

PROLOGUE · C-9

Great Zimbabwe: The City They Refused to Credit to Its Own Builders

c. 1100 CE – 1450 CE

CONTRIBUTION · SECULAR & POLITICAL



A Learn More reference document — full narrative, sourcing, and context beyond the timeline card.

I. Built By the People Denied Credit For It

Great Zimbabwe was built between approximately 1100 and 1450 CE by the ancestors of the Shona people, in what is now southeastern Zimbabwe. It was not a myth, a legend, or the work of some vanished, unidentifiable civilization. It is the largest medieval stone-built complex in sub-Saharan Africa, covering nearly 800 hectares, and UNESCO's own listing states plainly that scientific research has proven it was founded by a Bantu population of the Iron Age — the Shona — with no outside builders involved.

II. Engineering Without Mortar

The city's walls, including the Great Enclosure — the largest single ancient structure south of the Sahara — were built entirely in dry-stone construction: granite blocks, quarried locally and shaped through controlled heating and cooling, stacked in fitted courses without any mortar, some walls standing over thirty feet high and lasting more than seven centuries. This required precise knowledge of stone behavior and structural load, developed and applied independently, with no European or Middle Eastern architectural influence.

III. A Trading City, Not an Isolated One

At its peak in the 13th and 14th centuries, Great Zimbabwe supported an estimated population of 10,000 to 18,000 people and sat at the center of a trade network stretching to the Indian Ocean. Archaeological excavation at the site has recovered Chinese ceramics, glass beads from the Middle East, and coins from the Swahili trading city of Kilwa — physical, dated proof that Great Zimbabwe's rulers were participating in a functioning global trade network centuries before any European ship reached that coast.

IV. The Manufactured Denial

When European explorers and colonial administrators encountered the ruins in the 19th century, the prevailing colonial position was that African people could not have built them. Theories crediting the site to Phoenicians, Arabs, or the Biblical Queen of Sheba circulated for decades and were actively promoted by colonial-era authorities in Southern Rhodesia. Archaeological dating and excavation, conducted across the 20th century, closed that argument definitively. The 1980 naming of the newly independent nation of Zimbabwe after this site was, among other things, a direct rejection of that colonial-era denial.

NC LOCAL LENS

This entry is continental in scope (Southern Africa) and has no documentable Fayetteville/Cumberland County connection. Per project standard, no local lens is forced.

Sources & Citations (Chicago, Notes-Bibliography)

1. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. "Great Zimbabwe National Monument." Accessed August 2026. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/364>.
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4. “Great Zimbabwe.” Scientific American. February 20, 2024.

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