

The great zimbabwe essay sample

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There have been many civilizations in Africa's long history. As proof of these ancient civilizations, archeologists have found many remains throughout Africa. One of these is the Great Zimbabwe from the Bantu-speaking tribe. The Bantu translation for Zimbabwe is "house of stone" due to the Great Zimbabwe ruins (Marquet 131). There are two schools of thought as to the origin of the word Zimbabwe. In the first theory, the word "Zimbabwe" could be a short form of "ziimba remabwe" or "ziimba rebwe", a Shona (dialect: chiRanga) term, which means "the great or big house built of stone boulders". In the Karanga dialect of the Shona language, "imba" means "house" or "building" and "ziimba" or "zimba" mean "a huge/big building or house".

The word "bwe" or "ibwe" (singular, plural being "mabwe") in the Karanga dialect means a stone boulder. Thus, a linguistic analysis of the word Zimbabwe clearly indicates that the origin of the word refers to the ancient city of Great Zimbabwe whose buildings were built of stone boulders. It should be noted that the Karanga-speaking Shona are found around the Great Zimbabwe in the modern-day province of Masvingo and have been known to have inhabited the region since the building of this ancient city. The second theory is that Zimbabwe is contracted form of "dyimba woye" which means venerated houses in the Zezuru dialect of the Shona language. This term is usually reserved for chiefs' houses or graves. The first theory could be said to have the advantage of a linguistic analysis that produces an outcome ties with it the physical nature of the ancient city of Great Zimbabwe and that is based on the language in use today among the people

who are known to have inhabited the ancient city and are found in the surrounding area today.

Great Zimbabwe originated from the Shona branch of the Bantus. Many groups and tribes of the Bantu-speaking people migrated from the coast of the Indian Ocean to the interior around 500 AD (Cutter 157). It was the start to a new thriving empire known as Monomotapa (Jackson 286). The gold and ivory that helped the coastal city-states grow rich came from the interior of Southern Africa. In southeastern Africa, the Shona people established a city called Great Zimbabwe, which grew into an empire built on the gold trade. By 1000, the Shona people claimed the fertile, well-watered plateau between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers in modern Zimbabwe. The area was well suited to farming and cattle raising. Its location had also economic advantages. Great Zimbabwe stood near an important trade route linking the inland gold field with coastal trading city of Sofala. Sometime after 1000, Great Zimbabwe gained control of these trade routes. From the 1200s through the 1400s, it became the capital of thriving state. Its leaders taxed the traders who traveled these routes. They also demanded payments from less powerful chiefs. The city of Great Zimbabwe was the economic, political, and religious center of its empire (Bech et al, 380).

The ruins of Zimbabwe are dominated by two features that once housed the royal palace of Zimbabwe's rulers. On a hill, is a series of connected enclosures, with elaborate walkways, steps, walls, and hidden passages, often referred to as the " acropolis". In a valley adjacent to the acropolis is the Great Enclosure or temple, the highlights of which are a wall, with eight

hundred feet long with heights up to thirty two feet and widths up to seventeen feet, and a conical tower over thirty feet high. Zimbabwe was constructed over a long period of time, perhaps centuries. The walls of the Great Enclosure and the conical tower represents the peak of architectural achievement by the Zimbabwe builders. They are made of smooth, even layers of granite building blocks put together with great care and skill. By this phase of construction the builders had began to introduce intricate refinements-rounded gateways, curved stepways, doors with timber lintels, platforms for statues and monoliths, and stepped recesses.

The possibility that Africans had built Zimbabwe grew more believable as it was discovered that most of the city's stone ruins were of dwellings, defensive walls, enclosures for livestock, and other utilitarian structures, most of which resembled similar structures built by the modern Bantu speaking peoples of the same area, albeit in different materials. Then in 1931, Dr. Gertrude Caton-Thompson, an eminently qualified archeologist who was asked to investigate Zimbabwe, systematically destroyed the several vague theories about alien builders. Zimbabwe she declared, had been built by Bantu artisans indigenous to the area, with skill that increased steadily over the several centuries of construction (Murphy 207-208).

Because there was no way for soldiers to climb to the top of the walls, archeologists theorize that the walls were not used primarily as defenses. The massive walls were probably built to impress visitors with the strength of Zimbabwe and its rulers. Among the ruins were found tall figures of birds, carved from soapstone (Bech et al 380). According to the Department of Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, the enormous walls are the best-

preserved testaments of Great Zimbabwe's past and the largest example of an architectural type seen in archeological sites and throughout the region.

By 1450, the city of Great Zimbabwe was abandoned. No one knows for sure why it happened. According to one theory, cattle grazing had worn out the grasslands. In addition, farming had worn out the soil, and people had used up the salt and timber. The area could no longer support a large population (Bech et al, 380). By 1500, Great Zimbabwe dominated the Zambezi Valley both militarily and commercially (the Mwenemutapa empire); because of this, the new ideas about divine kingship spread throughout the valley and changed the social structures of most of the Bantu people living there. Great Zimbabwe was so far inland that it never felt the political or cultural effects of Islam during its existence. It is perhaps one of the few African urban culture south of the Sahara to be a fully African civilization, built off of no cultural ideas imported from outside (Africa Hooker, 1996).

Radio-carbon dating of materials taken from the Great Zimbabwe ruins tells us that there were people living there at least as early as the sixth or seventh century. There were apparently three periods in Zimbabwe's active life. The first period may have begun as early as the fourth century and ended in the twelfth. The people of this lengthy period knew how to smelt iron and make tools and weapons from it. The traditions state that this people came into the area from the north. This group in turn was forced out by another wave of people from the north from the twelfth century, the Monomotapa people. The Monomotapa actually is the title of the ruler, but it has been applied to the whole group. These people stayed in this area until

the middle of the fifteenth century when, it is believed, they abandoned the site. Another group is thought to have come to the area about 1400, and had taken over the Zimbabwe site. The Portuguese recorded the name of the Monomotapa of that time – he was Mokomba Menomotapam-and said his empire extended to the coast and included the town of Sofala with the capital at Zimbabwe (Brooks 267).

The Mwenemutapa or Zimbabweans were a Bantu-speaking people in southeastern Africa. As with all the Bantu who migrated from central Africa to the south and to the east, the ancestors of the Mwenemutapa brought iron-smelting and agriculture with them to the region south of the Zambezi River. The region was dominated by the Swahili city-state of Sofala; Zimbabwe, however, was rich in gold. Because of the wealth of Zimbabwe and the importance of Sofala as a trading city, the Zimbabweans from 1000 AD onwards were exposed to Chinese, Persian, and Indian crafts and culture. The growing trade encouraged the Zimbabweans to centralize their government. Originally ruled by ruler-priests, the Mwenemutapa developed a military and economic kingship of astonishing power and efficiency.

Zimbabwe is no longer the capital of a great kingdom. Its buildings were destroyed by enemies but the fame of ancient Zimbabwe lives on (Lunger 1987, 167). Today, Zimbabwe is one of the country's greatest historical and cultural attractions. As Paul Tingay's helpful guide explains, Great Zimbabwe, the largest ruins in Africa, covers almost 1800 acres. Sited on an open wooded plain surrounded by hills, the ruins comprise the vast Great Enclosure complex, and the hill complex, a veritable castle of interlocking

walls and granite boulders, while all around the valley lie a myriad other walls. The ruins feature an array of chevron, herringbone and many other intricate patterns in its walls, and the astonishing fact that despite the dry-stone technique used in Great Zimbabwe's construction, the complex has endured for seven centuries (97). Although the ancient Monomotapa Empire had been looted many times from all the explorers who visited the site, the stone monument has finally achieved the position of being recognized and preserved by the government.

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