

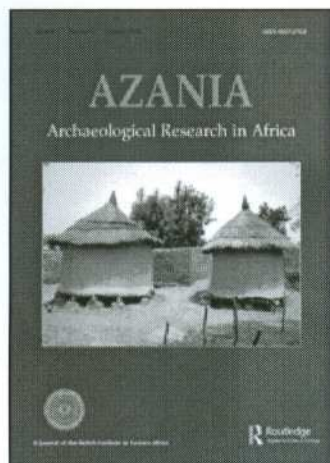
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Revisiting Great Zimbabwe

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Revisiting Great Zimbabwe

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Editor's notes

The following article is in response to a paper by Shadreck Chirikure and Innocent Pikirayi that appeared in *Antiquity* (2008) revisiting the sequence of Great Zimbabwe, and proposing fundamental changes to the site's interpretation. If you have not yet had the opportunity to read this paper, it may be freely accessed online at: <http://antiquity.ac.uk/ant/082/ant0820976.htm>. It is anticipated that Chirikure and Pikirayi will make a riposte to this reply in a forthcoming issue of *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*.

Chirikure and Pikirayi (2008) offer a new interpretation of Great Zimbabwe. Using a 19th Century principle of political succession, they argue that all major stonewalled buildings in the valley, as well as on the hill, served as separate palaces for successive rulers. Older historical data, however, together with evidence from other Zimbabwe settlements, negate this interpretation.

Keywords: Great Zimbabwe; Iron Age of Southern Africa; Shona ethnography

Chirikure et Pikirayi (2008) présentent une nouvelle interprétation du Grand Zimbabwe. Employant un principe d'avènement politique du dix-neuvième siècle, ils proposent que tous les édifices en pierre importants de la vallée, ainsi que ceux de la colline, servirent de palais individuels pour des chefs successifs. Cependant, les données historiques plus anciennes et les informations issues d'autres sites de la culture de Zimbabwe contredisent cette interprétation.

Introduction

Recently, Chirikure and Pikirayi (2008) presented a new interpretation of the stonewalling at the famous site of Great Zimbabwe. Following Robinson (1961a, 189), Garlake (1973) and Beach (1998), they argue that the site's political centre shifted from the Hill Ruin to the Great Enclosure. As an addition to the debate, they identify most other major enclosures as the centres of different leaders, with the overall order following the P, P/Q to Q architectural sequence that stretched between AD 1300–1420. Their new interpretation is a welcome addition to the debate, but their approach suffers from three inadequacies. First, they use an inappropriate principle of political succession; secondly, they use an out-dated chronology; and thirdly, they treat Great Zimbabwe as if it were unique. I begin with an examination of their original premise.

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Political succession and shifting headquarters

Their argument in favour of shifting headquarters between successive rulers is based on a Shona principle first articulated by Beach (1998) in the context of Great Zimbabwe: ideally, succession passes from brother to brother. Beach's original interpretation derived from a major study of Shona political activity, but was confined to the last 250 years or so, that is, *after* the collapse of the Zimbabwe culture in the northeast of Zimbabwe. At the height of Great Zimbabwe, this system was not in operation. Instead of brother to brother, there were several claimants whose father was the king and whose mothers were equal members of the upper class. As Dos Santos (1609) put it for the Quiteve dynasty:

The prince who succeeds to the throne is generally one of the eldest sons of the former king and his chief wives who are legitimate, and when they have not sufficient prudence to govern, the second or third son succeeds. Should these also be insufficient, the king is succeeded by his brother, if he is skilful and can govern well. This uncertainty in the succession is because the [people] say that any legitimate son of former kings of that land can inherit the kingdom of his father, and that he has the best right of succession who is best fitted to govern. (Theal, 1898–1903, vol. 7, 191)

Multiple claimants also characterise political succession among the Venda (Stayt 1931). This point is significant because Venda people are descendents of the Zimbabwe culture (Huffman 1996) and they maintained sacred leadership into the twentieth century (Van Warmelo 1932).

The two different principles of succession both concern the ideology of pollution. In the recent Shona world, the eldest son represents the same house as his father and pollution is not a factor. When leadership shifts to the next brother (or from the chief to his brother), it is the start of a new house. As the brothers are competitors, they fear each other's magico-religious power and would therefore not occupy the same residence. With sacred leadership, the son chosen by the ancestors continues the direct line, whoever he is. Because the normal claimant constitutes the same 'house' as his father, there is no reason why he must have a separate place. Indeed, Dos Santos (in Theal 1898–1903, vol. 7, 192) makes it clear that a new king occupied his father's palace. A direct descendant may shift his entire settlement, but he does not have to do so. As with Quiteve, he was probably expected to stay. On the other hand, the brothers not chosen by the ancestors must leave with their supporters and start their own houses elsewhere.

Although valid for recent times, the principle of succession used by Chirikure and Pikirayi does not apply to Great Zimbabwe because a series of later interventions fundamentally affected Shona society; these include those of the Portuguese in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the Swazi and Ndebele in the early nineteenth century and the British 60 years later. As a result, class distinction and sacred leadership disappeared, and a new principle of succession became the norm. The new principle, contrary to Chirikure and Pikirayi's (2008, 989) claim, cannot logically invalidate the cognitive model that is based on earlier principles: cause must precede effect.

Chronology

The second point to clarify is the sequence in the Hill Ruin. Robinson's (1961a, 1961b) pioneer excavations there established the general sequence of ceramics and

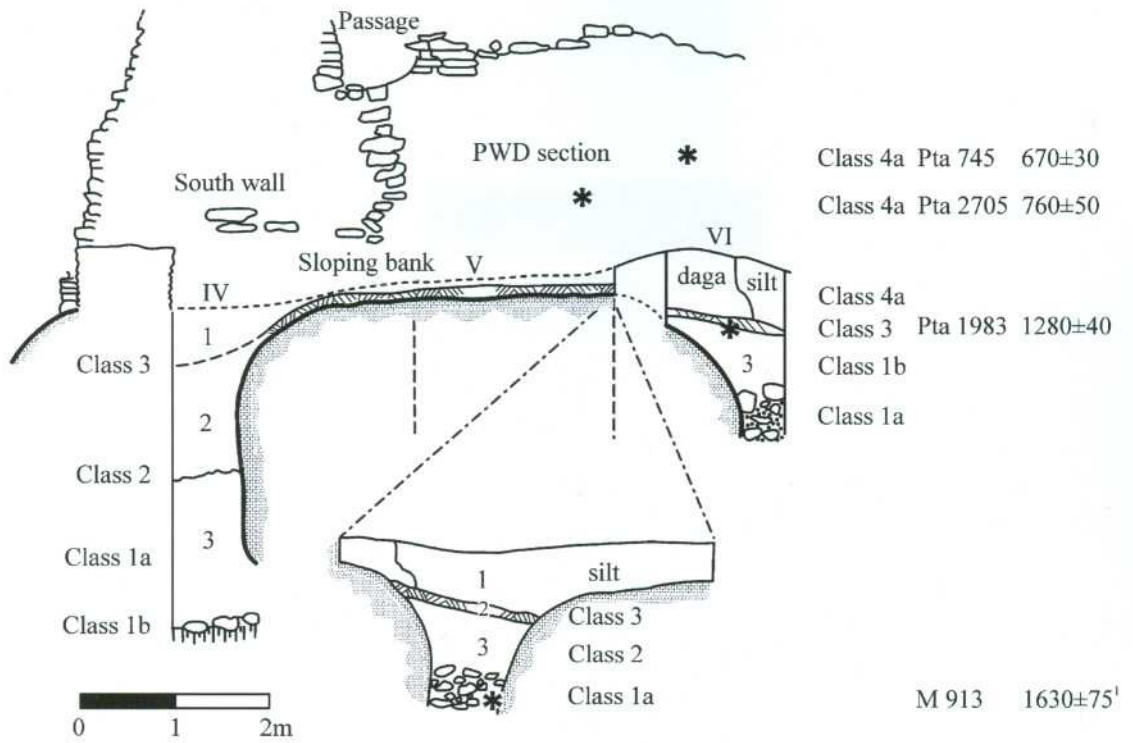


Figure 1a. Sections through Trench IV and VI inside the palace at Great Zimbabwe. After Robinson 1961a. Projected locations of radiocarbon date.

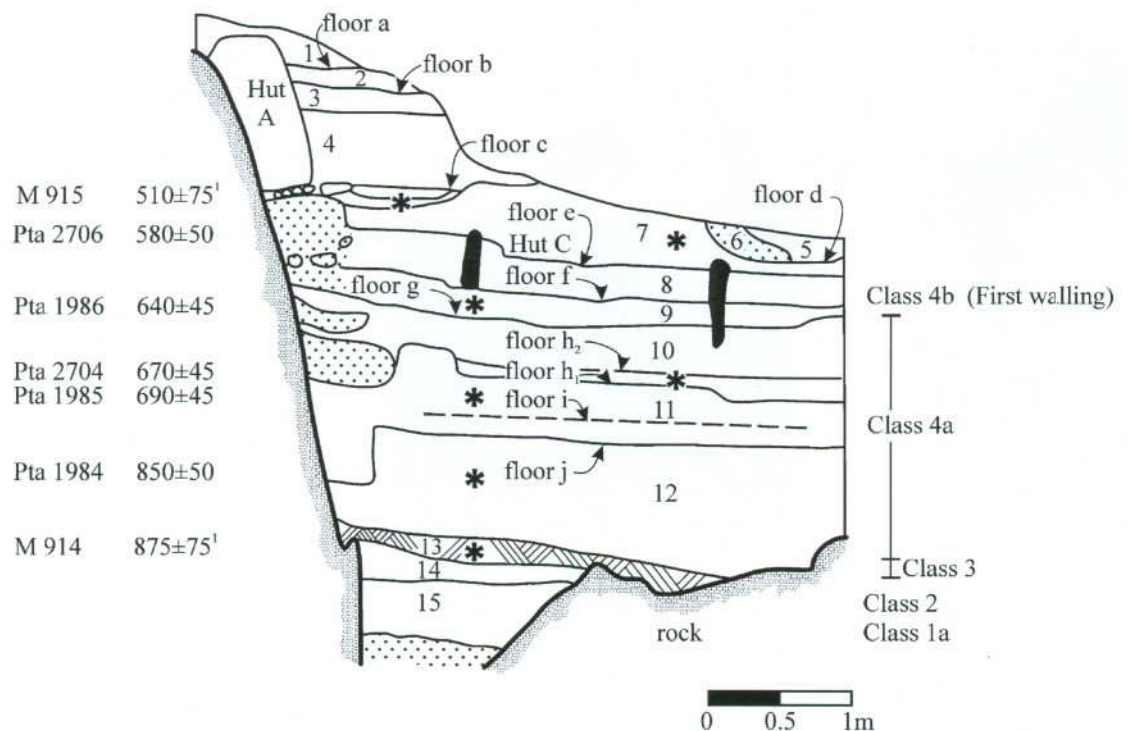


Figure 1b. Stratigraphic sequence in Trench I. After Robinson 1961a. Projected locations of radiocarbon dates.

periods. More recent analyses, some not available to Chirikure and Pikirayi, refine it further, especially in relationship to the landscape at the earlier capital of Mapungubwe, in the far north of South Africa (Huffman and Vogel 1991; Huffman 2007, 2009b). Class 3 ceramics, as redefined, occur only in Level 13 in Trench 1 (Figure 1a, Figure 1b). Period III is similarly restricted and does not encompass Levels 12 to 7, as Chirikure and Pikirayi believe. Instead, Class 4a (Robinson's Class 3 influenced by Class 4) characterises Levels 11 and 10 (Level 12 is fill), and then classic Great Zimbabwe pottery (Class 4b) dominates the remaining upper levels.

Furthermore, the more recent research (Huffman 2009a, 2009b) demonstrates that Periods I–III at Great Zimbabwe are best interpreted in terms of rainmaking activities (Table 1). In Trench 1, the first solid *daga* (daub) structures appear in Level 12. These first structures were associated with Class 4a (3/4) pottery and predated the first stonewalling. Contrary to Chirikure and Pikirayi's (2008, 980) reading of these data, solid *daga* structures belong to Period IV, not Period II. Moreover, Class 4a pottery is not found inside any P or P/Q enclosure (*pace* Chirikure and Pikirayi 2008, 986), only underneath.

Chirikure and Pikirayi rely on Chipunza (1994) for the relative sequence and dating of stonewalling. Chipunza, however, missed the important stratigraphic point that the first stonewall in the Hill Ruin rests on top of a sloping bank of broken and decomposed *daga* structures (Robinson 1961a, 185), dating to Period IVa (Figure 1a, Figure 1b). Chirikure and Pikirayi are thus incorrect in their assignment of P-coursing to Period III and too general in dating this walling from the early to the late thirteenth century. Radiocarbon dates for Class 4a (Pta-745, Pta-1985, Pta-2704, Pta-2705), Class 4b (Pta-1192, Pta-1986, Pta-2706) and wooden lintels in the Hill Ruin (Pta-1192) and Great Enclosure (Pta-792, Pta-1594) indicate instead that the first walling most likely appeared about AD 1300 $\pm$ 10 (Huffman 2007, 2009b). This walling marks the beginning of Period IVb.

Sometime between AD 1400 and 1450, the rise of Khami brought an end to Great Zimbabwe as a centre of power (Huffman 2007, 411–412, 421–425). As a result, Great Zimbabwe was largely abandoned, and its leadership moved north to the Mutapa area. Mutapa (Monomatapa) traditions (Abraham 1959, 1962) do not link Mutota, the first Mutapa, directly with Great Zimbabwe, but the link is nevertheless highly likely. According to De Barros (1551, in Theal, 1898–1903, vol. 6, 267–268), the Mutapa in the early to mid-sixteenth century kept a number of his wives at a former capital with a large tower. This was probably Great Zimbabwe. Period IVc encompasses this later phase (Huffman and Vogel 1991). Thus, the

Table 1. Chronology of Great Zimbabwe.

Period	Date cal. AD*	Pottery	Comments
PV	Nineteenth century	Class 5	Dispersed homesteads
PIVc	1450–1550	<i>Great Zimbabwe</i>	Lower Valley
PIVb	1300–1420/50	<i>Great Zimbabwe</i>	First stonewalling
PIVa	1250–1300	<i>Z4a</i> (3/4)	First elite <i>daga</i> structures
PIII	1200–1250	<i>Z3</i>	Rainmaking
PII	1020–1070	<i>Gumanye</i>	Rainmaking
PIb	750–800	<i>Zhizo</i>	Rainmaking
PIa	400–450	<i>Ziwa</i>	Rainmaking

Notes: *Period IV based on calibrated radiocarbon dates following Huffman (2007, 2009b). Periods I–III based on calibrated radiocarbon dates following Huffman (2009a).

florescence of Great Zimbabwe lasted for some 100 years, not 200 years. This shortened chronology in itself casts doubt on Chirikure and Pikirayi's revision.

Palace structures

The first solid *daga* in Level 12 begins the long sequence of structures exposed in 1915 by the Public Works Department (PWD) in the Western Enclosure. To interpret this sequence, we need to consider palaces elsewhere. Although Chirikure and Pikirayi acknowledge the large number of other Zimbabwe settlements, they consider Great Zimbabwe in isolation. This narrow treatment is a significant weakness in their arguments.

There are five principles concerning all Zimbabwe capitals that are relevant to the interpretation of Great Zimbabwe (Huffman 1996). First, chiefs and kings were sacred leaders. That is, there was a mystical association between leadership and the land and a related link between leaders, their ancestors and God. Secondly, sacred leadership was associated with the majesty of mountains. Thirdly, hilltop palaces provided ritual seclusion from physical and supernatural danger. Sacred leaders required this protection because of widespread concepts about pollution (see Ngubane 1977) and they were expected to be aloof (Van Warmelo 1932). Fourthly, the front of a palace contained only a few structures and they are diagnostic. The largest of these was an audience chamber where supplicants could meet the leader in private. To meet the leader, visitors had to negotiate with an official, the king's messenger, who maintained a public office at the edge of the palace. Once inside the palace, visitors had to pass by the traditional diviner. Another small structure was the leader's private sleeping hut, while leaders drank beer with special advisors in a larger hut with an internal pot-stand. Finally, palace complexes included a compartment for the king's ritual sister. In some cases, vertical grooves—*mihombwe* (signifying furrows for crops associated with women and by extension female roles)—marked the doorways to her compartment, or the doorway linking her compartment to the audience chamber. This pattern also applies to the Hill Ruin at Great Zimbabwe.

The *daga* structures within the Western Enclosure cannot be completely reconstructed, as Chirikure and Pikirayi note, because of earlier damage by Hall (1905) and the PWD. Nevertheless, some diagnostic components can be recognised through reference to typical palaces elsewhere. For instance, the PWD uncovered a small, solid *daga* structure with a moulded snake on the exterior (Douslin 1922) that was probably the office of the diviner. In the wall section nearby, are several superimposed structures with an interior pot-stand that were probably beer huts. Their superpositioning shows that the location of this activity, whatever it was, remained fairly constant. A radial hut (that is, a circular *daga* structure with radiating walls supporting an outer wall), identified by Robinson (1961a, 188–189), stands a few metres away. Hall (1905, 156) also found two radial huts. One was the same structure that Robinson noted: it lay about 1 m below the original surface. The second was a further 2 m lower, near Robinson's Trench 1 (Robinson 1961a, 188). If their position did not vary much, then some of the thick *daga* walls in the exposed section below them were earlier chambers. The constant locations, furthermore, show that the Western Enclosure contained typical palace features throughout Period IVb. From the stratigraphy

and dating, then, there is no reason to believe that the palace shifted to the Great Enclosure.

The Great Enclosure

The Great Enclosure does not contain anything like the sequence in the Hill Ruin. To explain this difference, some may wish to argue that early excavators removed much of the deposit. Indeed, Chirikure and Pikirayi (2008, 980) reference Hall and Neal (1902) to this effect (although the reference for their quotation should actually be Hall 1905, 135). Hall, however, was referring to the situation after 1890, not before. It was Hall himself who caused the greatest damage, removing some 3.5 m of deposit from Enclosure 15 and a further 2.5 m from Enclosure 6. Fortunately, Summers (1961, 286) was able to reinterpret Hall's two published sections in terms of his own detailed *daga* sequence: other than Enclosures 6 and 15, Hall had removed only 0.5–1 m of soil. It is simply not true, then, that looters had stripped away metres of deposit over several centuries. The deposit inside the Great Enclosure remained largely undisturbed until Bent (1892) and Willoughby (1893) began their excavations.

The earliest walling stands in Enclosure 1. Significantly, this is the only enclosure that could have contained an audience chamber because it was placed at the front. Even the later walling with Q-coursing did not alter the original organisation (Summers and Whitty 1961). According to Hall (1905, 155, 225–226) and MacIver (1906, 71), Willoughby found only a few stratified *daga* structures here. None had radial walls, or a central partition. Equally significant, this enclosure has neither a *daga* structure on the front wall for the messenger nor a small hut inside for the traditional doctor.

Besides this lack of diagnostic structures, the organisation of the Great Enclosure is quite different from that of a palace. Typically, the front wall is the highest, forming a boundary between the sacred leader and his followers. Even when a palace is completely enclosed, the front wall bears most of the symbols associated with sacred leadership. The front wall of the Great Enclosure, on the other hand, is lower than the decorated back wall. Several other features occur in unexpected places and, overall, the Great Enclosure reverses typical palace features. Similar reversals characterise other enclosures in other Zimbabwe settlements with normal palaces. Eleven of these other enclosures are illustrated in *Snakes and crocodiles* (Huffman 1996; see also Huffman 1984). Among other things, reversals are typical of rites of passage, and this is one of the reasons why I identified these enclosures with premarital initiations similar to the Domba School of the Venda.

For the record, I do not, and have not, associated Domba with male circumcision. Chirikure and Pikirayi (2008, 990) lost focus on this point, for I devoted a separate section in *Snakes and Crocodiles* (Huffman 1996, 197–206) to circumcision schools. Circumcision was conducted outside normal settlements in isolated enclosures associated with permanent stone memorial cairns: Bhila in Zimbabwe and Khubu in Botswana are two examples. Chirikure and Pikirayi cannot dismiss the Domba hypothesis simply because Shona speakers have not held such a school in living memory. The changes in Shona society beginning with the Portuguese contributed greatly to this memory loss.

Valley enclosures

Chirikure and Pikirayi list a variety of objects and features shared by the main enclosures in the Valley as evidence for a palace function. Most, however, are not relevant to the specific hypothesis. For instance, soapstone bowls, imported ceramics, glass beads, metal objects and round entrances have no known association with political leadership *per se*, as opposed to elite wealth. Even some of their claims about these objects are not supported by the evidence (for example, soapstone manufacture in the Hill Ruin; Chirikure and Pikirayi 2008, 987). I am particularly concerned with their contention that each of the valley enclosures contained evidence for metal working (Chirikure and Pikirayi 2008, 986). They reference Collett *et al.* (1992), but this paper does not consider the topic at all. Perhaps they meant Hall (1905), who does make such a claim. In any case, one must remember the social context of Hall's various claims. In his attempt to devalue the upper occupation, Hall fabricated information about recent 'Makalanga' (that is, Shona) activity. At the time, it was widely known that Shona people smelted iron in furnaces with female symbolism and so Hall ascribed 'old Makalanga' iron working to the upper levels whether there was evidence for it or not (see Hall 1905, 116, 123). Close inspection of his descriptions shows that he did not find iron or gold furnaces *in situ* in the Valley enclosures. Indeed, he even denied there was a metal industry in the Posselt Ruin, as well as in the No. 1 and East Ruins (Hall 1905, 366, 400, 423). Furthermore, in Caton-Thompson's (1931, 31, 33, 38) thorough examination of the Maund Ruin, iron slag occurred *in situ* only below the walling in association with EIA pottery. More pieces of slag and Early Iron Age pottery were incorporated in the fill of *daga* houses because the builders had dug soil from the immediate vicinity. Caton-Thompson, it is worth emphasising, did not find any evidence for metal working on any Period IV floor inside any enclosure. Metal working in this area therefore predated the walling by almost 1000 years. On the basis of the metallurgy, Chirikure and Pikirayi do not have evidence for a sizable male presence in the Lower Valley. The Lower Valley, incidentally, was not exclusively female; if it were, the builders would have marked every entrance with *mihombwe*.

Conclusion

As this response to Chirikure and Pikirayi's thesis shows, interpretations need to consider Great Zimbabwe in relation to other Zimbabwe capitals and in relation to contemporaneous organising principles. It also shows the need to return to original data. The distribution of artefacts that Chirikure and Pikirayi describe does not counter the original interpretation that the Western Enclosure remained the palace throughout the floruit of Great Zimbabwe. The function of the later Posselt/Philips complex, on the other hand, remains a topic for research.

Notes on contributor

Tom Huffman trained at Denver University (BA) and the University of Illinois, Urbana (MA, PhD). He was professor and HOD of Archaeology, Wits, from 1977 to 2009. He has published extensively on precolonial farming societies in southern Africa.

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