

Ritual Space in the Zimbabwe Culture

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The social use of space is a worldwide phenomenon that can clarify the structures of various ancient societies. One of these, the Zimbabwe culture, embraces state-level societies dating to the Iron Age of Southern Africa (AD 1200–1820). In contrast to the preceding chiefdom-level societies, ritual space in the Zimbabwe culture centered on sacred leadership. Among other things, what had been rain-control hills in the wild bush became the locus for stone-walled palaces inside the capitals. In this sense, Zimbabwe people ‘domesticated’ the concept of God. Among other palace functions, the front provided the leader with ritual seclusion, while the back was reserved for national rituals, such as rainmaking. One year after death, royal leaders (both men and women) were buried in the palace or in rock shelters on special hills. Such hilltop burials began in the 13th century at Mapungubwe. According to 16th-century documents, both these grave sites and palaces had the same name: *dzimbahwe* in the Shona language (the residence, court, and grave of a leader). Inside the settlement, royal and commoner youths together attended a pre-marital school that inculcated societal norms. Evidence for such a school first appears in the Mapungubwe landscape. Overall, sacred leadership provided the ideological foundation for institutionalized social classes. Different settlement organizations made these social classes manifest: the Central Cattle Pattern for commoners and the elite Zimbabwe Pattern for royalty.

KEYWORDS Cognitive archaeology, Great Zimbabwe, Iron Age of Southern Africa, Settlement organization

Human groups everywhere divide their spatial environment into discrete categories where only a limited range of culturally related activities are permitted. As social scientists have noted (e.g. Douglas 1972; A. Kuper 1982; H. Kuper 1984), spatial categories and related activities have a reciprocal relationship: physical spaces interact on, and are in turn created by, political, social, and religious beliefs and practices. Past societies can therefore be understood in terms of beliefs and social conventions related to spatial organization. Here I show how

mental and physical constructs interact in the Southern African complex known as the Zimbabwe culture.

The Zimbabwe culture differs from other pre-colonial social groups in Southern Africa in that it encompasses a series of indigenous states each characterized by political centralization, class distinction, and sacred leadership. We now know that these features evolved in the Limpopo Valley (Figure 1) about 800 years ago through the combination of elite control over long-distance trade wealth and a growing population made possible through the intensive cultivation of the Limpopo floodplains (Gardner 1963; Fouché 1937; Huffman 1982, 2000; Maggs 1984; Meyer 1998; Smith et al. 2007; Wood 2000, 2011). As is well known, surplus wealth and growing populations were important to the development of secondary states elsewhere, and sacred leadership itself was common in early states throughout the world (e.g. Tainter 1988: chapter 2). Because it is so recent, the Zimbabwe culture has the potential to help elucidate crucial organizing principles in older states.

My interest in the Zimbabwe culture centers on its spatial organization. Archaeological evidence shows that various transformations changed the use of space in the Limpopo Valley from the Central Cattle Pattern at the early capital site of K2 (AD 1000–1220) to the elite Zimbabwe Pattern first evident at Mapungubwe (AD 1220–1300). An important characteristic of the new pattern was a stone-walled palace reserved for the sacred leader. Historical documents and other ethnographic evidence shows that, among associated changes in worldview, the leader became the rainmaker, and from this time on, most sacred leaders placed their palaces on top of old rainmaking hills. The most famous is Great Zimbabwe. Because of Great Zimbabwe's importance and physical integrity, I have studied its spatial organization in detail (e.g. Huffman 1996). Here I use this famous site as a datum to clarify the use of ritual space in the elite Zimbabwe Pattern.

Background and Theory

Great Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Culture, and Sacred Leadership

Great Zimbabwe is the best known stone-walled site in sub-Saharan Africa. This large town covered some 700 hectares of clay house remains, public spaces and stone enclosures, the most prominent being the Hill Ruin (or palace) on top of Zimbabwe Hill, and the Great Enclosure in the valley below (Figure 2). 'Discovered' at the end of the nineteenth century, Great Zimbabwe has been the scene of numerous investigations (e.g. Bent 1896; MacIver 1906; Caton Thompson 1931; Summers et al. 1961; Garlake 1973b; Huffman 1982). It is now dated to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Huffman and Vogel 1991), and forms the core of the second facies of the Zimbabwe culture sequence, after Mapungubwe but before Khami. These three facies are not simply archaeological conventions: they represent different dynasties and ethno-linguistic groups (Huffman 2007: chapter 21).

Khami AD 1400–1820

(With capitals such as Breslau, Chamabvefva, Danangombe, Khami, Lotsani, Naletale, Thaba zika Mambo)

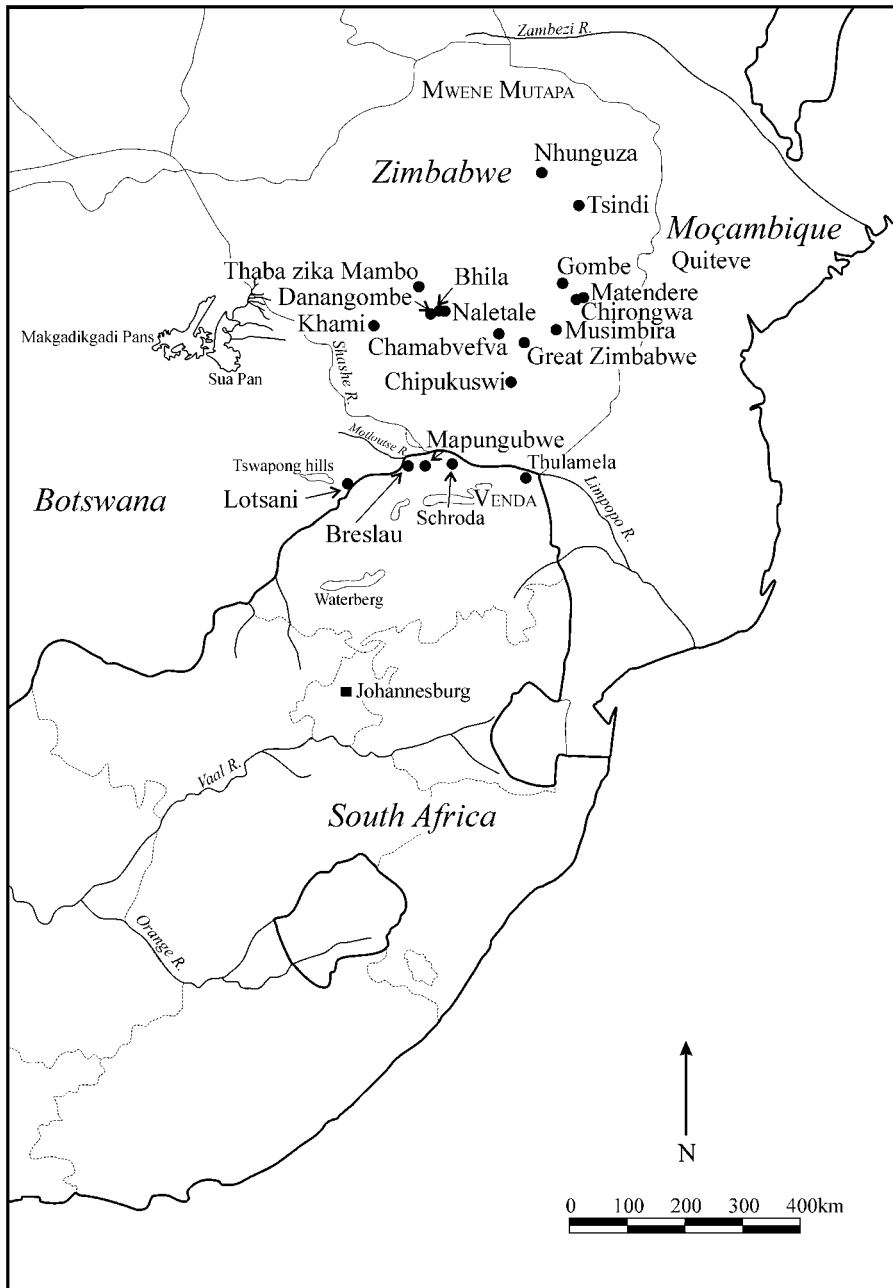


FIGURE 1 Location of sites, people, places, and dynasties in Southern Africa mentioned in the text.

Great Zimbabwe AD 1300–1700

(With capitals such as Chipukuswi, Chirongwa, Gombe, Matendere, Musimbira, Nhanguza, Thulamela, Tsindi)

Mapungubwe AD 1200–1300

(Mapungubwe)

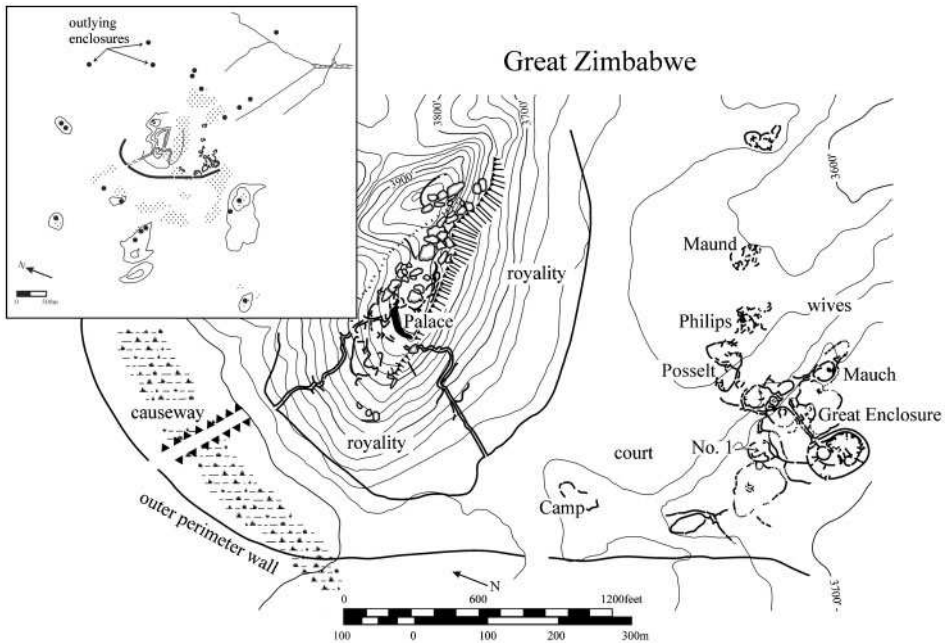


FIGURE 2 Plan of Great Zimbabwe (adapted from Whitty 1961 and Huffman 2007).

The co-existence of the elite Zimbabwe Pattern (ZP) in these capitals and the Central Cattle Pattern (CCP) among their followers is archaeological evidence for marked social classes. The distribution of this dual pattern (with its relevant material culture) defines the Zimbabwe culture area. Elite settlements of the three facies are on record in a wide area of southern Africa, spanning parts of eastern Botswana, northern South Africa and western Mozambique, as well as Zimbabwe.

The present summary of ritual space in the Zimbabwe Pattern is an example of Cognitive Archaeology: that is, the study of past values, ideals, and beliefs through their material manifestations and other sources. Cognitive archaeologists use contemporaneous ethnography and the practices of descendent communities to derive cultural principles that inform the organization of space and distribution of artifacts. Such principles articulate worldview with daily behavior. For the Zimbabwe culture, the ethnographic record began in the sixteenth century with Portuguese eyewitness accounts of the Mwene Mutapa dynasty (e.g. De Alcaçova, 1506 in Documents 1962 vol. I: 389–401), thus starting a 500 year long record of the Shona-speaking world. We know from this ethnographic record that there was a mystical association between Zimbabwe leaders and the land, and a related link between leaders, their ancestors, and God. To ensure fertility, it is to God one must turn through the spirits of former leaders. In Southern Africa, that is the meaning of sacred leadership.

The king of all these lands of the interior and of the river of Sofala is a woolly-haired [Black], a heathen who adores nothing whatever, and has no knowledge of God; on the contrary he esteems himself the god of all his lands, and is so looked upon and revered by his subjects, as I shall hereafter relate (Dos Santos 1609, in Theal 1901 vol. VII: 190–191).

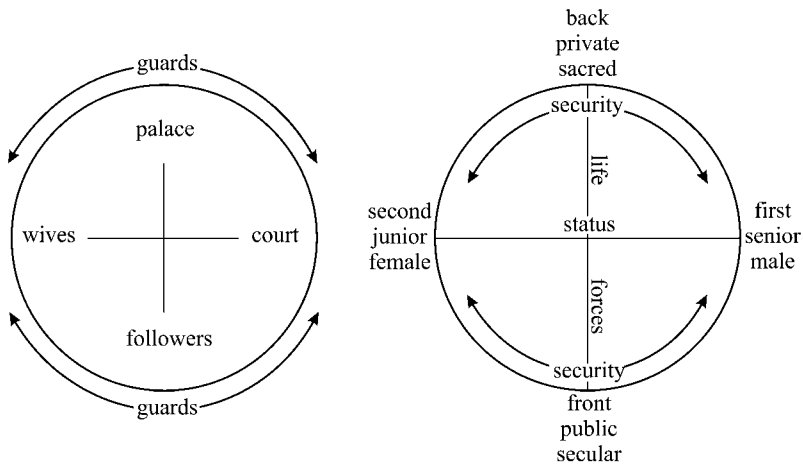


FIGURE 3 Idealized model of the Zimbabwe Culture Pattern.

Like all ethnographies, these accounts suffer from the cultural attitudes of the observers. Moreover, Portuguese intervention undermined various Zimbabwe polities, bringing to an end sacred leadership in the Mutapa area in the mid-eighteenth century. Nevertheless, sacred leadership continued until the early nineteenth century in the southwest, and most importantly, it still exists today, albeit in a twenty-first-century form, among Venda people in South Africa (Stayt 1931; Van Warmelo 1932). Venda identity, it should be noted, evolved from an amalgamation of Shona and Sotho-Tswana people in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a process well represented in the archaeological record (e.g. Loubser 1991). Venda worldview, on the other hand, is a direct continuity from the Zimbabwe culture. Indeed, Venda chiefs continued to rule from traditional capitals until recently, maintaining class distinction and sacred leadership as crucial organizing principles.

A previous article here in *Ethnoarchaeology* outlined my theoretical approach (Huffman 2012), and it was presented in greater detail in *Snakes & Crocodiles* (Huffman 1996). A few points are worth repeating. First, similarities in layout between many settlements show that there must have been some underlying mental template, or structure, that generated the repetition. This mental template can be adequately represented by what I call the ZP through concepts such as status, life forces, and security, and the inherent social relationships through binary codes (Figure 3). A cognitive model, however, cannot be reduced to a simple list of binary oppositions. These codes are simply convenient heuristic devices to consider clusters of interrelated principles. The model may be termed structuralist not because it is founded on binary codes but because it articulates underlying normative guidelines for behavior. As a result, this model is more people-centered than classic structuralism. Further, although the model itself is an ahistoric construct (that is, it is independent of time), Zimbabwe society was not static; on the contrary, the contestation for political power was a particularly important social dynamic, as was the tension between norms and daily behavior. Even so, the

values, beliefs, and ideals that framed behavior formed enduring cultural principles: sacred leadership was one.

As a procedure, I developed the ZP by starting with the contemporaneous ethnographic record and then worked backwards in time. This procedure was recursive in that one moves back and forth between the ethnography and the archaeology. In this recursive process, the two most important capitals in the ethnographic period were Danangombe (ca. AD 1820–1690) and Khami (ca. AD 1640–1420). Khami was the second largest capital after Great Zimbabwe, while Danangombe was the third and headquarters of the Changamire Rozwi (the most important Shona dynasty in the southwest of Zimbabwe for over 100 years). Moreover, the present ruling families in Venda, the Singo, were originally Rozwi and probably moved south from Danangombe as a result of a succession dispute (Beach 1986; Huffman 1996: 12, 2007: 417–421).

My use of ethnographic data to construct settlement models is part of the Direct Historical Approach. In one sense this is an argument by analogy, but in another sense it is an argument about sameness. In a normal argument by analogy there is no reason to expect further similarities when the source and subject are not culturally related. When the model, however, is derived from descendants, or the ethnography is contemporaneous with the archaeology, we can expect further similarities provided the similarities are necessarily associated, provided there has been no significant cultural change, and provided there is no evidence to the contrary. Once developed with the Direct Historical Approach, the models are applied to progressively older archaeological data, phase by phase, component by component – in this case from Khami through Great Zimbabwe to Mapungubwe. It follows that each application step has to be evaluated.

In these evaluations, the ZP serves as a hypothesis about the settlement organization at Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe. In comparative terms, the hypothesis with the least dubious assumptions, covering the most data and with the greatest coherence and predictive potential is superior. If the ethnographically-derived model, rather than any other, fits and makes the most sense of the archaeological data, then we can conclude that the same (or essentially the same) worldview was probably present at Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe. Continuity in settlement pattern is therefore evidence for probable continuity in worldview at the scale of the model.

Now in some cases, there have been important changes and a break in continuity. Political succession provides one relevant example. In societies with the ZP, leadership was not simply primogeniture, as it was supposed to be in the CCP. Instead, there were several claimants whose father was the king and whose mothers were equal members of the upper class. Dos Santos (1609, in Theal 1901 vol. VII: 193, 191) describes this uncertainty for the Quiteve dynasty in northern Zimbabwe in the following way:

Disputes sometimes arise in the election of these princes, for as the chief wives of the former king are many, and each one has sons by him, there are many pretenders to the throne, and each one wishes to be king, and those who have the power do all they can to win the people to their cause, sometimes stirring up changes and rebellions among them...

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 [that is to say, royalty], 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.

This policy changed in the eighteenth century when a spirit medium mediated between two competing houses (Beach 1980: chapter 4). After that time, succession moved from brother to brother before returning to the eldest son of the first brother. According to the documentary evidence, spirit mediums did not become important to political succession until the breakdown of sacred leadership. This is because the ancestors were supposed to choose the next leader from a number of equally eligible sons. Thus, from an anthropological perspective institutionalized spirit mediums were a structural contradiction to sacred leadership, and therefore not part of the ZP. Nineteenth-century political succession and the role of spirit mediums are therefore inappropriate models for the Zimbabwe Pattern. Clearly, the ethnographic record needs to be examined for significant cultural changes such as these.

A few more comments about the approach are in order. When early records ignore a specific spatial feature, it could still be old if it is widespread: as a rule, the greater ubiquity, the greater chance of antiquity. The Portuguese, for example, did not mention a *chikuva*, the sanctuary at the back of a Shona hut. But such a sanctuary must have been present at the time because it was found throughout the Shona-speaking world in the nineteenth century, because it has physical correlates among Sotho (*mohaolwane*) and Nguni (*umsamo*), and because its physical characteristics have been found in house remains dating back from recent times to the Early Iron Age (Huffman 2012). This is an important methodological point, since early records (and ethnographies) are always incomplete.

Another methodological point concerns form and content: not every spatial feature must be exactly the same. People familiar with the American code, for example, can recognize the kitchen, bathroom, living room, and bedrooms in a house which they have never visited before, despite differences on the outside. Similarly, any one kitchen does not have to incorporate every typical feature to retain its function. Thus, many places may appear different even though they were generated by the same underlying principles of organization. Furthermore, because of unequal preservation, a site may exemplify one spatial category but not another, so it may take several related settlements to exemplify the complete pattern.

With these cautionary comments in mind, it is possible to study prehistoric ritual by analyzing spatial codes such as the ZP.

Zimbabwe Pattern

The Zimbabwe Pattern (ZP) or elite pattern has remarkably few components (Figure 3). A sacred leader, ruling with the aid of a specially designated brother and sister, remained secluded in an elevated enclosure with a small number of officials (Barbosa 1517–1518, in Theal 1898 vol. I: 129; Bocarro 1631–1649, in

Theal 1899 vol. III: 356); the back of this palace, in contrast, was reserved for national rituals and the youngest royal wives. A law court for disputes among nobles was usually secluded inside the palace, while commoners resolved their disputes in a public arena (Dos Santos 1609, in Theal 1901 vol. VII: 208–209). This public court was predominately a male area located to the side of the palace, opposite the compound for the leader's wives. Most of his wives lived in a single compound under the authority of the first wife (De Barros 1551, in Theal 1901 vol. VI: 272), and this compound sometimes included an initiation center. The leader's mother lived at the edge of this complex, opposite a man in charge of female labor. Commoners formed a protective circle around these wives, as well as the leader, particularly on the west front side below the palace (Barbosa 1517–1518, in Theal 1898 vol. I: 128). Overall, the commoners, wives and palace were surrounded by guards and medicines (Dos Santos 1609, in Theal 1901, vol. VII: 202), while rivals for political power, such as district chiefs and regional governors, lived in prestige enclosures outside this protective zone (Huffman 1996: 13).

This pattern is a cultural package in terms of the ideology of class and leadership — including the principle of succession. I do not claim that other aspects, or all cultures, are bounded packages, only that these features are interrelated and that the ZP is necessarily associated with them, and moreover, with some Eastern Bantu languages. In terms of scale, the ZP contrasts with the circular CCP characteristic of Eastern Bantu societies that are based on social ranking and male hereditary leadership (Kuper 1982). Because it evolved out of the CCP (Huffman 1982), the two patterns share several features. I concentrate on the differences.

First and foremost, ritual spaces in the elite Zimbabwe Pattern related to sacred leadership. Because these leaders claimed a special relationship to God through their royal ancestors, even political drama had a supernatural component. To consider this point in some detail, I begin with the palace, the physical focus of leadership inside a royal settlement. I then turn to ritual spaces within the wives' area before considering an unusual type of site located outside the settlement, in the 'wild bush.'

Royal Settlements — The Center of Cultural Order

Palace

From an indigenous viewpoint, the space dedicated to sacred leaders was sacred by definition. The palace, in particular, was where sacred leaders held private audiences, ate, lived, and slept, and communicated with their ancestors. We know these activities took place here, once again, because of Venda ethnography, Shona oral history, and contemporaneous eye-witness accounts. I discuss these activities in more detail later. For now, our interest is in early descriptions:

...and the amyr went into the houses of the king which were of stone and clay and very large and on one level (De Alcaçova 1506, in Documents 1962 vol. I: 395).

Item, thence to Embire, which is a fortress of the king of Menomotapa and is now made of stone without mortar (Veloso 1512, in Documents 1964 vol. III: 183).

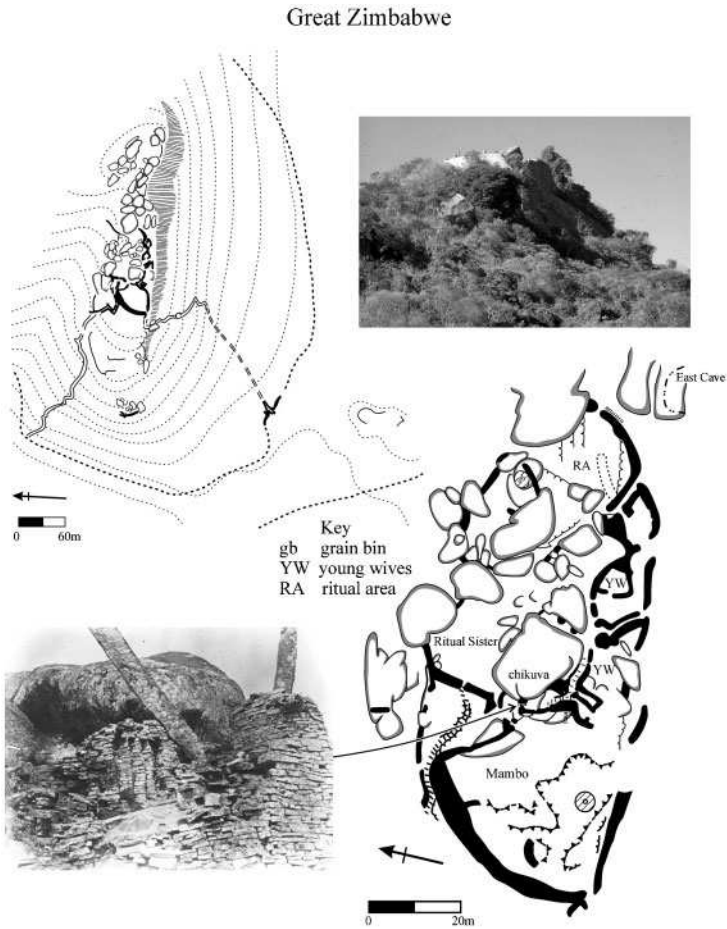


FIGURE 4 Hill Ruin at Great Zimbabwe (redrawn from Whitty 1961 and Huffman 1996).

In this same town of Benametapa is the usual residence of the king, in a very large place...he is each day served with very large presents...and they bring them through the middle of the town bareheaded until they reach a very high house where the king is always lodged (Barbosa 1517–1518, in Theal 1898 vol. I: 96).

The natives of the country call all these edifices Symbae [dzimbahwe in Karanga], which according to their language signifies court, for every place where Benomotapa may be is so called; and they say being royal property all the king's other dwellings have this name (De Barros 1551, in Theal 1901 vol. VI: 267).

Usually, palaces were built of stone and situated on a hill (Figure 4) because of a metaphorical association between leadership and mountains. 'To climb the mountain', for example, means to approach a chief in the Shona and Venda languages (Hamutiyinei and Plangger 1987: proverb 1486), and these chiefs were sometimes called 'thaha', or 'taba', i.e. mountain. 'Thaba zika Mambo' (hill of the king), for example, was where the last Rozwi king was killed in the early 19th century (Beach 1980; Hall and Neal 1902: 314).

Although built on a hill, or raised on a terrace, Zimbabwe palaces were not defensive structures in the European sense because some lacked a back wall (for example Lotsani in Huffman and Hanisch 1987). Rather, the entire palace was a sacred space that provided the leader with ritual seclusion from physical and supernatural danger. Leaders required such protection because of widespread pollution concepts (see Ngubane 1977). Among other things, people in 'hot' (i.e. contaminated) states could affect his power, while political rivalry was an ever-present threat. As a result of this need for supernatural protection, sacred leaders were separated from ordinary people and expected to be aloof (Van Warmelo 1932).

Venda people express this aloofness in the phrase 'the crocodile does not leave its pool' (Van Warmelo 1971). As the phrase implies, crocodiles could symbolize leaders and pools their palaces. According to the research of Anitra Nettleton (1984), the 'crocodile in its pool guarded by a giant snake' was the prime nexus of Venda court art. Nettleton used Venda court art, the symbolism in initiation schools, and the designs on Shona divining dice to identify the meaning of symbols on such objects as wooden doors and sacred drums. Significantly, similar designs regularly occur in elite Zimbabwe settlements. In Khami-type palaces, for example, a check design most likely referred to crocodiles (probably derived from the pitted skin), while in the Zimbabwe facies a dentelle design (probably derived from ridges on the back) most likely served the same purpose. In both facies a dark line in a light-colored wall (or a light line in a dark wall) represented the pool, while a chevron and cord (i.e. sloping blocks) referred to snakes. We can be confident about these interpretations because of the Singo connection to seventeenth century Danangombe (the Rozwi capital from AD 1690 to 1820), and because they form a pattern that makes sense in terms of the organization of space. Crocodile (check), snake (cord), and pool (dark line) designs, for example, encircle the nineteenth-century court wall at Danangombe (see Huffman 1996 for more examples).

Snake and crocodile designs relate to the tripartite division of the cosmos: God is *Nyadenga* and *Wokumsoro* — 'the Great One of the sky' and 'the One Above' (Van der Merwe 1957), while the ancestors live underneath — *pasi* in the Shona language (Hodza and Fortune 1979). Because snakes come up out of the earth, they carry messages from the ancestral world below. Further, they are most frequent in the rainy season; and so, as the 'snake of the mountain' (a chevron), they are associated with rainmaking and the fertility of the earth (a similar link connects the 'snake of the water' (cord) with female fertility and the ritual sister). A Shona myth recorded by Leo Frobenius (in Haberland 1973: 215–216) expresses the link between snakes, rain, and leadership:

The boy with the birth mark like the moon on his forehead went to a cave. In the cave was a snake. The boy said: 'I am the boy with the birth mark shaped like the moon on my forehead. Crawl from the feet up across my body and across the birth mark on the forehead'. ...When it crawled across his forehead...it began to rain...The boy with the birth mark became the *mambo* [king] of the new country.

Distribution of symbols and their core meanings at Naletale

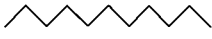
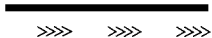
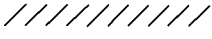
		feature	symbol	meaning
FRONT WALL		monolith tower	spear grain bin	defence bounty
		chevron line	snake of mountain pool	fertility of earth protection
		herringbone	female croc.	snr. female status
		check	male croc.	snr. male status
		line	pool	protection
		herringbone	female croc.	snr. female status
COURT WALL		cord	snake of water	fertility of people
		check	male croc.	snr. male status
		line	pool	protection
RITUAL SISTERS' QUARTERS		herringbone	female croc.	snr. female status
		check		
YOUNG WIVES' QUARTERS		line	pool	protection of female fertility
		herringbone	female croc.	

FIGURE 5 Wall designs and their meaning at Naletale, Zimbabwe (from Huffman 1996).

Crocodiles in turn frequent deep pools that are another entrance to the ancestral world. Some Shona leaders even ingested 'crocodile' stones at the assumption of power to enhance their link to the underworld (e.g. Bullock 1927; Sandes 1955). Crocodiles too are mediators and associated with rainmaking. Often crocodile and snake symbols appeared on the front wall of a palace, proclaiming the duties of sacred leadership (Figure 5).

Front of the Palace — the King

In Shona and Venda spatial organization, the front is associated with secular activities while the back is reserved for private and sacred functions (this is also true for other Eastern Bantu speakers). Although the entire palace was a ritual space, it nevertheless followed this convention. The front portion enclosed a section for the *mambo* (king) that included offices for a senior messenger and diviner, the king's private sleeping quarters and sanctuary, and an audience chamber. The large audience chamber was where supplicants could meet the king

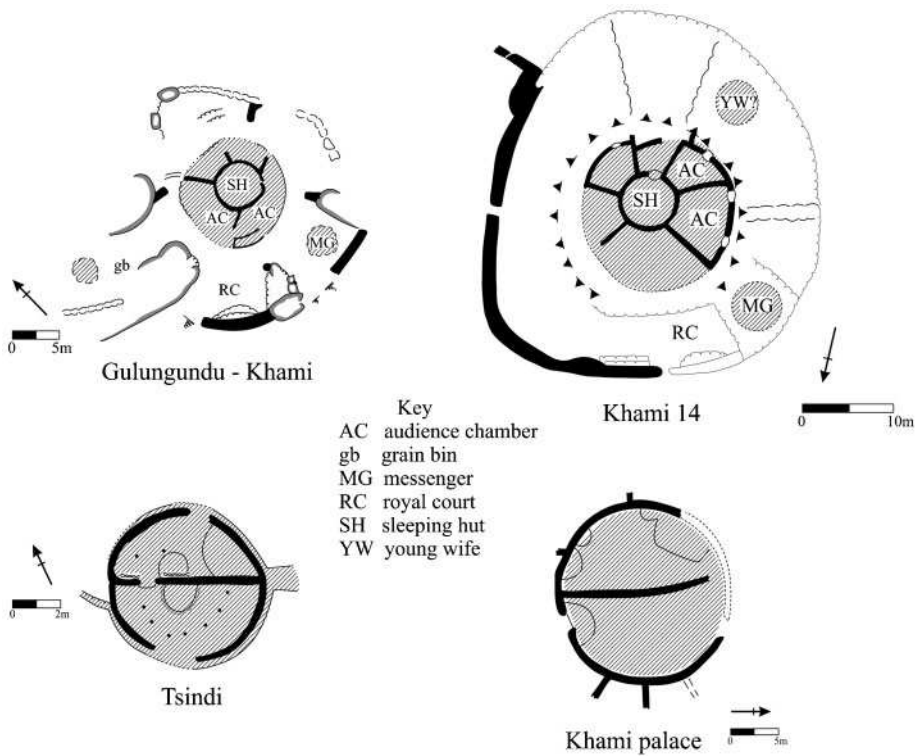


FIGURE 6 Variation in audience chambers: upper have radial walls; lower have central dividing walls (adapted from Robinson 1959, Rudd 1984, and Huffman 1996).

and his entourage in private. As Dos Santos described the scene (1609, in Theal 1901, vol. VII: 192, 195):

[The new king] seats himself with the principal wives in a public hall in which the king hears all causes, in which he is hidden by a cloth or curtain so that none can see the king and his wives who sit behind it...

When the [people] wish to speak to the king they throw themselves on the ground in the doorway and drag themselves to where he is, and speak to him lying on their sides without looking at him, clapping their hands all the while they are speaking...When their business is concluded they withdraw in the same manner as they entered.

To facilitate this special behavior, distinctive radial walls often divided the audience chamber (Figure 6 upper); they can be seen at nineteenth-century Danangombe (Caton Thompson 1931), seventeenth-century Khami (Khami 14), (Robinson 1959: 22) and seventeenth-century Naletale (MacIver 1906). At Great Zimbabwe, Robinson (1961: 188–189) identified a radial hut in the upper levels of the Western Enclosure (ca. early fifteenth century) that would have served this purpose. As an alternative, a central partition could divide the chamber (Figure 6 lower), such as at seventeenth-century Khami (Robinson 1959: 77), sixteenth-century Tsindi (Rudd 1984), and sixteenth-century Nhunguza (Garlake 1973a). At

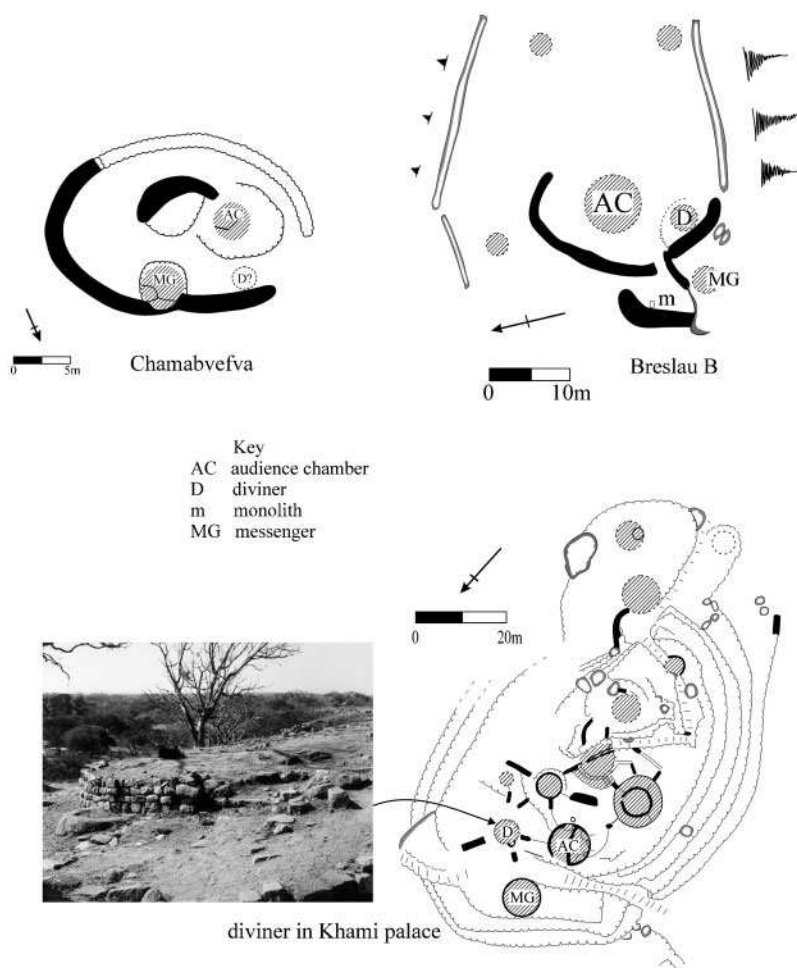


FIGURE 7 Typical location of messenger's (upper) and diviner's (lower) offices (redrawn from Robinson 1959, Huffman 1979, 1996, and Huffman and Hanisch 1987).

fifteenth-century Musimbira (Monroe and Spies 1975), baked mud inside a divided audience chamber preserved the impressions of a curtain, like that described by Dos Santos (Huffman 1996: 159).

To meet the leader in his audience chamber, visitors had to negotiate with a special official because they could not approach him directly: 'to climb the mountain', as the saying goes, 'you must go zig zag.' According to documentary sources and Shona tradition, this official was the senior messenger; it was his duty to keep the king informed about events throughout the kingdom (e.g. Monclaro 1569, in Theal 1899 vol. III: 228), as well as court proceedings in the capital and the business of visitors. Because of his public function, he should maintain an office at the edge of the palace with easy access to visitors and the leader. Structures that meet these criteria (Figure 7 upper) are on record at seventeenth-century Naletale (MacIver 1906) and seventeenth-century Chamabvefva (Huffman 1979), six-

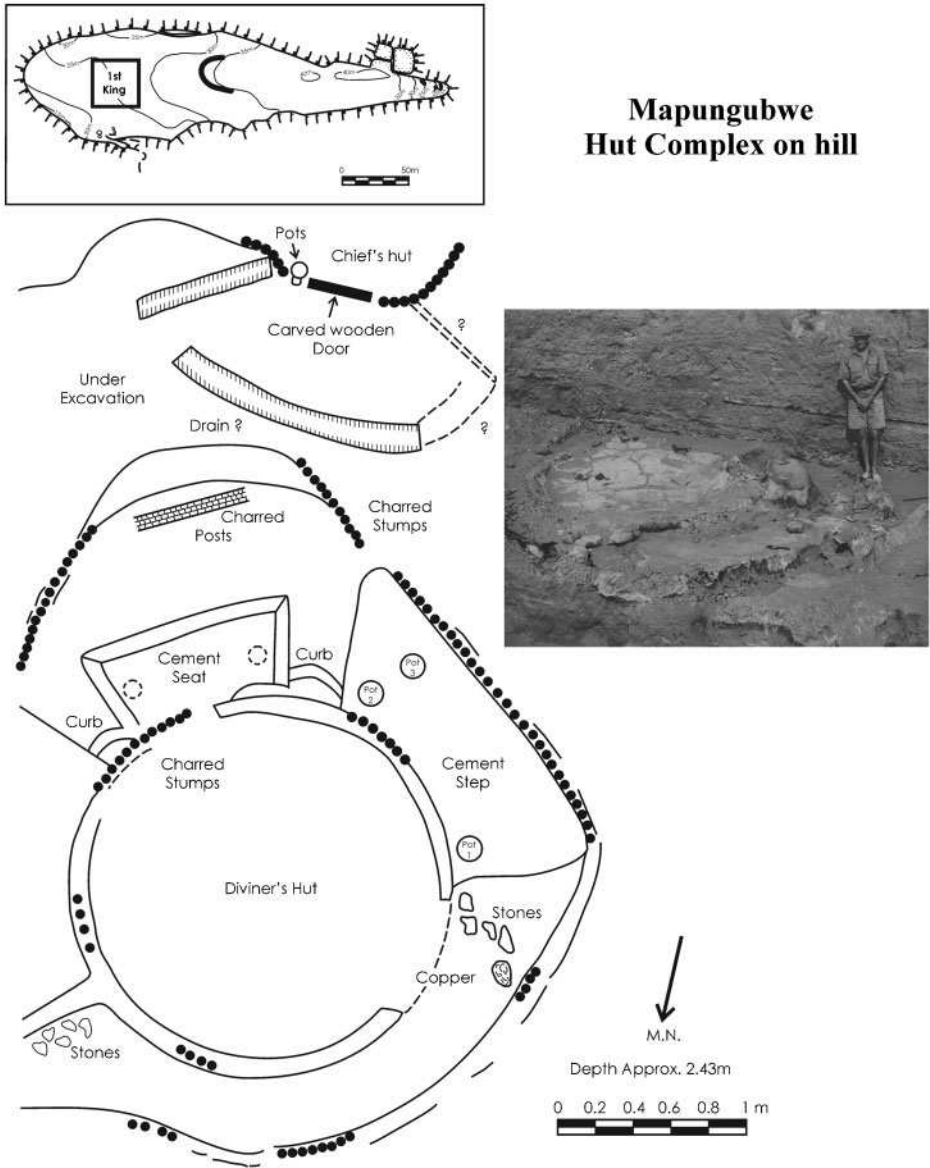


FIGURE 8 Diviner's office and leader's sleeping hut (with wooden door) at Mapungubwe, South Africa (adapted from Gardner 1963 and Huffman 2009).

teenth-century Breslau A and B and Lotsani B (Huffman and Hanisch 1987), and fifteenth-century Chipukuswi (Houser 1975). Once inside the palace, the traditional diviner should have screened visitors; his structure should be small and dark to invoke the mystery of the spirit world. Small solid-daga huts with exterior fireplaces (Figure 7 lower) identify this office at seventeenth-century Khami (Robinson 1959: 78) and thirteenth-century Mapungubwe (Gardner 1963: 180), while a molded snake (Douslin 1922) marked the exterior of a hut that

probably belonged to the diviner in a fourteenth-century level at Great Zimbabwe. Shona and Venda custom suggest that these structures would have served only as offices; at night, the diviner and senior messenger would have slept in their own households outside the private palace.

Another small structure characterized the leader's private sleeping hut (e.g. De Sousa 1697, in Beach and de Noronha 1980 vol. I: 253). In a Venda palace, the leader's sleeping hut had an interior fireplace and a carved wooden door. As a rule, only Venda nobility had such doors and this also was the case in the sixteenth century. As De Barros noted (1551, in Theal 1901 vol. VI: 270):

And the third [highest honor] is to allow them to have doors at the entrances of their houses, which is the dignity of the highest lords, for all the rest of the people have no doors.

A Venda chief's door is known as *ngwenya*, the crocodile (Van Warmelo 1971): holes in the door are 'nostrils', the locks are 'teeth', and to close the door is to 'bite the crocodile.' Various designs also refer to this metaphorical link between crocodiles and rulers (Nettleton 1984: 271), including circle-and-dot motifs, nested diamonds, X-shaped multiple lines and multiple pitted designs similar to a real skin. At seventeenth-century Naletale (MacIver 1906: plate XXII), a swivel hole for a wooden door shows that the leader slept in the central compartment of a radial hut. At sixteenth-century Thulamela (Miller 1997), a pile of river pebbles had been placed at the entrance to the private enclosure, while at fourteenth-century Matendere (Caton Thompson 1931), a 'pool' design denoted this small sleeping hut. It is significant to the origins of the ZP that the first Mapungubwe palace (Gardner 1963: 180) contained the earliest known hut (ca. AD 1220) with a wooden door (Figure 8).

In some ways the king's section of the palace was like a huge house with its own front and back dichotomy. At the back near his private sleeping hut was the *chikuva* (sanctuary) where he communicated with his ancestors for private purposes. In contrast, the *chikuva* of most men stood at the back of their wife's kitchen (e.g. Taylor 1927) because marriage and children were their link to the ancestors. A sacred leader's link, however, was by virtue of his position, independent of marriage, so his *chikuva* stood alone. At Great Zimbabwe (Bent 1896), tall monoliths, a carved soapstone beam (with hatched diamonds and diamond-and-dot designs), and a large panel with a dentelle design (derived from crocodile ridges) identifies this sanctuary. At Khami a check design (derived from crocodile skin) probably marked the king's *chikuva* there.

Front of the Palace — the Ritual Sister

According to Venda ethnography, the sacred leader was head of a ruling triumvirate. When a new leader was inaugurated, for example, a brother was appointed as the legal expert (*ndumi* in the Venda language) in charge of the public court, along with a special sister (*khadzi*) who was the *makhadzi* (ritual sister) in training (Stayt 1931: 195–196, 322). While young, she was expected to marry the son of a district leader and then, once the old king joined the ancestors, return to the capital to assume her duties. As *makhadzi*, she was treated with the same

formality and respect as the leader: the same people prepared her food and it was served with the same ceremony; moreover, men would kneel and clap in her presence. The equivalent sister in the Mutapa dynasty was the *mazarira* (e.g. Bocarro 1631–1649, in Theal 1899 vol. III: 358). As an administrator, she was an important national advisor and joined the king in the audience chamber on various occasions. As the senior female of the ruling line, she was present at all rituals involving the ancestors, and her ancestors were responsible for female fertility and other female qualities. It was also her duty to keep the sacred medicines that protected her brother and allowed him to govern: she kept these charms in a private grain bin in her compartment. Traditional praise poetry still recalls the sisters of founding fathers as the ‘great ancestress’ (Hodza and Fortune 1979: 15). According to Shona tradition, the origin of a clan began with the ritual intercourse of the leader and this sister (see also Dos Santos 1609, in Theal 1901 vol. VII: 191).

In the 50+ palaces that have been investigated (e.g. Caton Thompson 1931; Garlake 1973a; Huffman 1996; Loubser 1991; MacIver 1906; Manyanga 2007; Pwiti 1996; Robinson 1959; Wieschhoff 1941), the ritual sister’s section was always smaller and less prominent than that of the king. Her compartment, however, was sometimes marked with special symbols, such as *mihombwe* (vertical grooves), today signifying furrows for female crops (such as ground beans) and by extension female roles. A second common symbol was a herringbone design, which most likely signified a female crocodile (probably derived from the legs). At Great Zimbabwe, a herringbone design designated a prominent stairway leading up the hill to the compartment most likely reserved for the ritual sister, which in turn was linked to the king’s section of the palace by way of a side entrance marked with a monolith on top and a single *hombwe* in the doorway itself. This doorway also led to the king’s sanctuary. Fourteenth-century Matendere provides another example of *mihombwe* and herringbone (inside and outside) that most likely demarcated the ritual sister’s compartment (Figure 9). At sixteenth-century Nhunguza (Garlake 1973a) and nineteenth-century Danangombe (Huffman 1996: 65–66), her compartment included an audience chamber.

Danangombe illustrates the important point that architectural changes do not necessarily mean a change in organizational principles. In this case, herringbone and pool designs marked an earlier side doorway (now blocked) that led directly to an audience chamber on the ritual sister’s side of the palace. Later, a larger chamber stood raised on a platform towards the front of the compartment, next to a stairway leading from the servant’s kitchen (Figure 10). This change is similar to alterations in a house in North America: removing walls and enlarging the kitchen, say, or creating an open plan, does not mean there is a new American spatial code.

Back of the Palace — Fertility of People and the Earth

According to Shona and Venda spatial organization, the secluded back portion of a palace was reserved for the related functions of procreation and rainmaking — the fertility of people and the earth. Because conception was a sacred act (even for ordinary people), the leader’s young wives lived here next to the main ritual space.

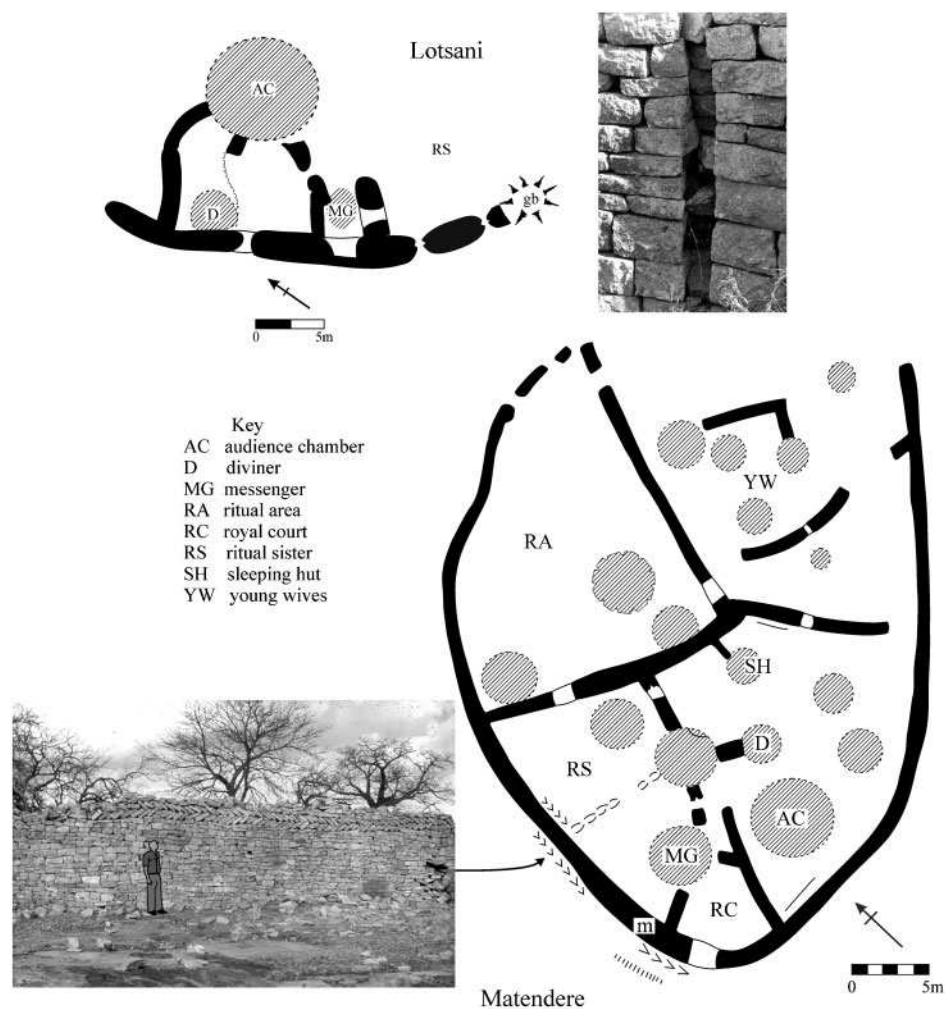


FIGURE 9 *Mihombwe* at Lotsani in Botswana and at Great Zimbabwe and Matendere in Zimbabwe (adapted from Caton-Thompson 1931, Huffman and Hanisch 1987, and Huffman 1996).

According to custom, they remained until pregnant. In Venda today, their whereabouts are supposed to be a secret (N. M. N. Ralushai, pers. comm. 1983).

The rainmaking area was also at the back of the palace, and thus in the settlement. In contrast to rainmaking in the CCP (Schoeman 2006), it was not in the wild bush. I argue that this represents a theological as well as physical shift. Because of the Indian Ocean trade, Mapungubwe people would have inevitably broadened their understanding of the physical world. In response to other cultures from far away, their theology probably changed from a parochial view that emphasized ancestors and impersonal supernatural forces to a more international view that emphasized the concept of God. This is a reasonable inference because throughout the Bantu-speaking world, insular societies with little trade contact

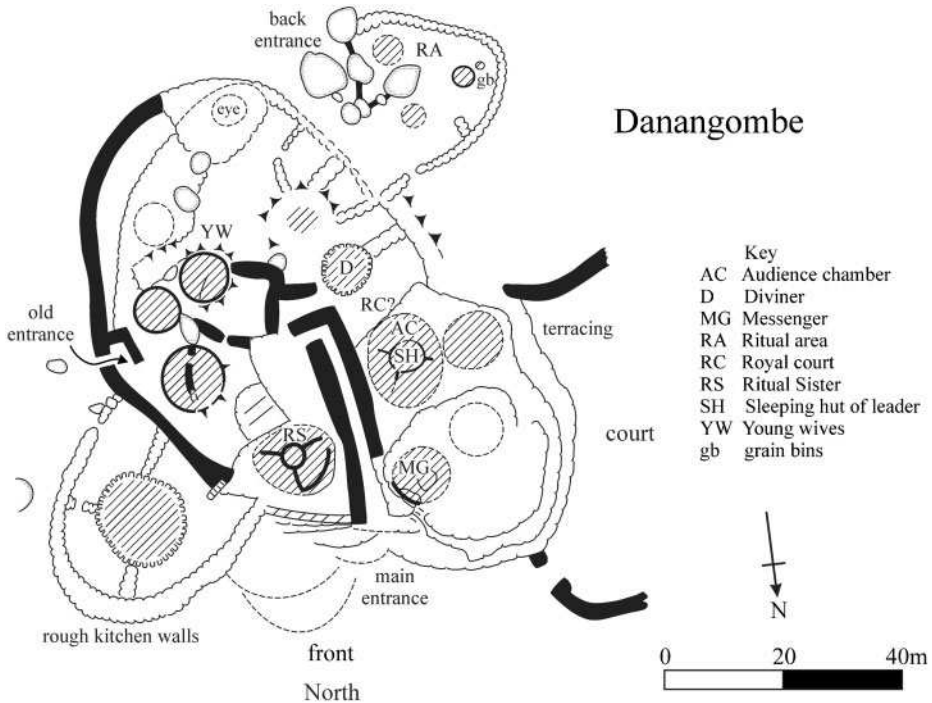


FIGURE 10 Architectural changes at Danangombe, Zimbabwe (adapted from Caton-Thompson 1931 and Huffman 1996).

contrast in this way to societies with multi-ethnic interaction (Horton 1967). Further, because settlements were the centre of cultural order, especially a capital, 'wild' activities were not permitted inside. This is also a widespread concept. In this sense, then, Mapungubwe people 'domesticated' the concept of God when they incorporated the rainmaking hill inside the capital.

As part of this theological shift, the sacred leader became the rainmaker, praying to God through his ancestors. Significantly, the first stone-walled palace at Mapungubwe was built on top of an old style rainmaking place (Huffman 2009: 46). If historical patterns apply, the king would have performed his duties only once (rather than multiple rituals with various medicines), and this ritual would have involved sorghum beer and the sacrifice of a black bull, before lesser chiefs prayed the same way in their own areas (Murimbika 2006). The use of sorghum beer for ritual and other purposes is so widespread (e.g. Hannan 1984: 769–770) that we can be confident of its antiquity. Afterwards, other rainmakers continued with the older pattern among commoners who followed the CCP. In addition to a concern with rain, the *mambo* (king) also communicated with his royal ancestors about other national problems, such as epidemics and locust swarms. As Dos Santos noted (1609, Theal 1901 vol. VII: 199):

When they suffer necessity or scarcity they have recourse to the king, firmly believing that he can give them all that they desire or have need of, and can obtain anything from his dead predecessors, with whom they believe that he holds converse. For this reason

they ask the king to give them rain when it is required and other favorable weather for their harvest.

The back, sacred area, where the *mambo* (king) prayed for the good of the nation, usually incorporated boulders and natural rock shelters — as did rainmaking hills in the CCP. Rock shelters are said to be direct entrances to the spirit world, as are pools, and they enhance the spiritual significance of this area. A rock shelter may have stored the king's sacred drums, while there may have been a hut for sacred objects and another one for beer pots. Shona informants believe there also should have been large grain bins to store sorghum for the production of the necessary ritual beer. These bins should be visible to the general populace so that they know the *mambo* is performing his duties. Large and prominent grain bins are on record in the sacred area at nineteenth-century Danangombe (Huffman 1996: 44) and seventeenth-century Khami (Robinson 1959: 93–95), and there are remnants at other palaces, such as at fifteenth-century Chipukuswi (Houser 1975).

Death and Burial — the Mountain has Fallen

Sacred leaders were associated with mountains in death as they were in life. This association began with the royal burials at Mapungubwe. The famous golden rhino and other prestige items (Fouché 1937) mark the first time in the archaeological record that grave goods truly signaled high status. Before this time, children (who lacked status traditionally) often wore more glass beads than adults. Thus, status differentiation in burials demonstrates the greater social complexity of the Zimbabwe culture.

The infamous Ancient Ruins Company was formed to exploit such gold artifacts. According to Hall and Neal (1902: 97–108), these rough prospectors discovered gold burials in a few Zimbabwe palaces. Another treasure hunter found a considerable amount of gold at the Rozwi capital of Danangombe. Professional recoveries, however, are few (e.g. Caton Thompson 1931; Miller 1997; Wieschhoff 1941); they suggest that some royal women were buried in palaces. Chiefs may have been buried more often in rock shelters, as they were in the nineteenth century (e.g. Bullock 1927; Sandes 1955). One cave complex on Chirongwa Hill is an example. It was built in the same walling style as the Matendere palace (Caton Thompson 1931: plate XXXIII) not far away, and they both probably date to the fourteenth century (Huffman 1996: 173–174). An internal wall bearing a *hombwe* suggests the ritual sister was also buried in the cave (Figure 11). Chirongwa may have therefore been the spiritual *dzimbahwe* of the Matendere dynasty. This and other burial places are called *dzimbahwe* because a deceased king could be found there: they were palaces of the dead. According to Dos Santos (1609, Theal 1901 vol. VII: 196–197), living kings visited their royal ancestors at such places:

Every year in the month of September...Quiteve ascends a very high mountain situated near the city called Zimbaoe, in which he dwells, on the summit of which he performs grand obsequies for the kings his predecessors, who are all buried there...and they continue eating and drinking for eight days with great rejoicings, the chief of which is for the king to cause to *pemberar*, as they call one party running against the

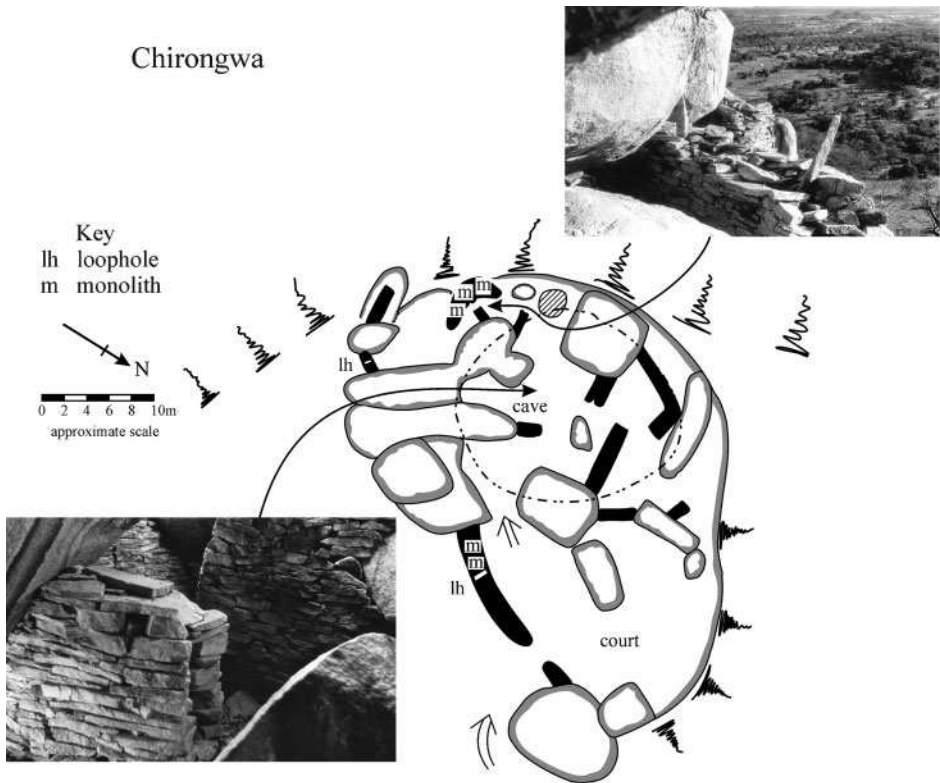


FIGURE 11 Chirongwa burial hill, Zimbabwe: note monoliths, loop holes and *hombwe* (adapted from Huffman 1996).

other...Standing thus, they rush against each other with bows and arrows in their hands, pretending to shoot and fight...

This *pembere* dance links the famous golden rhino at Mapungubwe to Zimbabwe leadership. Among other characteristics, a black rhino will destroy a bush or termite mound, stamping the ground and tossing soil and leaves in the air (Smithers 1983). Shona and Venda call the black rhino *chipembere* (Hannan 1984: 85) because of this similar behavior. Further, the black rhino is dangerous and unpredictable, two more important characteristics of Zimbabwe leadership. Although the *pembere* dance is widespread in southern Africa, only Shona and Venda people associate black rhino with the dance and sacred leadership.

Even though royal burials at Mapungubwe and Chirongwa occur on hills, they belong to the world underneath, *pasi* in the Shona language. In the case of Chirongwa, the cave site contains various reversals appropriate to this other-worldliness, for example, an east rather than west front. In the case of Great Zimbabwe, the sounds of drums and cattle are said to come from the Hill Ruin at night (Sandes 1955). Such sacred statements link a place with the ancestral world. Deep pools frequented by crocodiles also elicit such comments because, as noted earlier, they too are entrances to the underworld. Evidently, hill-top burials

characterized pre-Singo chiefs when they formed the ruling dynasties in Venda, but they were buried in pools after the Singo assumed control. Singo chiefs, in contrast, were buried only on hills (Loubser 1990). These different but related locations represent a shift in political status. Furthermore, some pre-Singo groups placed burial huts in plain view on their ancestral sites to remind other people about their previous occupation. This is probably why a fifteenth-century skeleton was placed in a much later burial hut at Thulamela (Miller 1997). Clearly, the politics of space affected the ancestral and living worlds alike.

As a rule, a Shona leader's body was placed in its rocky chamber a year after death, when the new leader assumed power. One nineteenth-century burial cave I visited in the 1970s near Great Zimbabwe contained a body wrapped in a small bundle of blue cloth lying on a wooden rack. Perhaps the royal burials at Chirongwa also once lay on such racks. Whatever the precise mode, past and present leaders should begin their next phase at the same time — one in the spirit world and the other on earth.

Zimbabwe Birds — Mediators Between Heaven and Earth

Sacred leaders linked all three tiers of the cosmos by their prayers to God through the ancestors. Flying creatures, such as eagles, could symbolize this heavenly link. Lightning, 'the needle that stitches together heaven and earth', was believed to travel on the back of a supernatural eagle — *shiri ye denge* in Shona, the bird of heaven (Van der Merwe 1957: 43). Because of its supernatural origin, traditional doctors eagerly sought its egg (fulgurites, the fused soil where lightning struck). Birds also could represent a link to the underworld as well as to heaven. A bateleur eagle, for example, carries messages from the ancestors (Franklin 1933), and it was particularly associated with the Rozwi (C. K. Cooke, pers. comm. 1980). Traditionally, either a bateleur or a black eagle carries the spirit of the Rozwi king who was killed at Thaba zika Mambo (K. R. Robinson, pers. comm. 1980).

This association between eagles and royal ancestors rests on their similar roles as mediators between earth and heaven. More specifically, the spirits of former kings are said to travel between the two realms, like eagles, interceding with God on behalf of the nation. This crucial intercessory role appears to be the overarching metaphor in stone of the famous Zimbabwe birds (Huffman 1985; Matenga 1998; Summers 1963). Eight are authentic: one was found near the king's sanctuary in the front Western Enclosure; six from the back Eastern Enclosure (Bent 1896; Posselt 1924); and the last from the Lower Valley (Hall 1905). All eight combine human and raptor elements, such as toes instead of talons, and they come in two forms: standing and sitting (Garlake 1973b). Each are said to represent individual ancestors and to form separate focal points to call them for national issues. Since both the ritual sister and king have important spiritual roles, I argue that the sitting birdstones represented the ancestors of ritual sisters and the standing birdstones former kings. Their distribution within the palace supports this distinction (Figure 12). For example, one 'male' bird was associated with the king's sanctuary in the Western Enclosure, while at least one other 'male' bird stood inside the doorway to the Eastern Enclosure marked with a crocodile design. 'Female' birds, on the other hand, stood near the passage linking the Eastern

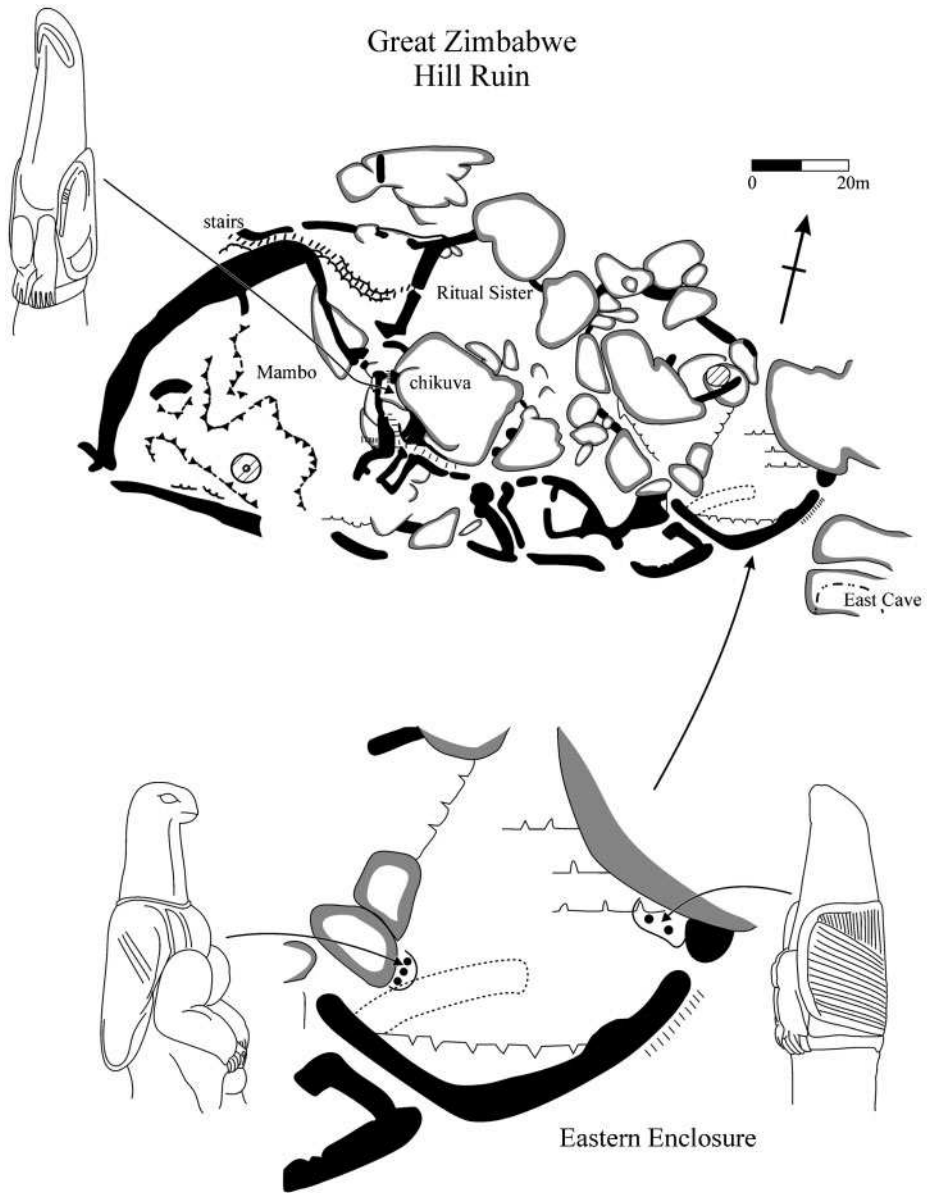


FIGURE 12 Distribution of male (standing) and female (sitting) birdstones in the Hill Ruin at Great Zimbabwe.

Enclosure with the ritual sister's compartment, and the eighth bird was found in a female context in the Lower Valley. I return to this last bird shortly.

Even though only eight carvings are on record, every palace contained a ritual area equivalent to the Eastern Enclosure. It was in such rocky arenas at the back that the king, his ritual sister, and a few others would have propitiated the royal ancestors for the benefit of the nation.

Alternative Interpretations

Recently, Shadreck Chirikure and Innocent Pikirayi (2008; Pikirayi and Chirikure, 2011) presented a novel re-interpretation of the stone buildings at Great Zimbabwe. Following D. N. Beach (1980, 1998) and Paul Sinclair (1987: 155–156), they used the principle of brother-to-brother political succession to re-identify most of the major enclosures in the Lower Valley as the shifting palaces of different leaders through time. Their overall order followed the P, P/Q to Q stone wall sequence established by Anthony Whitty (1961).

This interpretation, however, is not sustainable for a number of reasons. In the first place, collateral succession, as noted earlier, began only in the late eighteenth century. Contemporaneous documents and D. N. Beach's (1980) oral history research are quite clear about father-to-son succession: the first seven Mutapa kings succeeded through their fathers, not via brothers (see also Abraham 1959). The only exceptions were caused by assassination and death on the battle field.

Secondly, provided the nature of leadership did not change in any radical way, the interrelated principles of spatial organization evident in the Hill Ruin would apply to every palace, even those in the Lower Valley. As I noted elsewhere (Huffman 2010, 2011), if any enclosure in the Valley was the headquarters of a sacred leader, it would have to be similar in form to the Hill Ruin and to the numerous palaces mentioned here earlier. In fact, most valley ruins (No. 1, Mauch and Maund) lack the three principal diagnostic components of a palace: an audience chamber, a messenger's hut, and a diviner's hut. Further, these other enclosures are all too small, and they lack ritual areas sited among boulders at the back. The principles of sacred leadership, known from the early documents and more recent ethnographic sources, show that it would be unthinkable to separate the ruler from his ritual area in this way. Indeed, the stratigraphy in the king's section of the Hill Ruin shows that there were multiple audience chambers one on top of the other, forming a three-meter thick deposit (Robinson 1961). A stratified series of radiocarbon results date these and associated structures to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Huffman and Vogel 1991). Thus, kings must have continuously occupied the Hill Ruin during the main occupation period.

Moreover, the large outer wall of the Western Enclosure was topped by two important symbols of leadership: monoliths and small towers. Today, the monoliths are called 'the horns of the *mambo* (leader)', symbolizing protection, while the small towers are regarded as symbolic grain bins, representing the earth's bounty. This is not simply a modern guess. According to De Barros (1551, in Theal 1901 vol. VI: 271), the sixteenth-century Mutapa king carried a special spear and hoe to denote these two responsibilities:

The insignia of his royal state are a very small hoe with an ivory handle, which he always carries in his belt, and which denotes peace and that all may dig profit from the earth, and one or two assegais [spears], which denote justice [i.e. the courts] and the defense of his people.

These political symbols and the new front wall date to about the same time as the P/Q walling in the Lower Valley, and there were later additions to the palace

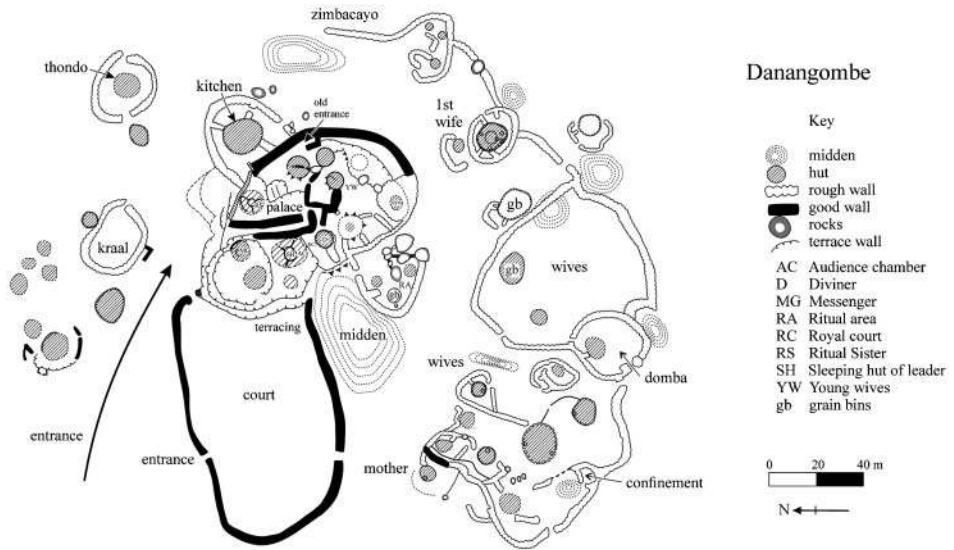


FIGURE 13 Danangombe, Zimbabwe: note different walling marking wives area (adapted from Caton Thompson 1931 and Huffman 1996).

built in Q-coursing. All these architectural features combine to show that the Hill Ruin remained the palace throughout the time Great Zimbabwe was a functioning capital. It follows that the Lower Valley ruins are still best interpreted as the compound for the king's wives. I turn now to that area.

Royal Wives' Compound

Throughout the Eastern Bantu-speaking world, women were an avenue to success and status. Groups of men established political alliances by exchanging prestige goods, and the number of wives was a direct reflection of a man's wealth and political power. As a result, leaders had many wives.

Every man who wishes to have two wives may do so if he can afford it, but these are few, and therefore they only have one, except the nobles and lords of the kingdom, for these have many (Dos Santos 1609, in Theal 1901 vol. VII: 213.).

By custom, most of the king's wives lived in their own compound in his capital (some lived in district capitals) under the control of the first wife (e.g. De Barros 1551, in Theal 1901 vol. VI: 272). Such compounds have been identified at a number of capitals because of differences in walling styles (rough coursing), content (kitchens without a *chikwa*), and symbols (*mihombwe*). Danangombe (Figure 13), Khami, and Great Zimbabwe provide three well-known examples.

Masungiro Ritual – the Transfer of Fertility

Wives in general and royal wives in particular needed ritual protection against malevolent forces when they were pregnant. This is a widespread concept throughout the Shona-speaking world. They needed this spiritual protection because young women were particularly susceptible to witchcraft during their first

pregnancy and childbirth. Even today, a young wife should return to her mother's home to have her first child (Bullock 1927; Gelfand 1959: 178). Among other things, this practice stems from the strong ancestral focus of Shona society: fertility is a blessing from God given through female ancestors, and it is an ancestral duty to protect this gift. When they return home, young wives are physically protected by their mother and spiritually protected by their mother's ancestors. According to custom, ordinary women were not as vulnerable with subsequent births, but wives of sacred leaders should have returned home every time because they posed a danger to their husband, while at the same time, his supernatural power could endanger the unborn child. This principle applies equally to the daughters of a sacred king, especially those who have married district leaders. Thus, every capital should have a confinement area where royal daughters could return and wait out their pregnancy.

The supernatural aspects of pregnancy pose a related problem. When a young wife is pregnant for the first time, she (and her in-laws) can no longer interact with her parents. To restore normal relations, both families must undergo the *masungiro* ritual (Holleman 1952: 177–181; Weinrich 1982: 108–109). In this ritual today, the daughter, and perhaps the mother, removes her *mutimwi* (a beaded belt symbolizing fertility), places it at the threshold of the mother's hut (symbolizing the womb) and jumps over it: the daughter into the hut and the mother outwards. This action symbolizes the transfer of fertility to the next generation, and in some cases (if the mother also removes her *mutimwi*) the mother will cease to bear children. The daughter then replaces her *mutimwi* (she must wear it during childbirth) and both generations enter the hut. Finally, a black male goat is sacrificed and shared by the two groups, signifying the normalization of relations.

The Posselt and Philips ruins in the Lower Valley conform to the expectations of a *masungiro* centre at Great Zimbabwe (Huffman 1985, 2011). Two audience chambers in the Posselt Ruin are particularly diagnostic. Various symbols likely identify Audience Chamber A with a woman, including the *mihombwe* (symbolic furrows) at the main entrance, the small tower (symbolic grain bin) on the ground in front, and the stepped-platform nearby (associated with the pots of special women). Because the birth of potential kings and ritual sisters is a national concern, and because human fertility is the responsibility of female ancestors, a national representative of the female line must officiate. This was most likely the ritual sister or her substitute.

The *masungiro* ceremony would have been repeated many times at Great Zimbabwe because royal daughters must return every time they bear children. It therefore seems likely that a formal structure such as Audience Chamber B served this purpose. The two opposing families could enter through the two opposing doorways, while the dividing wall would have kept them separate. Moreover, the internal doorway would have provided an appropriate threshold for the *mutimwi* ritual (Figure 14).

As a rule, east/back locations are reserved for private activities, especially those involving fertility and the ancestors, while public activities take place in west/front locations. All palaces, as noted earlier, follow this format. Following

hombwe-and-monolith (female and male), that probably symbolized the ‘stone-in-the-pool’, that is, God’s gift of fertility (see Aschwanden 1982: 217–220).

The dating of this center is of interest. Chinese blue-on-white porcelain of the Hongzhi period (1488–1505) dates the Posselt Ruin to Period IVc – that is after the main abandonment of Great Zimbabwe (Collett et al. 1992; Huffman and Vogel 1991). De Barros’s mid-sixteenth-century description of Great Zimbabwe (in Theal 1901 vol. VI: 267–268) probably refers to this center:

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 all these edifices Symbaoe, which according to their language signifies court, for every place where Benomotapa may be is so called...It is guarded by a nobleman, who has charge of it after the manner of a chief *alcaide* [governor of a fortress or prison warden] 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.

Spiritual protection was still available at Great Zimbabwe even when it was no longer the Mutapa capital because of two related principles. First, the spirit world operates in parallel with the world of the living. Because sacred leadership is normally bonded to the land, so are ancestral spirits. So when the Mutapa leadership moved north, only the most recent generations would have accompanied the move: older ancestors would have remained behind. Secondly, a Shona leader’s claim to land is through his ancestors. For these two reasons Great Zimbabwe was most likely the spiritual home of the Mutapa dynasty, and it could become the *masungiro* for the king’s married daughters after it was abandoned.

This example shows how the ZP provides an over-arching framework for interpreting agency and ritual behavior: principles derived from early documents and more recent ethnographic sources closely mesh with the archaeological evidence. My next example involves rites of passage conducted in the settlement.

Great Enclosure — Proper Moral Behavior

Following a model derived from Venda beliefs and practices related to *domba*, I argue that the Great Enclosure at Great Zimbabwe most likely functioned as a pre-marital initiation school for both royalty and commoners (Huffman 1984, 1996: 85–95). In *domba*, young men and women learn societal values, especially concerning the proper moral behavior expected of married people (Blacking 1969). Commoners also were introduced to court language (Van Warmelo 1971) and all participants to royal legends and ideology. These lessons were taught through riddles, proverbs, physical exercises, dances, songs, and dramas in which an assortment of figurines were used as teaching aids. Because this kind of education belongs to the domain of women, the school should be attached to the royal wives’ compound, and because of its public aspects (the *domba* dance), it should be near the public court. Special *domba* huts, known as *tshivhambo*, are built for this purpose in a special enclosure near the court.

A similar concern for education existed in traditional Shona society. In the recent past, the ritual sister (Lady Moyo in praise poetry) was responsible for proper moral behavior. Moreover, the spirits of previous ritual sisters were thanked for their past success and invoked for their continuing influence. Even traditional poetry alludes to this educational role (Hodza and Fortune 1979: 15–18, 248): ‘Soothing shade to the weanling; where you are the girls gather to play.’

The initiation hypothesis was at first met with fairly strong local resistance. Among other objections, some anthropologists claimed that Shona never held such elaborate rituals (e.g. Bourdillon 1997), some historians claimed that Portuguese documents did not mention them (e.g. Beach 1997, 1998), and some Shona archaeologists rejected any ethno-linguistic connection to the Venda (e.g. Pikirayi 1997, 2001; Pwiti 1997). Since that time, there has been mounting evidence to support the hypothesis.

In terms of the Venda model, D. N. Beach thought *domba* initiation schools were due to Sotho influence, while John Blacking (1985) argued that *domba* predated the ruling Singo, who had conquered non-Venda people. Blacking was right on the first point but not the second. Prior to the Singo, Shona-speaking leaders ruled from Zimbabwe culture palaces in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries throughout Limpopo (Huffman and Hanisch 1987; Ralushai and Gray 1977). J. H. N. Loubser (1991), as noted earlier, demonstrated that Venda identity evolved through the interaction of Shona (making *Khami* ceramics) and Sotho-speaking peoples (making *Icon* ceramics) before the Singo moved south from Zimbabwe. The pre-Singo peoples were therefore also Venda. Most importantly, similar initiation schools can be traced back through the Khami facies in the Limpopo Valley (Huffman and du Piesanie 2011) to the Middle Iron Age site of Schroda (Hanisch 2002; Nettleton 2002). Significantly, the Schroda School predates the arrival of Sotho-Tswana people by 100 to 200 years. Thus, *domba* has great antiquity in the region and in the Zimbabwe culture.

Rather than an initiation school, most commentators have preferred to identify the Great Enclosure as a later palace. It is therefore worth summarizing why the Great Enclosure truly differs from a typical palace. Among other features:

- the back wall is noticeably higher than the front (rather than the reverse);
- the high back wall bears the only decorative symbols on the outer wall (rather than at the front);
- symbols of male defense dominate one side (rather than status symbols);
- the most private hut is in the front (rather than the back);
- large numbers of people assembled in the back (where it should have been private) near a speaker’s platform;
- a wide assortment of clay and stone figurines lay scattered around the speaker’s platform (Hall 1905: 267);
- the interior lacks the normal divisions and locations for palace officials, occupants, and activities;
- and the earliest P and P/Q walls, forming the first Great Enclosure (see Summers and Whitty 1961; Garlake 1973b), lack palace features (Figure 15).

There is, thus, no archaeological evidence for a palace function at any time.

Great Zimbabwe

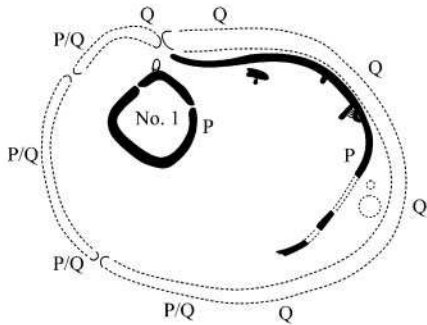
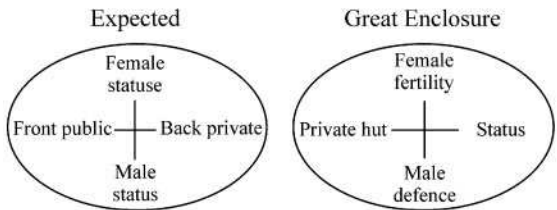
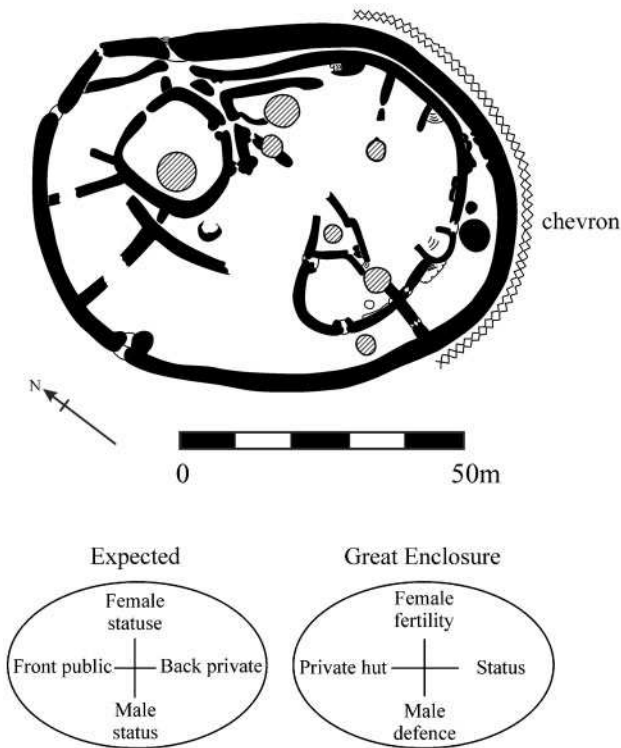


FIGURE 15 Great Enclosure at Great Zimbabwe (adapted from White 1905, Summers and Whitty 1961, and Huffman 1996): P, P/Q and Q=walling types.

What is more, the Great Enclosure is not unique, as some commentators forget. No fewer than fifteen other examples have been mapped or otherwise recorded (Huffman 1984; 1996 chapter 3). They are all similar in their locations, architectural features, and contents. In particular, they are all peculiar in their reversals of normal rules. These reversals are typical of rites of passage throughout the world.

Last century, *domba* was held in the capital only when a chief was installed so that he might choose young wives to help him start his reign. Afterwards, he allocated the right to headmen to hold subsequent schools. For this reason, the Great Enclosure was probably used for *domba*-like functions only five or six times. Venda girls, on the other hand, attend a short ceremony at puberty in the settlement of their headman or chief; one ceremony is held for commoners and another for royalty. Later, both social classes come together for a few weeks so that nobles can learn the songs and dances taught to commoners (Blacking 1969). Typically, *domba* enclosures are also used for these ceremonies. Portuguese sources do not record the pre-marital school, but De Barros noted an important puberty celebration:

No one can marry a woman before she reaches the age of puberty and is capable of conceiving, and they are accustomed to keep that day with great feasting (1551, in Theal 1901 vol. VI: 269).

There is therefore no reason to believe that Shona society lacked elaborate rituals. My final topic concerns rites of passage outside a Zimbabwe settlement.

The Wild Bush

Circumcision Lodges — The Formation of Regiments

Another ruin type is so different from pre-marital schools as well as palaces that it must have served a different purpose. This other type I associate with circumcision (Huffman 1996: chapter 7) and this interpretation has likewise been controversial. Beach and others critics believe two points conclusively negate the initiation hypotheses. One, Shona speakers have neither held circumcision schools in living memory, and two, Portuguese documents do not report any such schools on the Zimbabwe plateau. Beach's (1997) original assertion that the circumcision hypothesis lacks any documentary support, however, requires revision. He later (1998) found references to circumcision in the Makombe dynasty in Barwe (a non-Shona area) and in the eastern Shona dynasty of Muponda. In both cases the sources thought there were Muslim connections. Sofala on the East Coast, one should remember, was originally a Muslim settlement, and 'Moorish' men traded throughout the Mutapa kingdom (e.g. De Barros 1551, in Theal 1901 vol. VI). Theodore Bent's (1896: 56–57) nineteenth-century travels provide a third observation.

There is certainly a Semite drop of blood in their veins; whence it comes will probably never be known, but it is marked both on their countenances and in their customs. In religion they are monotheists — that is to say, they believe in a supreme being called Muali ...They lay out food for their dead...they have dynastic names for their chiefs...circumcision is practiced amongst some of them.

Some people in Zimbabwe did indeed practice this custom in the nineteenth century. Moreover, there is no reason why one should assume that sixteenth-century documents must be complete. In Bantu-speaking societies, secret initiations are seldom discussed. Even today, some Tswana women will not tell

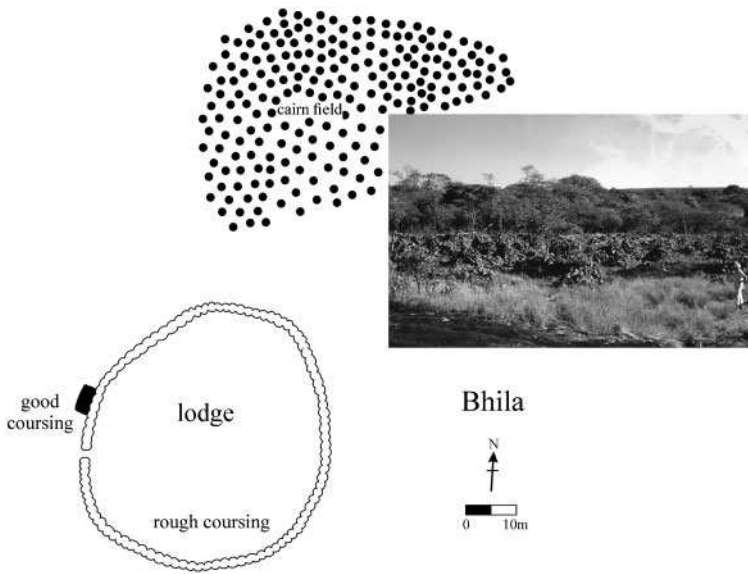


FIGURE 16 Bhila circumcission site near Naletale, Zimbabwe (adapted from Huffman 1996).

their husbands what transpired years before when they went through their own initiation schools. In terms of logic, the absence of evidence is not the same as evidence for absence. In the case of circumcision, the early documents only show that circumcision was probably not universal: they do not ‘prove’ that circumcision was not practiced by the Zimbabwe culture. The physical evidence — especially the similarity with circumcision schools in the CCP — suggests that it did.

This physical evidence includes several distinctive features. In contrast to ordinary palaces, circumcision lodges stand outside the settlement. In further contrast, these unusual ruins neither follow a palace arrangement (they lack daga structures inside the walling) nor is there any major residential population outside. Most of them are instead associated with a large field of stone cairns. Bhila (probably dating to the seventeenth century) provides a well-known example (Figure 16). Another important example (probably dating to the fourteenth century) comprises the walling and cairns on top of Gombe Mountain in the Buhera District (Caton Thompson 1931: 130). Caton Thompson’s excavations showed that the cairns were not graves, even though they are physically similar. Nor were cairns the result of land clearance because most sites are agriculturally unsuitable (Gombe is sited on a rocky hilltop) and some cairns were quarried on the spot, as they were at Bhila. The so-called loopholes at Gombe may well have been symbolic eyes, similar to the functional windows incorporated in the front walls of palaces, such as nearby Matendere. Certainly, the loopholes could not have functioned as gun slots because they predate firearms, and there was nowhere to fire: the Gombe wall faces a 300-foot drop. The isolation, lack of population, lack of daga structures inside, symbolic features, and consistent presence of cairns outside are explicable in terms of male circumcision. Indeed, these sites have the

same features as the schools attributable to the CCP (e.g. Roberts and Winters 1915), except Zimbabwe culture walling marks the lodge.

To most Bantu-speaking peoples, activities representing great disorder must take place in the 'wild bush', away from capitals that represent the centre of cultural order. In Sotho-Tswana society (the main ethnographic source for schools in the CCP), the bush school is a type of military induction. At the end of the school, the temporary shelters in the lodge and other paraphernalia associated with childhood are destroyed and the initiates receive adult names. Later, the shepherds (the young men who passed through the previous school) erect stone cairns to mark the birth of the new age set and regiment. As a reversal, the cairns resemble graves, but symbolize rebirth.

In the nineteenth century, Venda royals did not undergo circumcision. Instead, young boys (from about 7 to puberty) attended another school, known as *thondo*, based in the capital where they were trained to become the youngest regiment (Stayt 1931). Like Venda, perhaps only Zimbabwe commoners attended the bush schools. Even though we are unsure who used these unusual sites, circumcision is still the best hypothesis: the sites were probably training grounds for the military.

Summary and Conclusions

Early documents and other ethnographic sources show that ritual space in the Zimbabwe culture centered on sacred leadership. Because sacred leaders claimed a link to God through royal ancestors, their every move involved the supernatural, and was highly ritualized. The focus of this ritual behavior was the palace. As a sacred space, the palace accommodated the king, his ritual sister, young wives, and ancestors, as well as a limited number of officials to support the institutionalized functions of leadership. Most importantly, the king provided his people with defense and justice through the courts and bounty from the earth through adequate rainfall. His ritual sister was responsible for human fertility.

The most important ritual space in the royal wives' compound focused on the supernatural dangers surrounding pregnancy. Each Zimbabwe capital had a confinement zone for royal daughters returning home to give birth, while an associated area facilitated the *masungiro* ritual, permitting family and in-laws to resume normal relations. Another area attached to the wives' compound served as an initiation center for both royals and commoners. Puberty rituals were probably frequent in every capital and district center, while pre-marital rites occurred less often and in fewer places.

Throughout Southern Africa, male circumcision schools were associated with disorder and always held outside the settlement. In the Zimbabwe culture circumcision lodges included stonewalled enclosures for temporary occupation and stone cairns to symbolize birth through death. The distribution of these circumcision sites suggest that initiates may have had to travel some distance to attend the bush school. Admittedly, the initiation hypothesis has less documentary and other ethnographic support than the interpretation of Zimbabwe culture palaces. Nevertheless, the marked similarity to bush schools associated with the

Central Cattle Pattern — where there is extensive ethnographic support — considerably strengthens its plausibility. The bush schools most probably created age-sets with military functions.

Clearly, the Zimbabwe past was different from historic times. Class distinction was no longer an organizing principle when colonial powers entered the country in the nineteenth century, and sacred leaders no longer ruled from large towns as they did in the fifteenth century. Living memory may omit such features, but the ethnography of the descendents is nevertheless crucial for interpreting the archaeological record.

The ethnographically-derived model is persuasive at least in part because the archaeological sites are so recent. Indeed, some, such as nineteenth—seventeenth-centuries Danangombe and seventeenth—fifteenth-centuries Khami, were contemporaneous with the beginning of the ethnographic record. The interplay between this ethnography and archaeology shows that a society's worldview was a crucial force in its character, functioning, and continuity. Sacred leadership was such a force in the Zimbabwe culture.

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