and how? How could the pastoralist Shona people who inhabited the area have constructed anything on such a scale, and why? Unwilling to admit that the Shona people could have been responsible, the colonial settlers invented elaborate explanations to explain away the conundrum. Could these be the site of the fabled land of Ophir? Had the Phoenicians somehow, and for some inexplicable reason, built a settlement here? Or had the Biblical King Solomon constructed his palace in this far-off place?

However ludicrous the explanations, some white settlers stuck to their guns even up to the 1970s, and in some cases beyond, determined to ignore the obvious explanation, which was becoming clearer with the discovery of similar, though smaller-scale settlements in the area. With the independence of Zimbabwe in 1979, the Shona were finally given the credit they deserved, though why they had gone to such unusual lengths to build these structures remains a topic of academic debate.

### Why study Great Zimbabwe?

Its recent history has ensured that Zimbabwe has remained in the news, and it is a country where post-colonial tensions are particularly acute. Ownership of the country's more distant past has been as controversial a topic as arguments surrounding rights to its land today. The mystery of exactly why the structures at Great Zimbabwe, unusually large for that part of Africa, were raised provides fertile ground for debate.

For students studying History for the Key Stage 3 English National Curriculum, this module provides an example of a pre-colonial society which can be used to counter arguments of Africa being home only to primitive peoples prior to the era of the slave trade. It also serves as an example of the lengths to which racist attitudes could be taken in efforts to denigrate Africans. Finally it offers a useful link to the Swahili civilisation of Kilwa, whose prosperity seems to have been bound up with that of Great Zimbabwe.

In terms of the wealth of Africa, Great Zimbabwe is an example of a society that used natural resources, in this case gold and ivory, to grow rich from trade. It allows an insight into the sophisticated trading systems that existed in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans.

### Location

Great Zimbabwe is situated on a high plateau between the rivers Zambezi and Limpopo, in south-east Africa. Its grasslands offered excellent grazing for cattle, which proved ideal for the pastoralist Shona. Its height above sea level meant that it was in one of the few areas that were free from the tsetse fly. There were elephants, which provided the basis for a trade in ivory and, more significantly, a nearby seam of gold, running along the highest ridge, which showed signs of having been worked in at least four places before AD 1000.

The one drawback was that its relatively poor soil made agriculture difficult, and thus the site was not ideal for a permanent settlement. The relatively short period of human occupation at Great Zimbabwe was possibly due to this factor.

## History

Little is known about the political history of Great Zimbabwe, and the information there is tends to be imprecise and contested. There are no names of rulers, no fixed dates, no certainty about the reasons for building the great stone structures, no definite ideas on what made the society prosperous or why it declined. There is no written record, apart from some Portuguese accounts, but they date from a period when Great Zimbabwe had already declined. We have to rely on archaeology and due to some unscientific techniques at the start of the 20th century some of that record has been corrupted or lost.

It appears that settlement at Great Zimbabwe began around 1100, and that it was created by the same ethnic group responsible for the Mapungubwe civilisation to the south. It flourished for a little over 300 years, during which time the great stone structures were built. Its decline began around 1450, coinciding with the arrival of the Portuguese on the coast, which may have diverted trade away from Great Zimbabwe. Also responsible for its eclipse may have been a population increase in the area, which resulted in a shortage of suitable farmland.

Great Zimbabwe seems to have been replaced by the Mutapa civilisation to the north, another Shona grouping which continued building stone settlements called *zimbabwe*, though not on the same scale as at Great Zimbabwe. Given their common ethnicity, these three civilisations could be seen as linked, or part of a continuum that was disrupted by the movement of the capital. What remains a mystery is the uniqueness of the size of the building at Great Zimbabwe, and why nothing on the same scale was attempted before or since.

## Debates over origins

Portuguese writers of the 15th century, the first Europeans to hear about Great Zimbabwe, do not seem to have questioned that it was built by Africans, but this proved more problematical to late 19th-century settlers and archaeologists who felt themselves able to deny the African origins of the site and its buildings. Mauch and Hall led the archaeological front for the 'Phoenician' explanation, pointing out similarities to structures in Yemen, backed on the political front by the empire builder Cecil Rhodes. Signs of dissent emerged at the same time, with the African origins of the site being shown by archaeologists Randall-Maclver and Caton-Thompson. Even as late as the 1970s, guides to the ruins were obliged by the white Rhodesian government to deny African involvement in their construction.

There is no longer any serious debate over who built Great Zimbabwe, and it is accepted that this is an African site, but the question of why they were built remains a mystery. Most perplexing is that although stone structures of a similar date are relatively common in the area, nothing else approaches the scale of these ruins. One theory was that proximity to the gold fields meant that the rulers could exploit this resource to trade with Sofala and the Swahili civilisations on the coast, and thereby grow rich. The structures could have been built by the rich members of society to show their wealth and power.

The problem with this argument is that the structures appear to predate serious exploitation of the gold seams which, in any case, are not that close to Great Zimbabwe. Given the pastoralist traditions of the Shona, the argument that some members became rich through cattle acquisition and wanted to display their power by building is more persuasive, but this still does not explain the sheer scale of the enterprise.

Most historians deny the possibility of a defensive purpose to the construction, though this does not preclude that the payment of tribute exacted by military force was a basis for the wealth of the inhabitants. The idea of the site having a religious significance seems more plausible, and the existence of the mysterious soapstone birds may support this, but there is little agreement over the nature of worship at this site.

### Great Zimbabwe today

The extent to which the government of Zimbabwe has exploited the ruins is particularly interesting. Not only has the new nation been named after these structures, but the soapstone bird, together with the conical tower and the Great Enclosure, is to be found on the national flag, as well as on many coins and banknotes. The country is clearly looking to the pre-colonial past to create a new national identity.

### Sources

In the absence of any written record (apart from Portuguese accounts which generally post-date the height of the civilisation, and which are mainly second hand), archaeology provides most of the evidence for life on the site. However, excavations carried out unscientifically at the turn of the 20th century by Hall have made this task less easy. To add to this evidence, there are oral histories and ethnographic studies – such as those by Huffman and Beach – as well as attempts to piece together life on the site by studying comparable communities at places like Mapungubwe.

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## Your feedback

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## Find out more

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The British Museum's collection spans over two million years of human history and culture, all under one roof and includes world-famous objects such as the Rosetta Stone, the Parthenon sculptures, and Egyptian mummies.

The Museum's collection of over 200,000 African objects includes material from ancient to contemporary cultures. Highlights on display throughout the Museum include a magnificent brass head of a Yoruba ruler from Ife in Nigeria, vibrant textiles from across the continent, and the Throne of Weapons – a sculpture made out of guns.

## For students

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Students can experience and engage with the collection in many ways, from taking part in activity sessions at the Museum to using free online resources or playing interactive games in the classroom and at home.

## For teachers

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Search the Museum's collection online at [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org) for information about objects, including pictures to download or print.

## Schools and teachers newsletter

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Sign up to the schools and teachers newsletter to receive regular updates on free special exhibitions previews, teacher events and new free resources at [www.britishmuseum.org/schools](http://www.britishmuseum.org/schools)

## Ancient Civilizations websites

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These award-winning British Museum websites have been specially designed for students in Years 5 and 6. Each site is supported by information and guidance for teachers. [www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk](http://www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk)

## The CarAf Centre

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These resources have been produced by the British Museum in collaboration with The CarAf Centre, a community educational support centre and registered charity based in the London Borough of Camden. For more information, visit [www.thecarafcentre.org.uk](http://www.thecarafcentre.org.uk)

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