

The City the Maps Forgot

Stone walls eleven metres high — and for eighty years, the wrong people were given the credit.

6 min read

Before you read

- **mortar** — the paste used to hold bricks or stones together
- **enclosure** — an area closed in by walls
- **artefact** — an object made by people, studied by archaeologists
- **excavate** — to dig carefully in order to uncover the past
- **plateau** — a wide area of high, flat land
- **assumption** — something believed true without being tested



The curved outer wall of the Great Enclosure at Great Zimbabwe, dry stone, no mortar

¹ On a high plateau in southern Africa stand the remains of a city built from stone, without mortar of any kind. The walls of its largest structure, the Great Enclosure, curve for a quarter of a kilometre and rise in places to around eleven metres. Every block was shaped and set so precisely that the walls have held for six hundred years without anything binding them together.

² The site is called Great Zimbabwe. The word comes from the Shona language and is usually translated as houses of stone. When the modern country became independent in 1980, it took its name from these ruins.

³ The city was built by the ancestors of the Shona people, beginning in roughly the eleventh century, and

it was at its height between about 1300 and 1450. At that point somewhere between ten and eighteen thousand people may have lived there — a large city by the standards of the time anywhere in the world. It sat on a trade route running from the interior to the Indian Ocean coast, and the gold and ivory that moved along that route is what made it wealthy.

⁴ We know about the trade because of what has been excavated. Among the artefacts recovered from the site are Chinese pottery, glass beads from the Middle East, and coins minted on the East African coast. None of these things could have reached a hilltop in southern Africa by accident. They are evidence of a city connected to a trading world that stretched across an ocean.

⁵ Eight carved birds of soapstone were also found there, each about the size of a forearm. Nothing quite like them has been found anywhere else, and nobody now can say with certainty what they were for. One of them appears on Zimbabwe's national flag.

⁶ When European travellers reached the site in the late nineteenth century, they looked at the walls and reached a conclusion quickly. The city, they decided, must have been built by visitors — Phoenicians, perhaps, or the Queen of Sheba. Anyone, in other words, but the people who lived in the region.



A soapstone bird carving from the site, displayed on a plain stand

⁷ This was not a conclusion drawn from evidence. It was an assumption, and the evidence was then made to fit it. Treasure hunters dug through the site looking for proof of foreign builders, and in doing so destroyed layers of material that could never be recovered. Archaeologists today describe that period as one of the worst losses of its kind anywhere.

⁸ The correction came from careful work. In 1905 the archaeologist David Randall-MacIver examined what remained and reported that the site was African in origin and medieval in date. In 1929 Gertrude Caton-Thompson excavated undisturbed ground and came to the same conclusion independently. Her findings were thorough enough that no serious archaeologist has disputed them since.

⁹ That did not settle the argument. For decades the government of what was then Rhodesia discouraged the African explanation, and museum guides were instructed to present it as one theory among several. The evidence had been clear since 1929. The official story took another fifty years to catch up with it.

¹⁰ Great Zimbabwe is studied today for its architecture, which is remarkable, and for its trade, which was extensive. But it is also studied as a lesson about how knowledge goes wrong. The walls were never a mystery. What needed explaining was why so many people, looking directly at them, saw something that was not there.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. What is unusual about how the walls of Great Zimbabwe were built?

- ☐ A They were built from imported stone
- ☐ B They used no mortar to hold the stones together
- ☐ C They were rebuilt every century
- ☐ D They were built on flat coastal land

2. What do the Chinese pottery and Middle Eastern glass beads found at the site show?

- ☐ A That foreigners built the city
- ☐ B That the city was attacked by traders
- ☐ C That the city was part of a long-distance trade network
- ☐ D That the artefacts were brought there recently

3. Why did treasure hunters cause so much damage at the site?

- ☐ A They removed the soapstone birds
- ☐ B They dug through layers while searching to prove a belief
- ☐ C They rebuilt the walls incorrectly
- ☐ D They flooded the excavation

4. What did Gertrude Caton-Thompson's 1929 work add to Randall-MacIver's findings?

- ☐ A It disproved them
- ☐ B It confirmed them independently, from undisturbed ground
- ☐ C It dated the site much earlier
- ☐ D It identified who the carved birds represented

5. In paragraph 6, the word 'assumption' is used to mean:

- ☐ A a careful measurement
- ☐ B a belief held without testing it
- ☐ C an official government record
- ☐ D a translation from another language

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences.

6. The writer says the evidence 'was then made to fit' the conclusion. Explain what that means and why it is a problem.

7. Great Zimbabwe's wealth came from its position rather than from what was beneath it. Explain, using the passage.

8. The evidence was settled in 1929, but the official story did not change for another fifty years. What does this gap suggest about how beliefs change?

9. Why do you think the writer ends by saying the walls 'were never a mystery'?

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

10. The treasure hunters destroyed evidence while looking for proof of what they already believed. Describe a situation, real or imagined, where the same mistake could happen today. What would prevent it?

11. Zimbabwe took its name from this site at independence. Why might a country choose to name itself after ruins? Give your reasoning.

12. Is it fair to judge nineteenth-century travellers by what archaeologists know now? Argue one side and give at least one reason the other side might offer.

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — They used no mortar to hold the stones together | 2. C — That the city was part of a long-distance trade network | 3. B — They dug through layers while searching to prove a belief | 4. B — It confirmed them independently, from undisturbed ground | 5. B — a belief held without testing it

Part B

6. They decided the answer first and then selected or interpreted findings to support it, rather than letting the findings lead. The problem is that this cannot be corrected by more evidence, because contrary evidence gets ignored or destroyed.

7. It sat on a trade route from the interior to the Indian Ocean coast, so gold and ivory moved through it. Its wealth came from controlling the movement of goods rather than from local resources alone. Accept answers that identify position or trade.

8. Evidence alone does not change what people officially accept; politics, authority and habit also hold a story in place. Accept answers noting that being right is not the same as being believed.

9. To make clear the fault was in the observers, not the object. The walls were plainly visible and well made; what required explanation was the error people brought with them. Accept any answer that locates the problem in the viewer.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

10. Look for a plausible modern parallel (searching online only for things that agree with you, a science experiment run to confirm a hope, a rumour investigated one-sidedly) plus a named safeguard — testing the opposite case, independent checking, recording evidence before interpreting it.

11. Strong answers connect the choice to identity, continuity or the correcting of a record. Weaker answers only restate that the ruins are famous. Prompt with: what does naming yourself after something say about what you value?

12. Either position works. A strong answer concedes the opposing point honestly — for example, that the methods existed to do better, or that nobody can see past their own era entirely — before defending its own.

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