

# THE BRITISH MUSEUM

## The wealth of Africa Great Zimbabwe

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Students' worksheets



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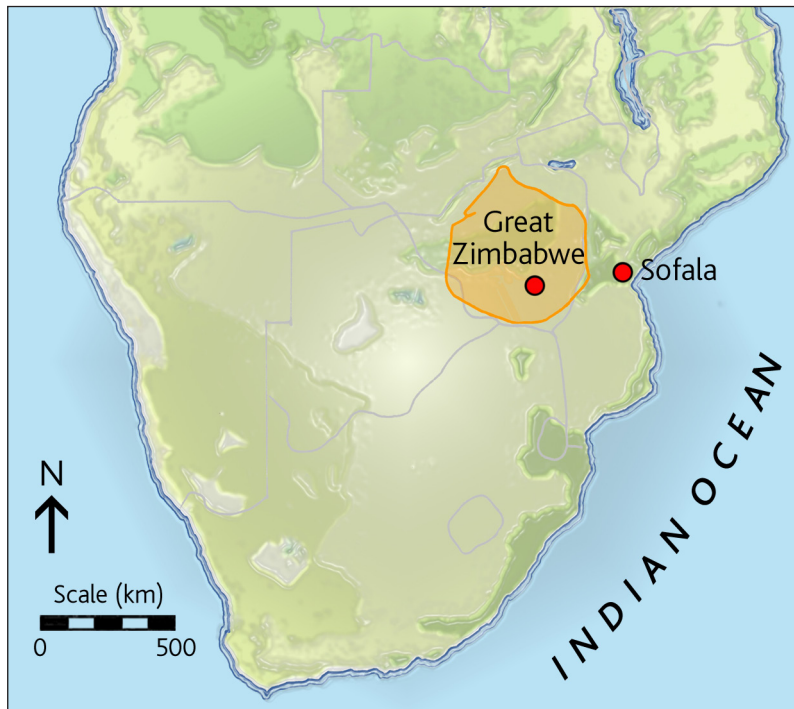
Arts & Humanities  
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The CarAf Centre

[www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)

## GREAT ZIMBABWE



### Century AD



### SHEET 1: HOW IMPRESSIVE WAS THE CITY?

The ruins of Great Zimbabwe are so remarkable that early Europeans could not believe they could have been built by Africans. What was so incredible about them?

#### Source 1

It is estimated that the central ruins and surrounding valley supported a population of 10,000 to 20,000.

Encyclopaedia Britannica 2010

#### Source 3

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 roofs nearly touched.

Reader 1997: 314

#### Source 4

Great Zimbabwe is not well built: the stones were not selected and laid with consideration for their relative sizes; vertical joints often run continuously through three or more layers (they should be offset)... The space within the walls is very loosely filled.

Reader 1997: 312

#### 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

#### Source 6

Among the gold mines of the inland plains between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers... [there is a] fortress built of stones of marvellous size, and there appears to be no mortar joining them.

Portuguese chronicler João de Barros (1552), quoted in Garlake 1973: 51–52

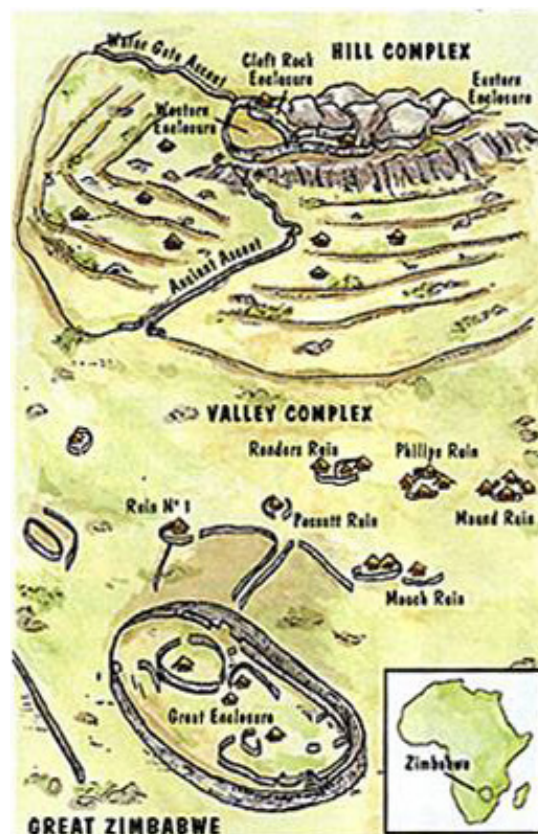
#### Source 8

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. An inner wall runs along part of the outer wall forming a narrow parallel passage, 55 metres long, which leads to the Conical Tower.

Encyclopaedia Britannica 2010



Source 2: The site with Great Enclosure at bottom  
© Richard Pluck



Source 7: Plan of the site  
© Lynda D'Amico

### Questions

1. What is so remarkable about Great Zimbabwe?
2. How well was it built?
3. What was it like to live in?



### SHEET 2: WHY DID GREAT ZIMBABWE BECOME POWERFUL?

Historians are unsure why Great Zimbabwe, out of all the other Shona sites, should have become so powerful. Some historians argue that it was due to wealth based on cattle, others point to its ideal position near the trade routes. See what you think.

#### Source 1

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 2

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

#### Source 3

Great Zimbabwe is not close to the local gold seam, but its power comes from controlling the trade in gold. As much as a ton of gold is sometimes extracted in a year.

Gascogne 2001–10

#### Source 4

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

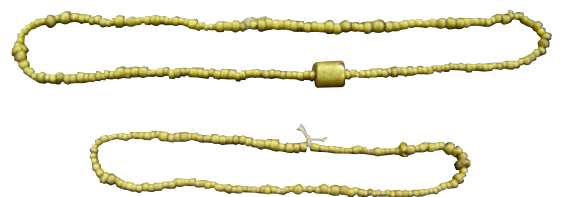
#### Source 7

Furthermore, 'cakes of copper' and other items with strong likenesses to artefacts from Zambia, the Congo Basin, and West Africa, suggest that Great Zimbabwe was on the eastern edge of a widespread and complex internal trading network which pre-dated by a long time the external trade that was mainly founded on gold.

Reader 1997: 314



**Source 5:** Female soapstone figure, found at Great Zimbabwe  
British Museum



**Source 6:** Gold beads found at Great Zimbabwe  
British Museum

### Questions

1. Which sources suggest that gold was a key factor in the rise of Great Zimbabwe? How are they different?
2. What other reasons for Great Zimbabwe's success are given?
3. Which of these reasons do you think was the most important in the rise of Great Zimbabwe?

### SHEET 3: HOW WAS SOCIETY ORGANISED?

Archaeological discoveries have revealed large amounts of bones of young cattle close to the stone structures, but very few in other living areas. Archaeologists have concluded that society in Great Zimbabwe was strictly organised, with only the rich being able to eat beef. See if other sources back up this view.

#### Source 1

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

#### Source 3

Shona rulers had many wives. Oral traditions say that the wives at Great Zimbabwe lived below the hill.

Huffman 1981: 135

#### Source 4

In the valley below lived the more modest members of society, huddled in densely-packed settlements far removed from the elite lifestyle of their social superiors.

Collins 2007: 166–168

#### Source 5

16 human skeletons had been uncovered during excavations of pre-colonial mines. These skeletons are interpreted as those of miners who were caught when mine shafts caved in. Of these 16 skeletons, at least 9 have been identified as female. There is no question, then, that some, and perhaps a large number, of the miners were women.

Pyburn 2004: 64

#### Source 6

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 Steffoff 2006: 27–28



**Source 2:** The site with Great Enclosure at bottom  
© Richard Pluck

### Questions

1. Were women treated equally to men (sources 3 and 5)?
2. What evidence is there that there were different social classes at Great Zimbabwe?
3. How far do you agree with the conclusions made from the evidence in sources 5 and 6?

### SHEET 4: HOW FAR CAN WE UNDERSTAND LIFE AT GREAT ZIMBABWE BY LOOKING AT SHONA SOCIETY TODAY?

Trying to understand what life was like for ordinary people at Great Zimbabwe is hard. Archaeology cannot tell us everything. One way to find out is to look at how people from the same Shona society behaved in the more recent past. The information on this sheet is about recent and modern Shona customs. See if it helps.

#### Source 1

Women also make the bark cloth blankets. The technique involves softening the inner bark of trees, twisting it into threads, and then finger-weaving the fibres without any loom into the desired shape. Women's skirts used to be made by this technique.

Dewey 1986: 65

#### Source 3

In the central areas of Zimbabwe the guardians of the old music were the players of the mbira.

Kaemmer 1989: 37

#### Source 5

Cattle are kept by most groups, but, although useful for their milk, they are mainly for prestige, as a store of value, and for bride price payments. Villages consist of clustered mud and wattle huts, granaries, and common cattle kraals (pens) and typically accommodate one or more interrelated families. Chiefdoms, wards, and villages are run by hereditary leaders.

Encyclopaedia Britannica 2010

#### Source 7

Headrests were used by Shona men to protect and preserve their elaborate hair styles which were common until the end of the 19th century. They were highly personal objects, accompanying the owner wherever he went and, ultimately, being buried with him after death.

British Museum



**Source 2:** Bark cloth textile, made in Mashonaland, Zimbabwe, 19th century  
British Museum



**Source 4:** Mbira or finger piano  
© Bram Cymet



**Source 6:** Shona huts  
© Jim Butler



**Source 8:** Headrest, made in Mashonaland, Zimbabwe, early 20th century  
British Museum

### Questions

1. How much can sources 1 and 2 tell us about life at Great Zimbabwe?
2. Which of these sources on this sheet tie in with what we know about Great Zimbabwe?
3. What new information about Great Zimbabwe can we learn from these sources?
4. To what extent is it acceptable for historians to make guesses about societies in the past by looking at the same societies hundreds of years later?

### SHEET 5: WHO BUILT GREAT ZIMBABWE?

There used to be a debate over the origins of Great Zimbabwe. Early visitors either could not or did not believe that it could have been built by Africans. As late as the 1970s, during the period of the white Rhodesian state, guides at the site were not allowed to suggest that Africans had built it.

#### Source 1

It can be taken as a fact that the wood which we obtained [from Great Zimbabwe] actually is cedar-wood and it cannot come from anywhere else but from the Lebanon. Furthermore, only the Phoenicians could have brought it here; also, Solomon used a lot of cedar-wood for the building of the temple [in Jerusalem].

Carl Mauch (1871), quoted in Garlake 1973: 64

#### Source 2

The word 'peacocks' in the Bible may be read as parrots and amongst the stone ornaments from Zimbabwe are green parrots.

Cecil Rhodes (1891), quoted in Garlake 1973: 65

#### Source 3

We may now accept that the older portions of Zimbabwe represent the monuments of a colony of the ancient empire of Saba [Sheba]. At Marib [in Saba] there are ruins of a temple identical in their main features with those of Zimbabwe.

Hall 1905: 296–297

#### Source 4

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



**Source 5:** Rhodesian travel poster, 1938 (the shadowy woman standing in the middle is the Queen of Sheba)  
© Poster Team



**Source 6:** Zimbabwe 1 cent coin  
British Museum



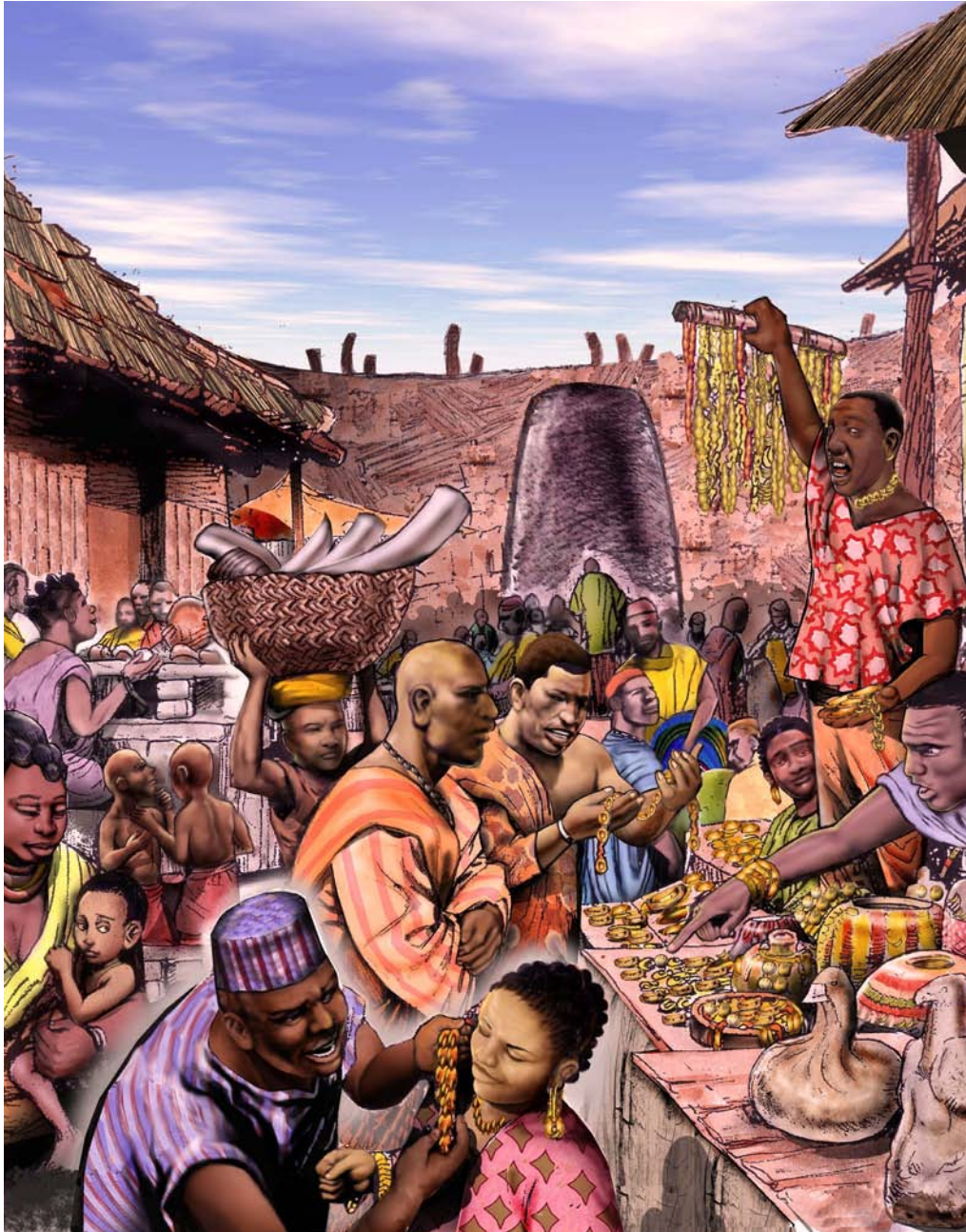
**Source 7:** Image of conical tower on Zimbabwe banknote (detail)  
British Museum

### Questions

1. How strong is the evidence that Great Zimbabwe was not built by Africans (see sources 1–5)?
2. Why could Europeans not believe it had been built by Africans?
3. Why does modern Zimbabwe have so many symbols from Great Zimbabwe (sources 6–7)?



**SHEET 6: TRADE WITH THE SWAHILI COAST AT  
GREAT ZIMBABWE**



Source 1: Illustration by Tayo Fatunla

**Questions**

1. Which items can you see being traded?
2. Which items came from Great Zimbabwe?
3. Describe what you can see going on in the picture.



## Your feedback

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## 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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