



COLONIAL MYTH-MAKING AND THE ORIGINS OF GREAT ZIMBABWE

As far back as the 16th century, the Portuguese had first alerted Europe to the fact that the Zimbabwe plateau was the main source of the gold that fuelled the Swahili trade of the western Indian Ocean. Over subsequent centuries it was vaguely speculated that this might be the fabled 'land of Ophir' from which biblical King Solomon received his gold in the tenth century BCE. Not too much further attention was paid to this however until 1867 when a German traveller named Carl Mauch returned to South Africa after a trip through Zimbabwe. He visited the overgrown site of Great Zimbabwe, and this led him to postulate the theory that the Zimbabwe ruins confirmed the ancient myths – that he had found the fabled 'land of Ophir'. He was thus claiming that the great enclosure of Zimbabwe was 3000 years old. The myth was further refined by excited potential colonists – it must have been built by Phoenicians and Sabaeans in the time of Solomon, for Africans did not build in stone. The elephant-hunter Frederick Courtney Selous visited the site in the 1870s. His book, *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa* (published 1881) provided inspiration for the English novelist H. Rider Haggard, whose best-selling novel *King Solomon's Mines* (published in 1885) seemed to confirm in the popular colonial imagination the ancient and exotic origins of Great Zimbabwe.



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These tales of ancient empire in the heart of Africa suited the imperialist Cecil Rhodes who was determined to use his great diamond wealth (founded in Kimberley, South Africa, in the 1870s and 80s) to colonise much of Africa north of the Limpopo. In his self-justifying imagination his colonisation of Zimbabwe would merely be reclaiming an ancient civilisation and saving it from 'native barbarism'!

Following their colonisation of eastern Zimbabwe in 1890 (see Chapter 22), Rhodes and his 'Pioneers' set about promoting the Phoenician myth. Prospectors and charlatans were let loose on the site, with the object of finding gold and proving the ancient Phoenician origin of the site. They cleared away undergrowth and dug ruthlessly through centuries-old layers of African settlement, down to bedrock in many instances. They found a disappointing number of gold artefacts and some Persians and Chinese pottery; but they

discarding an untold amount of invaluable archaeological evidence which they dismissed as 'African rubbish'. Publications by Theodore Bent (*The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland*, Longman Green, London, 1893) and A. Wilmot (*Monomotapa. Its monuments and its history from the most ancient time to the present century*, Fisher Unwin, London, 1896), both working for Rhodes, confirmed the Phoenician myth. But these works were treated with scorn by the scientific community in Britain, so Rhodes commissioned another work with the same task. A journalist, R. N. Hall, was set to investigate Great Zimbabwe and related sites. He was assisted by W. G. Neal, a local gold prospector. Hall devised a pseudo-scientific analysis of the stonemasonry – dividing it into four phases (R. N. Hall and W. G. Neal, *The Ancient Ruins of Rhodesia*, Methuen, London, 1904). The fine stonework of the great enclosure he attributed to the oldest period, the work of a 'superior civilisation', therefore, Phoenician and therefore 3000 years old. This, he claimed, was followed by a second and a third intermediate phase of declining stonemasonry skills as the Phoenician presence and influence declined. The fourth and final phase – the uneven stonework of the hilltop – he attributed to subsequent and unsuccessful African attempts to emulate the Phoenician model.

Hall's theory so well suited the racist prejudices of the closed-minded settler mentality that this myth persisted, against all subsequent scientific research, right through to the final decade of colonial rule.

The British Association for the Advancement of Science, however, was not so easily fooled and they sent a professional archaeologist, David Randell-MacIver, to make an unprejudiced scientific survey of the site. His publication, *Mediaeval Rhodesia* (Macmillan, London, 1906), confirmed that the whole of the site, back to its oldest roots, was indeed of African origin; but he had no firm evidence to date the site and so the myth of ancient origin, contemporary with King Solomon, still persisted.

In the late 1920s the British Association sent another archaeologist to investigate Zimbabwe and related sites. The person they chose was Gertrude Caton-Thompson, one of the leading archaeologists of her time. She had recently completed a major archaeological project on the Badarian period of pre-dynastic Egypt (see further reading list for Chapter 2), in which she pioneered the periodisation and sequencing of local pottery styles. Her arrival in Southern Rhodesia in January 1929 caused a stir in colonial settler circles, not just for her towering reputation, or for her being a single woman, who worked with two other single women, but in particular for the contempt with which she treated the racial and gender prejudices of settler society. In the introduction to her book (*The Zimbabwe Culture: Ruins and Reactions* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1931) she dismissed local self-styled experts on Zimbabwe as 'insane'. Her archaeological work lived up to professional

expectations. She persuaded the South African Government to take aerial photographs of Great Zimbabwe and related sites, another first for African archaeology. She concentrated on the Great Zimbabwe site itself, methodically excavating some of the remaining deposits and classifying her finds of pottery, by style, texture and finish, showing that it was distinctly African throughout. She was also able to show, through the analysis of imported artefacts – of known provenance and period – that the age of Zimbabwe should be counted in centuries rather than millennia.

Firm evidence of dating of the Zimbabwe culture, however, would have to wait until after 1945 and the development of radio-carbon dating techniques. Then Caton-Thompson's work was able to be followed up by Roger Summers and Keith Robinson (see Further Reading) whose work laid the foundations of the modern periodisation and interpretations of the Zimbabwe culture on which this book is based. For more recent work, see Garlake, Beach and Huffman (in Further Reading in Chapter 9).