**GREAT ZIMBABWE c. AD 1200–1600:**

**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. It 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 civilization 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.

**The wealth of Africa Great Zimbabwe**

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 civilization 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 civilization 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 civilizations 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-MacIver 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 civilizations 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.