

Innocent Pikirayi

Great Zimbabwe in Historical Archaeology: Reconceptualizing Decline, Abandonment, and Reoccupation of an Ancient Polity, A.D. 1450–1900

ABSTRACT

A recent anthropological critique of the archaeology and cultural heritage management of Great Zimbabwe refers to “the *silence of unheard voices and untold stories*,” “the unrepresented pasts of local communities,” and “the *silence of anger—the alienation—and desecration of Great Zimbabwe*” (Fontein 2006). Fontein sees a lack of representation of local histories, not only in the literature, but also in museum displays and in the archaeological narratives (Pikirayi 2001), including heritage management reports (Ndoro 2005). Admittedly, this is one of the reasons why Great Zimbabwe is a contested site and cultural landscape. In this paper it is argued that Great Zimbabwe’s contribution to the understanding of the origins of later Karanga and other regional histories is poorly understood. Archaeology, in collaboration with other disciplines, can play a useful role in writing the story of Great Zimbabwe and—in keeping with the plenary session themes—relating it to other transformative global developments of the early modern era, when the site was clearly experiencing decline and eventual abandonment. Detailed local histories, though useful in understanding sociopolitical dynamics on the Zimbabwe Plateau, may account for the invisibility of Great Zimbabwe since A.D. 1550 until its “discovery” by Europeans during the late 19th century. Underlying these processes is the failure by archaeologists to understand decline or collapse of a sociopolitical system once based at Great Zimbabwe, and its global implications.

Introduction

Great Zimbabwe is a complex of stone-walled structures located in south-central Zimbabwe (20° 16' 23" S, 30° 56' 04" E). Dating from the early second millennium A.D., these structures cover an area of more than 700 ha. The structures comprise massively built stone monumental architecture, and the site has been interpreted as the center of an ancient kingdom or state (Garlake 1973; Pikirayi 2001). This interpretation emanates from the fact that there are more than 300 sites

on the Zimbabwe Plateau and adjacent regions constructed in the same architectural tradition as Great Zimbabwe (Beach 1980; Mudenge 1988). Referred to as *madzimbabwe* or *zimbabwe*, literally meaning houses of stone, they were capitals of local and regional political dynasties that dominated the history of the Zimbabwe Plateau until the end of the 19th century (Figure 1). Although 16th-century Portuguese references describe Great Zimbabwe as a “fortress” under the control of a prince, the Portuguese do not seem to have made a direct expedition to it (Pikirayi 2006). The first known European to have visited Great Zimbabwe was Karl Mauch, who in 1871 publicized the stone structures to the Western world (Burke 1969), resulting two decades later in antiquarian investigations (Bent 1893; Hall and Neal 1902; Hall 1905).

The origins of the culture that dominated Great Zimbabwe probably lie some 300 km to the south, in the middle Limpopo Valley, following the demise of the state based at Mapungubwe (1220–1280). Mapungubwe, whose wealth was enhanced by trade in gold, ivory, animal skins, cloth, and glass beads with the Swahili on the Indian Ocean coast, declined following the abandonment of the region either due to climate change or transformations associated with the gold trade (Pikirayi 2001; Huffman 2007). Iron Age farmers then developed chiefdom-level societies at Chivowa and Gumanye hills in south-central Zimbabwe (Sinclair 1987). They transformed from simple kin-warranted domestic corporations, relying mainly on land and cattle, to long-distance traders. With this newly acquired wealth, they financed the building of stone structures. By about 1270, a powerful elite emerged at Great Zimbabwe, laying the foundations of an elaborate urban complex and the center of a state. Great Zimbabwe reached its peak during the 14th and 15th centuries when the erection of elaborate stone structures—evidently symbolizing prestige and status—was extended towards outlying areas. During its florescence, displaying elite residences, ritual centers, public forums, markets, houses of commoners and artisans, and with a population estimated at 18,000 inhabitants, it became the

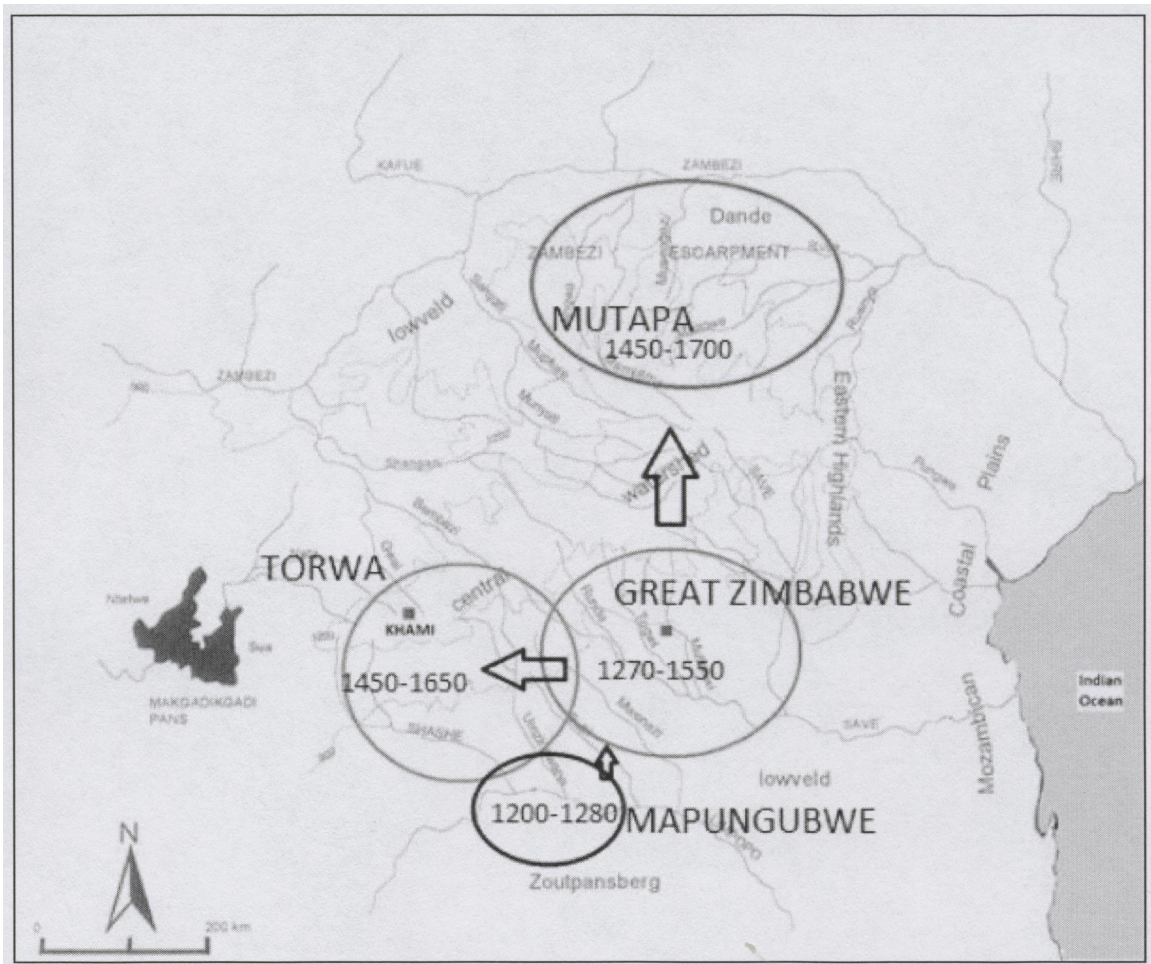


FIGURE 1. Map of the Zimbabwe Plateau showing the location of Great Zimbabwe in relation to other ancient polities. (Map courtesy of Shadreck Chirikure, 2012.)

largest metropolis in southern Africa (Figure 2). From about 1300, stone buildings of a scale and magnitude unparalleled on the entire Zimbabwe Plateau were constructed. Presiding over a polity located mostly in south-central regions of the Zimbabwe Plateau, Great Zimbabwe became the most dominant political authority south of the Zambezi for up to 250 years.

Dating from 1270 to 1550, Great Zimbabwe has, in conventional archaeological terminology, a prehistory, a protohistory, as well as an historical period. These terms are not without their own problems (Schmidt and Mrozowski [2013]). In this paper, I use the term protohistory to demarcate a period between the conventional boundaries of prehistory and history, during which a culture such as Great Zimbabwe is known through other

societies, either through contact and interaction, and/or through textual sources, both oral and written. The texts are mainly external in character and usually indirect in regard to the societies to which they are referring. Great Zimbabwe has been documented in such a way in Muslim and Portuguese sources, concentrating more on the Solomonian legend and the location of the biblical Ophir (Carroll 1988). The silence of these documents on the developments at Great Zimbabwe in the 15th century presents difficulties in understanding its decline and subsequent abandonment, although it is apparent that this is conditioned by economic and political changes that altered the character of Indian Ocean commerce in the early modern world. Archaeology must therefore reconstruct the associated events and tie them with



FIGURE 2. A view of the Great Enclosure and some of the valley complexes at Great Zimbabwe. (Photo by author, with permission from National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, 2012.)

the meager information available from the written sources. However, even when both oral and written sources become available after A.D. 1500, Great Zimbabwe remains peripheral to mainstream developments on the Zimbabwe Plateau and the western Indian Ocean zone. Clearly it must have been abandoned then, but not forgotten, given its size as a former capital and its regional political and economic influence. From a scholarly perspective, Great Zimbabwe's "silence" (Fontein 2006) comes, firstly, from the interpretation of the site's chronology, dominated by radiocarbon dating, which presents it essentially as a product of prehistory; secondly, the failure to understand post-1500 Portuguese accounts, despite some of these accounts making references to the site; and thirdly, the meaning of the spread of the Zimbabwe tradition elsewhere on the Zimbabwe Plateau, which, to a large extent, was largely by global developments

revolving around the gold trade. In order to understand these processes, Great Zimbabwe must be situated within the framework of abandonment studies in global archaeology. This is the subject of the next section.

Abandonment in Archaeological Contexts

Studies of abandonment remain extremely popular in archaeology and the social sciences, the objective being to understand why certain complex societies eventually succumbed to failure and came to their fateful end (Tainter 1988; Diamond 2005). However, most of these studies situate the fates of these societies largely in environmental terms and negate the global dynamics of which they had become an integral part. The way archaeologists use the term "abandonment" is problematic as it obliterates a range of human behaviors, often reducing

complex processes to simple, localized events (Cameron 1993:4). From a legal perspective, abandonment implies that people give up their claims to and interest in a place when they move away (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006:37). While communities did abandon sites on the Zimbabwe Plateau and adjacent regions in southern Africa during precolonial times, human/land relationships implied that they did not give up their claims to places they had settled originally. This contrasts, for example, with the U.S. Southwest, where a lot of abandonment studies have been conducted, and where archaeologists use the term “abandonment” to imply that the sites concerned were no longer occupied. Cameron (1993) demonstrated that abandonment processes are much more complex and should not be treated as single events. According to Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson (2006:57): “[C]ontinued employment of a single term to define a state of cultural and social practices is unconstructive because casual readers are unlikely to understand ‘abandonment’ beyond its colloquial meanings.” Some sites may have been abandoned but in fact continue to be used in the present—in a spiritual sense, such as the case of Great Zimbabwe (Ndoro 2005; Fontein 2006). One of the reasons scholars see Great Zimbabwe this way is conditioned by the reading of behavioral archaeology (Schiffer 1995), which, according to Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson (2006:38), structures elements as either a systemic context or an archaeological context. This is a dichotomy that leads researchers to see objects or artifacts as refuse and sites as abandoned.

Ordinarily, it is difficult to perceive a site or a region as abandoned when the people once living there show continuous connections with such places. The problem is those archaeologists who place too much focus on the “mystery of leaving” and not enough attention on many ways that connections to homelands were maintained (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006:38). It is proposed here that the inhabitants of Great Zimbabwe did not completely abandon the site during the 15th and 16th centuries as inferred from the reading of the archaeological evidence but, rather, maintained connections with the site and the associated landscape over centuries, as 17th-century movements to the south suggest (Beach 1980). I consider this as a reconnection with their ancestral homeland and, thus, with

Great Zimbabwe. The evidence for this comes from a careful reading of archival literature on Great Zimbabwe, including antiquarian literature (Bent 1893).

In terms of cultural formation processes, abandonment affects the quality of cultural remains entering the archaeological record. In this context, it is considered as a stage and key process in the formation of an archaeological site (Schiffer 1995). According to Cameron (1993): “[A]bandonment processes condition the entry of cultural material into the archaeological record.” When we archaeologists think of the abandonment of Great Zimbabwe, do we imagine catastrophe, mass depopulation, or a regional exodus of people to elsewhere as implied in oral traditions (Abraham 1962)? What was the cause for the abandonment? Is there any material culture patterning to suggest abandonment? How do we read “abandonment” in the stratigraphy? Did we interpret these remains with the assistance of relevant historical ethnographies on abandonment and human/land relationships?

Abandonment takes place or occurs at two levels, the local scale and the regional scale. Settlements can be part of a regional system. Abandonment of sites also occurs in a regional system as Binford’s (1978a, 1978b) study of hunter gatherers indicates. This is often a gradual process but can be rapid as well as catastrophic. Ritual may condition abandonment behavior, resulting in the deposition of unusual quantities of certain kinds of refuse. According to Nelson (2000:52–54), who also researched in the U.S. Southwest, archaeologists conceptualize abandonment differently when looking at foraging and state-level societies. Foraging societies are often referred to as employing a mobility strategy, while for state-level societies, this is often referred to as a collapse or decline. However, Nelson argues that state societies also employed mobility strategies. Archaeologists use the term abandonment when they are interested in the “the leaving,” such as the depopulation of regions or discontinued occupation of a site or structure. Abandonment together with migration are processes, strategies, outcomes, and causes of social change. People move as part of a strategy to address social issues. Abandonment is also a continuous process of transformation, a movement that results in the absence of active residence—it is about moving residence (Nelson 2000:55).

Using concepts framed around abandonment, it is possible to reconsider both the archaeological and historical evidence from Great Zimbabwe and discuss the site in the context of both local and regional histories on the Zimbabwe Plateau. It is the dynamics of these histories that tell of Great Zimbabwe's declining global role and its eventual demise as a center of considerable political and economic power. During the 14th and 15th centuries, Great Zimbabwe may be situated in a time period archaeologists may refer to as protohistory, as some of the events pertaining to the site can be gleaned from examining external written accounts and through extracting historical information from datable ceramics and glass beads that arrived at the site. In this perspective, the early-20th-century work of David Randall-MacIver (1906) is significant, especially his "Medieval Period" dating of Great Zimbabwe (which should be contrasted with Richard Hall's *Prehistoric Rhodesia* [1909], primarily a futile rejection of Randall-MacIver's groundbreaking work on the site). There is also need to consider seriously post-15th-century migrations by the Karanga and other groups, which are reported from oral sources as a process of expansion from south-central Zimbabwe northwards towards the Zambezi basin (Beach 1980). However, during the 17th century, the Karanga are reported in both oral traditions (Beach 1980) and Portuguese written accounts (Pikirayi 1993) to have migrated southwards, leaving much of northern Zimbabwe under the control of the Mutapa State but increasingly under Portuguese exploitation. While the value of these traditions is in clearly showing a reversal of earlier expansion or migration, and a subsequent reconnection with the landscape of Great Zimbabwe, the events also serve to underline how Great Zimbabwe lost its global significance in a period usually associated with the growth of globalization.

Great Zimbabwe in Protohistory

So far, current descriptions of the stratigraphy of Great Zimbabwe have failed to reconstruct the historical events associated with the site during the 14th and 15th centuries. The work of Huffman and Vogel (1991) redefined the chronology of the site demonstrating, using available radiocarbon dates, that the main settlement at Great Zimbabwe did not last more than two

centuries. However, the authors were obviously limited by the loss of much of the overburden removed through antiquarian activities and, therefore, did not discuss in detail the terminal periods of the settlement. In this section, I show, with the help of Arabic sources, that considerable information has been recovered about Great Zimbabwe's gold and copper trade during the 14th and 15th centuries.

One of the reasons for the "silence" of Great Zimbabwe even before the availability of Portuguese written sources is the peripheral treatment scholars have given the site in the context of the development of early modern urbanism, specifically the Swahili towns, along the East African coast. The problem lies in the interpretation of Arabic sources. In this respect, the works of Arabic writers, such as ullah Muhammad ibn Battuta (1304–1369), must be reconsidered and put into a broader regional context. Ibn Battuta was the only medieval traveler known to have visited the lands of every Muslim ruler of his time, including Mogadishu, Mombasa, and Kilwa. From these writings, as well as those of the much earlier Arab writer Al Masudi (ca. 888–957), "the Herodotus of the Arabs," who also visited eastern Africa, a perspective can be gained of the 14th century and even the much-earlier gold trade coming from the hinterland, for which the Zimbabwe Plateau played a dominant role. Often poorly understood is the growing intercontinental demand for gold during the 14th century, at a time when Great Zimbabwe, according to available radiocarbon dates, saw intensification and expansion of building activity (Huffman and Vogel 1991; Pikirayi 2001, 2006).

There was so much wealth around Great Zimbabwe, as well as in all the Swahili towns existing at the time, including Kilwa, that it led to these cities and towns erecting some of the most remarkable monumental architecture on the western Indian Ocean coast and in the adjacent hinterland (Sutton 1990). This wealth emanated from the gold, demand for which increased considerably not just in eastern Africa, but also in the Persian Gulf, India, the Far East, and Europe. According to Sutton (1990) it was Europe that exerted so much pressure to exploit all known and workable sources of gold. This development was significant in that "gold had a disproportionate impact on the directions of commerce and its intensity" (Sutton 1990:65) as

the volatile world market became characterized by unpredictable booms and sudden slumps. This affected the poorly developed sites of the gold-trading network, with destructive impacts. It will be seen in the next section the impact the demand for gold had on the mines around Great Zimbabwe, according to Portuguese accounts.

When he visited Kilwa in 1331, ibn Battuta was told about the gold coming from Sofala, “a fortnight’s sail away,” which in turn came from the hinterland of “Yufi,” “a month’s journey” away. According to Sutton (1990), this was certainly a reference to the Zimbabwe Plateau, although the identification was clearly confused with the West African Ife. Interestingly, a copper coin recovered at Great Zimbabwe was inscribed “al-Hasan [ibn] Sulaiman,” the sultan of Kilwa from about 1320 to 1330 (Huffman 1972a, 1972b). It has been suggested that although the coin was minted at Kilwa, the source of the copper was the Zimbabwe Plateau or elsewhere, possibly northern Zambia or southern Congo. The trade in copper connected Great Zimbabwe with societies in south-central Africa, and one of the sites that featured in the copper trade during the 15th century, if not slightly earlier, was Ingombe Ilede, on the middle Zambezi. The florescence of Ingombe Ilede coincides with the loosening of Great Zimbabwe’s hold over the gold trade to the Swahili coast and the rise of the Zambezi as the most important trade route in south-central and eastern Africa. From now on the Indian Ocean trade was channeled through the northern regions. However, the merchants could not escape the expansionary tendencies of rulers, some of them once based at Great Zimbabwe. During the late 15th century, the Mutapa dynasties in northern Zimbabwe conquered the copper mines of the northwestern plateau, upsetting Ingombe Ilede’s hold on the trade. At the same time, the Portuguese were arriving on the Mozambican coast, disrupting commerce at the lower end of the trade routes. This impacted Great Zimbabwe, a major player in global and regional commerce.

A further illumination of Great Zimbabwe during the 14th and 15th centuries comes from imported ceramics, glassware, and glass beads from the Persian Gulf, India, and the Far East, some of which have been recovered on the site (Garlake 1968). Of importance is the “ceramic route” defined by Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens (1985)

in regard to wares traded within the western, northern, and eastern Indian Ocean zones, including the adjacent hinterlands, between the 9th and 15th centuries. This route supplied vast commercial networks linking China with Southeast Asia, the Near East, and eastern Africa. According to Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens (1985:284), the marine network through which the wares were distributed was never completely broken up, but the restrictions imposed by the Chinese government at the end of the 14th century and the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean at the end of the 15th century affected its organization globally. The main challenge for researchers working on Great Zimbabwe and other sites on the Zimbabwe Plateau that have yielded some celadon sherds and, later, vast quantities of blue-on-white porcelain—see Pikirayi (1993) for the site of Baranda, in northern Zimbabwe—is interpreting these economic processes in terms of importation policies, constraints, and opportunities. What is apparent is a transformative shift from the world dominated by Asian powers that, for centuries, controlled much of the commerce in the Indian Ocean, the gulf, the Indian subcontinent, and continental Asia, to the world dominated by the European powers that arrived in the Indian Ocean in the late 15th century.

Portuguese Written Sources, Karanga Migrations, and Great Zimbabwe

Portuguese written sources further attest to the continued decline of Great Zimbabwe, as the commercial shift toward the more auriferous gold belts of northern Zimbabwe undermined the city (Pikirayi 2006). There is a tendency by scholars to misread, let alone misinterpret, Portuguese sources making references to Great Zimbabwe. S. T. Carroll is mistaken when he mentions that there were eight direct references by the Portuguese to Great Zimbabwe (Carroll 1988), when in fact those sources were pointing to the state capitals of the Mutapa Kingdom in the northern Zimbabwe Plateau (Pikirayi 1993). The closest and most detailed description of Great Zimbabwe comes from João de Barros, published in his book *Da Asia* in 1552, being an account of the activities of the Portuguese in the Orient. This particular source corroborates the observations of some Arabic writers during the 14th century:

There are other mines in a district called Toroa, which by another name is known as the kingdom of Butua, which is ruled by a prince called Burrom, a vassal of Benomotapa, which land adjoins the aforesaid consisting of vast plains, and these mines are the most ancient known in the country, and they are all in the plain, in the midst of which there is a square fortress of masonry within and without, built of stones of marvellous size, and there appears to be no mortar joining them. The wall is more than twenty-five spans in width, and the height is not so great considering the width. This edifice is almost surrounded by hills, upon which are others resembling it in the fashioning of the stone and the absence of mortar, and one of them is a tower more than twelve fathoms high.

The natives of the country call these edifices *Symbaoe*, which according to their language signifies court, for every place where Benomotapa may be is so called; and they say that being royal property all the king's other dwellings have this name. ... When and by whom these edifices were raised, as the people of the land are ignorant of the art of writing, there is no record, but they say they are the work of the devil, for in comparison to their power and knowledge it does not seem possible to them that they should be the work of men. ... The distance of this edifice from Sofala in a direct line to the west is a hundred and seventy leagues, or thereabouts and its is between 20° and 21° south latitude. ... In the opinion of the Moors who saw it, it is very ancient, and was built there to keep possessions of the mines, which are very old, and no gold has been extracted from them for years, because of the wars. ... It is guarded by a nobleman, who has charge of it after the manner of a chief *alcaide*, and they call this officer *Symbacayo*, as we should say keeper of the *Symbaoe*, and there are always some of Benomotapa's wives therein, of whom this *Symbacayo* takes care (Theal 1898–1902[6]:267–268).

Huffman and Vogel (1991) have used this source in connection with available radiocarbon dates to shorten Great Zimbabwe's chronology and argue for its abandonment mainly during the 15th century. This would support available archaeological evidence, irrespective of the stratigraphic integrity of the terminal phases of settlement at Great Zimbabwe. What this exercise fails to understand is the process of *leaving* Great Zimbabwe, and how this is reflected on the site and elsewhere.

It is evident from 16th-century Portuguese accounts of the Mutapa State in northern Zimbabwe that by that time Great Zimbabwe was not as important a center as it once was. João de Barros's account was heavily derived from coastal (Sofala) Swahili traders; for example, his references to square buildings and ancient inscriptions seen above the door of the building

clearly attest to their knowledge of the existence of Great Zimbabwe. More importantly, João de Barros's account—collated in 1538 and possibly making references to events three decades old—does not say Great Zimbabwe was completely abandoned. Some members of the royal family were still living there despite the abandonment of the gold mines in its vicinity due to civil war.

The late 15th century was characterized by civil wars, which saw the emergence of the Torwa dynasty in the southwestern regions of the Zimbabwe Plateau. Oral accounts from before the mid-17th century point to the movement of Karanga clans from the area of Great Zimbabwe northwards. Traditions refer to a region called "*Guruhuswa*," literally meaning "area with tall grass," which may be identified geographically with south-central or southwestern Zimbabwe (Garlake 1973), or simply the Zimbabwe highlands (Beach 1980). This Karanga movement seems to coincide with the emergence of the Mutapa State in northern Zimbabwe. The Mutapa State has been identified archaeologically with the expansion of the Zimbabwe tradition northwards (Beach 1980; Pikirayi 1993). Stone-walled settlements architecturally similar to Great Zimbabwe have been located in the region, dating from the 15th century onwards. Some of these Mutapa capitals were still being constructed in stone when the Portuguese arrived on the Zimbabwe Plateau in the early 16th century.

The traditions about *Guruhuswa* origins seem to convey centuries-old historical processes of migrations across the Zimbabwe Plateau landscapes, with communities searching for vital resources, such as salt, gold, ivory, game, pasture, and water in other regions (Abraham 1962). The traditions gleaned by Abraham (1962) about a movement from *Guruhuswa* to the Zambezi lowlands in search of salt need to be utilized with caution, as they have been interpreted to mean that Great Zimbabwe was abandoned due to a shortage of the commodity. However, it is not unusual to find salt being traded in the northern, northwestern, and even western Zimbabwe Plateau and areas beyond, such as the *Makgadikgadi Pans* (Pikirayi 2001). Karanga expansion northwards during the 15th century must have been triggered by the discovery of more lucrative goldfields in the region that they tried to control and that may have affected Great Zimbabwe in terms of population depletion. In other regions such as the southwest,

control of the lucrative goldfields seems to have fallen under the Torwa dynasty, which was clearly a rival of the Mutapa State and successor to Great Zimbabwe.

Further contributing to the “silence” of Great Zimbabwe is the rise of another polity in the southwestern regions of the Zimbabwe Plateau. The rise of the Torwa and the State of Butua is another poorly understood development in the 15th and subsequent centuries. The Torwa are first encountered in Arabic accounts written by Ahmad ibn Madjid, dating to 1494, in connection with a civil war with the Mutapa State. The geographical location of the State of “Butua”—the area ruled by the Torwa,—is, according to Portuguese written accounts, in the southwestern parts of the Zimbabwe Plateau (Beach 1980:197). It was rich in gold and supported large cattle herds. This coincides with the rise of the center of Khami in the region (Robinson 1959).

Torwa origins are obscure, but the general assumption until most recently is that they were a direct successor to Great Zimbabwe (Beach 1980; Pikirayi 2001). Khami inherits some of the architectural as well as material culture elements from Great Zimbabwe, but it appears the culture developed locally and earlier, as evidenced by Iron Age sites whose remains are found at Leopard’s Kopje (Ntabazingwe) and other sites found within the general area. Khami partly explains the “silence” of Great Zimbabwe in the 15th and later centuries, as it seems to have been the dominant force in the southwest during this time. According to Huffman (2007) it controlled gold and other resources, which affected the wealth that was once channeled through Great Zimbabwe to the Indian Ocean coast. Khami was therefore the capital of the Torwa State, which the Portuguese found wrestling for control of the northern trade routes through the Zambezi Valley. Its destruction in the 1640s by the Portuguese further confirms the dominance of the Torwa in the southwest (Pikirayi 2001).

Great Zimbabwe in Post-1500 Historical Developments on the Zimbabwe Plateau

A strict interpretation of available archaeological evidence from Great Zimbabwe would suggest that the site was no longer an important settlement after 1500, further suggesting that it may have been abandoned then or even before this

date. Available historical evidence would suggest evidence to the contrary, however, demonstrating that developments elsewhere on the Zimbabwe Plateau trigger the decline of Great Zimbabwe during the 16th century. From a regional perspective, the rise of successor states in the north and west played a major role in this, but, more importantly, they succeeded in undercutting the commercial links Great Zimbabwe had previously enjoyed with the Indian Ocean.

Conventional archaeological approaches used to define the chronology of Great Zimbabwe (Huffman and Vogel 1979, 1991; Hall and Vogel 1980; Chirikure and Pikirayi 2008) give the impression that the settlement is primarily “prehistoric,” since “history” only starts with the appearance of European texts in the early 16th century. A prehistoric dating for Great Zimbabwe would identify the authorship of the site with the “ancients,” a term coined in early antiquarian accounts (Bent 1893; Hall 1905), apparently designed to create a disconnect between present-day Karanga speakers living in the area and the perceived builders of the town. This results in the production of histories that are part of a broader process of silencing or erasing histories, particularly later histories. This has been further conditioned by traditional labels in archaeological scholarship, where deep time is regarded as “prehistory,” while the more recent pasts, which are illuminated in one way or the other by the availability of written and oral texts, are categorized as “protohistory” or “historical” (Schmidt and Mrozowski [2013]).

The absence of Great Zimbabwe in post-16th-century historical records partly accounts for the “silence” of the site, but, more importantly, to the poor understanding of settlement processes elsewhere on the Zimbabwe Plateau. It is evident that development in the northerly parts of the Zimbabwe Plateau during the 15th century with the rise of the Mutapa State (Pikirayi 1993) and the southwestern regions with the emergence of the Torwa represents peer-polity interaction that eventually shifts political power and dominance from the south, where Great Zimbabwe was based. By the time the Portuguese arrive on the Zimbabwe Plateau in pursuit of gold and ivory at the beginning of the 16th century (Beach 1980), these areas had become firmly integrated into the global networks of trade and interaction, which now involved mercantile powers from Europe. These developments overshadowed Great Zimbabwe

as a vibrant city and may have resulted in its demise, reducing it into an ordinary town. Sixteenth-century Portuguese secondhand reports of the site allude to this development.

What also remains poorly documented is the process of late-16th- and 17th-century Karanga migrations or movements from the northern part of the Zimbabwe Plateau to the south-central regions, where Great Zimbabwe is situated. What seems to trigger these movements was the growing, unstable, political, economic, and environmental conditions in the Mutapa State (Pikirayi 2001, 2009), exacerbated by exposure to global elements of the gold and ivory trade, which triggered considerable violence. This resulted in the repopulation of the south-central parts of the Zimbabwe Plateau, which remained shielded from the rapacious demands of external traders until the 19th century, when the region became exposed to developments associated with the Nguni movements from the south and the expansion of Afrikaner and British settlers towards the South African *highveld*. Karl Mauch's map of the south-central regions (Burke 1969) suggests an increase in population and settlement activity in the region of Great Zimbabwe up to 1870 (Figure 3).

While all this information is critical in building up a story for post-1500 Great Zimbabwe, little is known about the actual developments within the town or city save for the late-19th-century European accounts that publicized it to the Western world. Thus, Great Zimbabwe remains effectively without a history, its authors are conveniently associated with an "ancient race" that has no connections with the "decadent" tribes that were found living within it by European explorers, and therefore remains a "mystery" in terms of origins. This historiography, which puts considerable emphasis on the prehistory—narrowly conceptualized here as the period before written documentation—has perpetuated the silence observed in anthropological and historical research (Fontein 2006). This is posing considerable conflict in terms of management of the site, as communities living in the area around it have been ostracized from it in one way or the other (Ndoro 2005).

Conclusion

Future research on Great Zimbabwe must adopt two themes—how the settlement is connected to modern Karanga and other histories

on the Zimbabwe Plateau, and how it lost its domineering role in international commerce at the very same moment that European expansion was creating the modern globalized world. There is a need for a coordinated research program focusing on the decline of Great Zimbabwe and the development of successor states on the Zimbabwe Plateau and surrounding regions. Much remains unaccomplished insofar as telling the story of Great Zimbabwe is concerned, as fairly recent research suggests (Pikirayi 2006, [2013]; Chirikure and Pikirayi 2008). Scientific and historical redating of the site is important to refine the existing relative and radiocarbon chronology. At present available radiocarbon dates do not relate to the perceived terminal periods of the site, although some of the samples were secured from upper stratigraphic levels. A reexamination of Bent (1893), Hall (1905, 1909), Hall and Neal (1902), Randall-MacIver (1906), Gertude Caton-Thompson (1931), Robinson (1961), and Summers (1961) presents a clue to the nature of archaeological deposits removed by early investigators, while recent condition survey reports would be helpful in indicating which of these deposits remain available for study without further destroying the site. An archaeological study of imported ceramic, glass beads, and other valuable items brought to Great Zimbabwe through trade and exchange needs to be undertaken.

The history of gold mining on the Zimbabwe Plateau requires a reexamination (Summers 1969; Phimister 1976) to document which kingdoms and regions benefited directly from the gold trade when Great Zimbabwe was at its prime. Already, Kilwa provides useful clues, some of which have been recovered at Great Zimbabwe in the form of minted coins. However, research needs to establish how much of this trade ended up in the palaces of the Persian Gulf, India, and the Far East, whose written accounts may help define Great Zimbabwe's protohistorical period. Of value here is information relating to the decline in the price of gold during the protohistorical period and its coincidence with references from João de Barros's account of some of the gold mines on the Zimbabwe Plateau. The paucity of imported ceramics from India and the Far East during the 15th century has been interpreted to mean the decline of Asian trade with Great Zimbabwe. While this is technically correct, one should also consider the royal policy that banned exports

to the West. All of these factors demonstrate that while much of Great Zimbabwe's history predates the period of European expansion typically associated with the transformations brought about by modern globalization, it was nonetheless associated with relevant transformative themes.

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at the conference of the Five Hundred Years Initiative in Cape Town in 2008, which sought to redefine trends in historical archaeology in southern Africa. I would like to thank conference participants for their highly constructive comments and feedback. This paper is part of wider research on the collapse of complex societies, funded through the South African National Foundation Blue Skies Research Programme (BSRG) Grant 81694.

References

- ABRAHAM, DONALD P.
1962 The Early Political History of the Kingdom of Mwene Mutapa (850–1589). In *Historians in Tropical Africa: Proceedings of the Leverhulme Inter-Collegiate Conference*, pp. 61–92. University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Salisbury, Rhodesia [Zimbabwe].
- BEACH, DAVID N.
1980 *The Shona and Zimbabwe 900–1850*. Mambo Press. Gweru, Zimbabwe.
- BENT, THEODORE J.
1893 *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland*. Reprinted 1969 by Books of Rhodesia, Bulawayo, Rhodesia [Zimbabwe].
- BINFORD, LOUIS R.
1978a Dimensional Analysis of Behavior and Site Structure: Learning from an Eskimo Hunting Stand. *American Antiquity* 43(3):330–361.
1978b *Nunamiut Ethnoarchaeology*. Academic Press, New York, NY.
- BURKE, E. E. (EDITOR)
1969 *The Journals of Carl Mauch*. National Archives of Rhodesia, Salisbury, Rhodesia [Zimbabwe].
- CAMERON, CATHERINE M.
1993 Abandonment and Archaeological Interpretation. In *Abandonment of Settlements and Regions: Ethnoarchaeological and Archaeological Approaches*, C. M. Cameron and S. A. Tomka, editors, pp. 3–7. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- CARROLL, SCOTT T.
1988 Solomonian Legend: The Muslims and the Great Zimbabwe. *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21(2):233–247.
- CATON-THOMPSON, GERTRUDE
1931 *The Zimbabwe Culture: Ruins and Reactions*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, UK.
- CHIRIKURE, SHADRECK, AND INNOCENT PIKIRAYI
2008 Inside and Outside the Dry Stone Walls: Revisiting the Material Culture of Great Zimbabwe. *Antiquity* 82(318):976–993.
- COLWELL-CHANTHAPHONH, CHIP, AND THOMAS J. FERGUSON
2006 Rethinking Abandonment in Archaeological Contexts. *SAA Archaeological Record* 6(1):37–41.
- DIAMOND, JARED M.
2005 *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. Viking Penguin, New York, NY.
- FONTEIN, JOOST
2006 *The Silence of Great Zimbabwe: Contested Landscapes and the Power of Heritage*. UCL Press, London, UK.
- GARLAKE, PETER
1968 The Value of Imported Ceramics in Dating and Interpretation of the Rhodesian Iron Age. *Journal of African History* 9(1):13–33.
1973 *The Great Zimbabwe*. Thames and Hudson, London, UK.
- HALL, MARTIN, AND JOHN C. VOGEL
1980 Some Recent Radiocarbon Dates from Southern Africa. *Journal of African History* 21(4):431–455.
- HALL, RICHARD N.
1905 *Great Zimbabwe*. Methuen, London, UK.
1909 *Prehistoric Rhodesia*. F. T. Unwin London, UK.
- HALL, RICHARD N., AND W. G. NEAL
1902 *The Ancient Ruins of Rhodesia*. Methuen, London, UK.
- HUFFMAN, THOMAS N.
1972a An Arab Coin from Zimbabwe. *Arnoldia* 5(32):1–7.
1972b The Rise and Fall of Zimbabwe. *Journal of African History* 13(3):353–366.
2007 *Handbook to the Iron Age: The Archaeology of Pre-Colonial Farming Societies in Southern Africa*. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville, South Africa.
- HUFFMAN, THOMAS N., AND JOHN C. VOGEL
1979 The Controversial Lintels from Great Zimbabwe. *Antiquity* 53(207):55–57.
1991 The Chronology of Great Zimbabwe. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 46:61–70.
- MUDENGE, STAN I. G.
1988 *A Political History of Munhumutapa*. Zimbabwe Publishing House, Harare.

- NDORO, WEBBER
2005 *The Preservation of Great Zimbabwe: Your Monument, Our Shrine*. ICCROM Conservation Studies 4. Rome, Italy.
- NELSON, MARGARET C.
2000 Abandonment: Conceptualization, Representation and Social Change. In *Social Theory in Archaeology*, Michael Schiffer, editor, pp. 52–62. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.
- PHIMISTER, IAN R.
1976 Pre-Colonial Gold Mining in Southern Zambezia: A Reassessment. *African Social Research* 21:1–30.
- PIKIRAYI, INNOCENT
1993 *The Archaeological Identity of the Mutapa State: Towards an Historical Archaeology of Northern Zimbabwe*. Societas Archaeologica Upsaliensis, Studies in African Archaeology 6. Uppsala, Sweden.
2001 *The Zimbabwe Culture: Origins and Decline in Southern Zambezia States*. AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, CA.
2006 The Demise of Great Zimbabwe, AD 1420–1550: An Environmental Reappraisal. In *Cities in the World, 1500–2000*, A. Green and R. Leech, editors, pp. 31–47. Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology Monograph 3. Leeds, UK.
2009 Palaces, Feiras and Prazos: An Historical Archaeological Perspective of African–Portuguese Contact in Northern Zimbabwe. *African Archaeological Review* 26(3):163–185.
[2013] Water and Social Formation in Pre-colonial Zambezia: Rethinking the Development and Demise of Complex Societies in Southern Africa. In *Water and Humanity: Historical Overview*, Vol. 7, V. Scarborough, editor. UNESCO-IHP Manuscripts, Paris, France.
- PIRAZZOLI-T'SERSTEVENS, MICHÈLE P.
1985 The Ceramic Route. In *The World Atlas of Archaeology*, M. Beazely, editor, pp. 284–285. G. K. Hall, Boston, MA.
- RANDALL-MACIVER, DAVID
1906 *Medieval Rhodesia*. Macmillan, London, UK.
- ROBINSON, KEITH R.
1959 *Khami Ruins*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
1961 Excavations on the Acropolis Hill. *Occasional Papers of the National Museums of Rhodesia* 3(23A):159–192.
- SCHIFFER, MICHAEL B.
1995 *Behavioral Archaeology: First Principles*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.
- SCHMIDT, PETER, AND STEPHEN A. MROZOWSKI (EDITORS)
[2013] *The Death of Prehistory*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.
- SINCLAIR, PAUL J. J.
1987 *Space, Time and Social Formation: A Territorial Approach to the Archaeology and Anthropology of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, c. 0–1700 AD*. Societas Archaeologica Upsaliensis, Uppsala, Sweden.
- SUMMERS, ROGER
1961 Excavations in the Great Enclosure. *Occasional Papers of the National Museums of Southern Rhodesia* 3(23A):236–288.
1969 *Ancient Mining in Rhodesia*. National Museums of Rhodesia Museum Memoir 3. Salisbury, Rhodesia [Zimbabwe].
- SUTTON, JOHN E. G.
1990 *A Thousand Years of East Africa*. British Institute in Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya.
- TANTER, JOSEPH
1988 *Collapse of Complex Societies*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- THEAL, GEORGE M.
1898–1903 *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, 9 vols. C. Struik, Cape Town, South Africa.
- INNOCENT PIKIRAYI
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ARCHAEOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
PRIVATE BAG X20
HATFIELD, TSHWANE, 0028
SOUTH AFRICA