Inside and outside the dry stone walls: revisiting the material culture of Great Zimbabwe

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'Any study of Great Zimbabwe has to rely a great deal on re-examining and re-assessing the work of early investigators, the men who removed all the most important finds from the ruins and stripped them of so much of their deposits' (Garlake 1973: 14). The authors have here done us a great service in reviewing the surviving archaeological evidence from this world famous site. They challenge the structuralist interpretation – in which different parts of the site were allocated to kings, priests, wives or to circumcision rituals – and use the architectural, stratigraphic and artefactual evidence accumulated over the years to present a new sequence. The early enclosures on the hill, the Great Enclosure and the valley enclosures now appear as the work of successive rulers, each founding a new residence and power centre in accord with Shona practice.

Keywords: East Africa, Great Zimbabwe, second millennium AD, structural, symbolic archaeology

Introduction

Great Zimbabwe (Figure 1) is one of more than 200 sites in southern Africa (Garlake 1970; Beach 1998) which display the architectural tradition of those monumental but mortarless walls that have continued to attract archaeologists and the public alike (Ndoro 2001; Fontein 2006). With that attraction have arisen speculations and debates about the identity of the site's builders and the function of the walled enclosures (see Hall, R.N. 1905; Garlake 1982; Hall, M. 1995; Huffman 1996). Since the late nineteenth century several research issues have dominated the archaeology of Great Zimbabwe, including its origins and dating (Bent 1892; Hall 1905; 1910; MacIver 1906; Caton-Thompson 1931; Summers *et al.* 1961; Collett *et al* 1992; Chipunza 1997) and its purpose and significance (Garlake 1973; 1982; Huffman 1986; 1996; Beach 1998; Thorp 1998).

Architectural studies by Schofield (1926), Summers and Whitty (1961) and Whitty (1961) proposed a relative sequence in which the walls were constructed over time. Other studies have deduced the economic basis of the state based at Great Zimbabwe and the broader landscape setting and settlement hierarchy around stone built monuments of the Zimbabwe type in general (Sinclair 1987; Pwiti 1996). And yet others, particularly the more

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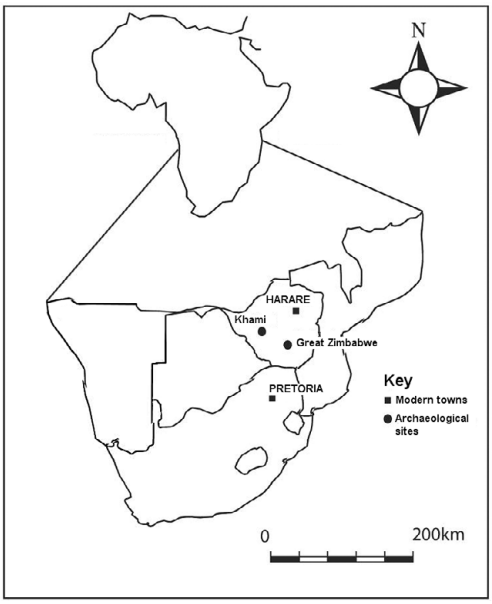

Figure 1. Map of southern Africa showing the location of Great Zimbabwe.

recent ones, have focused on the politics of the past and the conservation and management of the site (Ndoro 2001; Fontein 2006; Chirikure & Pwiti 2008). More recently the site has been interpreted from symbolic, structuralist and cognitive standpoints (Huffman 1981; 1982; 1985; 1986; 1996; 2007).

Research at Great Zimbabwe has, right from the onset, been highly politicised. Between 1870 and the 1930s, the site attracted considerable controversy, much of it based on antiquarian speculative beliefs and European colonial attitudes (Bent 1892; Hall & Neal 1902; Douslin 1922; Caton-Thompson 1931; Burke 1969; Hall 1987; 1995; Pikirayi 2001). The Rhodesian settler community did not accept an African authorship of the monuments. Even the highly scientific investigations by Robinson *et al.* (1961) were overshadowed by partisan claims (Wainwright 1949; Jeffreys 1954; Dart 1955). The radical white Rhodesian Front exiled professional archaeologists and hired non-archaeologists to re-write and popularise the antiquarian version on the origins and identity of the builders of the site (Bruwer 1965; Gayre 1972; Garlake 1982; Pikirayi 2001). Thus between the 1960s and 1980, when Zimbabwe attained independence, research on Great Zimbabwe remained far from impartial.

Fairly recent work from Collett *et al* (1992) and Chipunza (1994) has continued the study of the architectural development, but post-1980 research has suffered from a moratorium on excavations placed by the cultural management authorities, in favour of the conservation of dry stone walls and earthen structures. Whilst conservation is a laudable development albeit with its own problems (Ndoro 1994; Fontein 2006), it is worrying that no new generation of scholars seems to be taking an active interest in the archaeology of the site (Chirikure 2007a). This creates the false impression that we have exhausted all possible avenues of investigating the monument. Yet there are huge gaps in our knowledge. Since 1980, there has never been an integrated archaeological research programme on Great Zimbabwe, only isolated and often fragmented approaches (see for example Chipunza (1994) on stone architecture, Matenga (1998) on soapstone birds and Chirikure (2007b) on metalwork). This fragmented approach somewhat frustrates attempts to develop a coherent history of the different activities carried out at the site as revealed through artefact studies.

Using archival and published data, we seek here to review the archaeology of Great Zimbabwe, integrating assemblages with stratigraphic and architectural sequences. Making sense of some of the existing data is not easy if one considers the history of sustained plunder which has destroyed important deposits without adequate recording (Garlake 1973: 14).

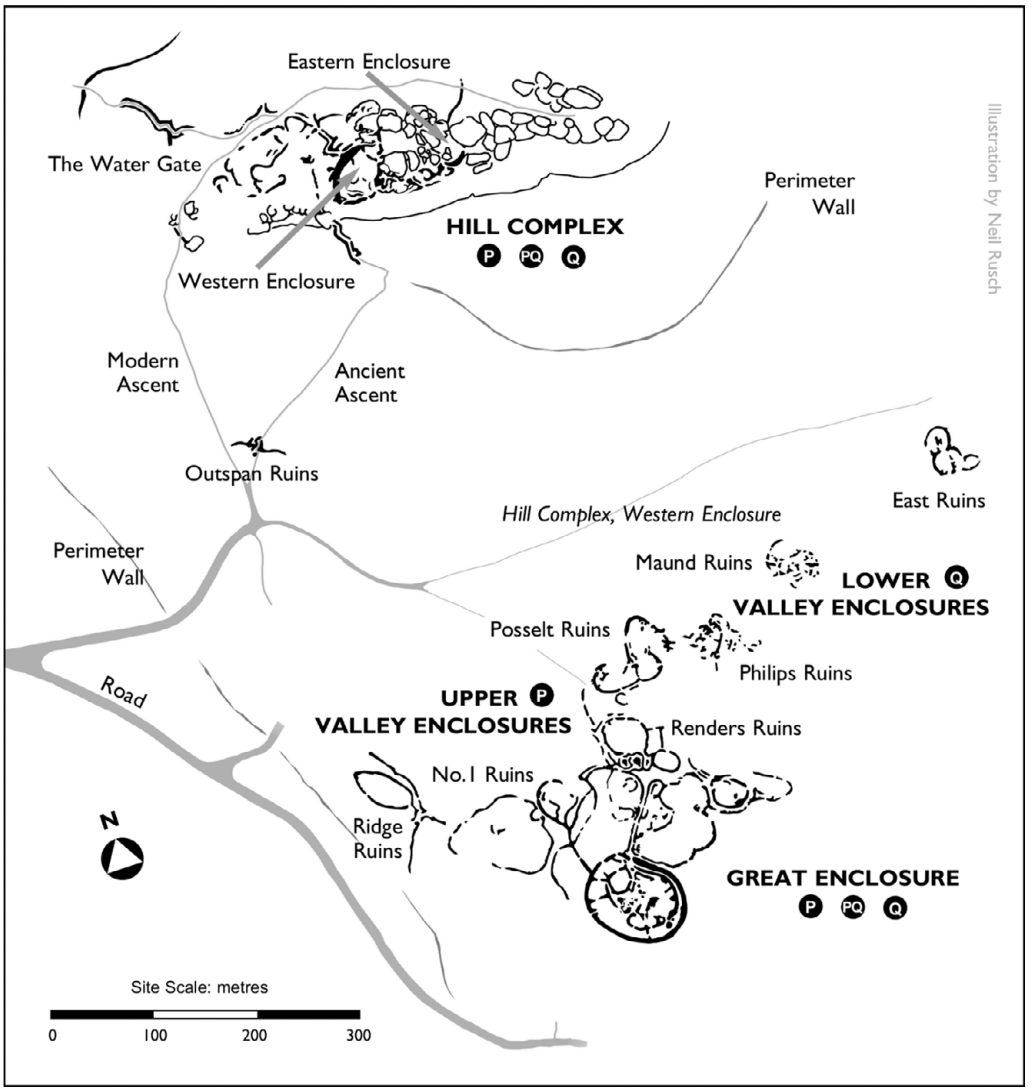

Figure 2. Site plan of Great Zimbabwe (modified from an original plan by National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe).

Nevertheless we are convinced that old data has the potential to bring new insights. In particular, we feel we are in a position to challenge the prevalent current structuralist model and replace it with another that has time depth.

Great Zimbabwe: the sequence (see Figure 3 and Tables 1 and 2)

The site of Great Zimbabwe consists of stone-walled enclosures on the hill (the *Hill Complex*) and in the adjacent valley (the *Valley Enclosures*), together with other unwalled areas (Figure 2). Two perimeter walls demarcate the inner and outer limits of the town (Sinclair 1987: 106). The *Upper Valley* includes the *Great Enclosure*, famous for its exquisite

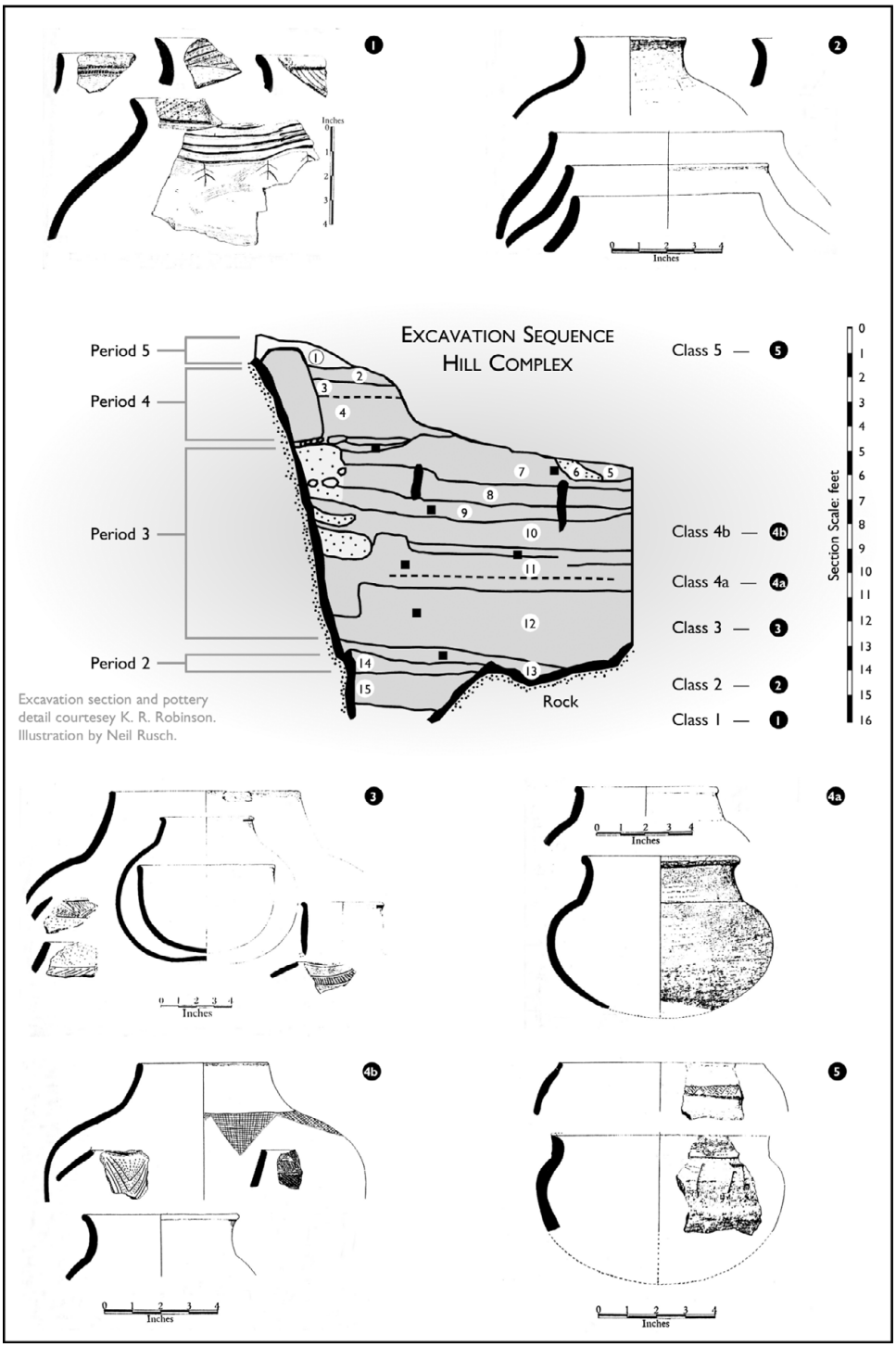

Figure 3. Stratigraphy of a section of the Hill Complex together with pottery classes and radiocarbon dates. The chronology of the site is based on the excavation by K. Robinson (1961a).

Table 1. Great Zimbabwe: summary of the main periods of occupation (modified from Summers *et al.* 1961 and Huffman & Vogel 1991).

Period	Focus	Pottery	Architecture	Date
I and Ia	Hill Complex	Class 1 – Gokomere/Ziwa/ Zhizo pottery	no stone walling	5th-8th centuries
	----------	**Abandoned**	----------	9th-12th centuries
II	Hill Complex	Class 2 – Gumanye pottery	no stone walling; *dhaka* house floors	mid 12th-early 13th centuries
III	Hill Complex, Western and Eastern Enclosures	Class 3 pottery, Class 3 influenced by Class 4a pottery	P stone walling; substantial *dhaka* houses	early-late 13th centuries
IVa	Hill Complex; Great Enclosure; Upper Valley Enclosures	Class 3 influenced by Class 4a pottery; Class 4 pottery	P and PQ walling	late 13th-early 14th centuries
IVb	Great Enclosure; Lower Valley Enclosures	Class 4b graphite burnished ware	PQ, Q and R walling	early 14th-mid 15th centuries
IVc	Lower Valley Enclosures	Class 4c graphite burnished ware	Q and R walling	mid 15th-mid 16th centuries
	----------	**Abandoned**	----------	mid 16th-19th centuries
V	Lower Valley Enclosures	Class 5 – Karanga pottery	R walling	19th century

workmanship in stone. This has attracted looters and treasure hunters who, for centuries, have stripped it of metres of archaeological deposit. In 1902 Hall and Neal '*found huge piles of soil debris deposited within the ruins by a succession of explorers, both authorized and unauthorized*'.

Over the years, the chronology of Great Zimbabwe has been built up within a combined framework of stratigraphy, pottery sequences, radiocarbon dates and architectural history (Summers *et al.* 1961; Figure 3). The sequence is divided into five periods (I-V) ranging from the sixth to the nineteenth century AD. This periodisation is strengthened by the existence of notable differences in material culture such as glass beads and local pottery belonging to the individual periods (Robinson 1961a, b & c). Accordingly, the local pottery has been categorised into five classes (Classes 1 to 5), corresponding with the stratigraphy (Figure 3).

The material culture of Period I, assigned to early farming communities, dates to between AD 500 and AD 800 and comprises characteristic pottery known as Gokomere-Ziwa and Zhizo (Class 1) (Robinson 1961b). After a lengthy hiatus, the site was occupied from the early second millennium AD (Period II) by an ancestral Karanga people who made pottery known as Gumanye (Class 2) (Huffman 2007) and lived on the hill.

Periods III and IV which follow constitute the main era of the stone walls and of the flourishing of Great Zimbabwe as a central place. Similarities in material culture strongly indicate that Period III (Class 3) evolved out of Period II (Class 2) (Sinclair 1987). Dating

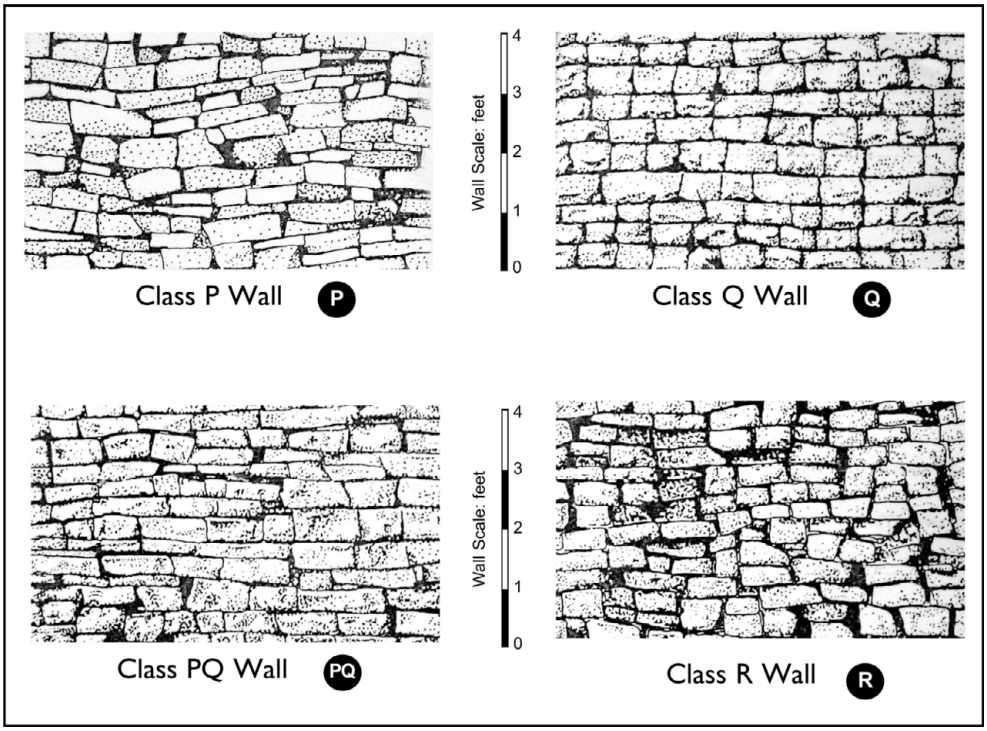

Figure 4. Types of wall fabric (modified from Whitty 1961, Garlake 1973 and Collet et al. *1992).*

between the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries on the hill, Period III is associated with substantial clay plastered houses and may have been associated with the first stone walling on the site (Robinson 1961b; Pikirayi 2001). Period IV covers about two centuries stretching from the late thirteenth to the early sixteenth century (Collett *et al.* 1992). It has been subdivided into three phases – IVa, IVb and IVc. Phase IVa developed out of Period III and the local pottery (Class IVa) has features of both Class 3 and 4 and it is sometimes referred to as transitional pottery (Robinson 1961a). This period witnessed the first expansion of the Zimbabwe culture settlement from the hill into the valley. Period IVb is associated with the florescence of the Zimbabwe culture up to the mid-fifteenth century. The local pottery (Class IVb) is lavishly burnished with graphite. Period IVc is associated with later settlement in the valley and subsequent abandonment of the site. The recovery of Ming Dynasty porcelain from the *Lower Valley* enclosures indicates that Period IVb ended in the early sixteenth century (Collett *et al.* 1992). Lastly, Period V represents the re-occupation of Great Zimbabwe more than three centuries later. The pottery is akin to that used by the nineteenth-century Karanga peoples who lived around the site (Garlake 1973).

The architectural chronology of Great Zimbabwe is also consistent with this sequence (Schofield 1926; Whitty 1961; Garlake 1970; Chipunza 1997). According to Whitty (1961) the earliest, poorly coursed, stone walls, which he termed P and PQ, were found on the Hill Complex, followed by the neatly coursed Q walls in the valley, the site of the elliptical Great Enclosure, and the other valley enclosures. The uncoursed R walls were attributed to the later occupation (Figure 4). However, this model was weakened by the existence of P

Table 2. Radiocarbon dates from Great Zimbabwe. The radiocarbon dates were calibrated using the Radiocarbon Calibration Program (Calib Revs 5.0.2. Copyright 1986-2005 M. Stuiver and P.J. Reimer). Modified from Huffman & Vogel 1991 and Stuiver & Reimer 1993.

Lab. No.	Date AD	Cal Age ± 1 sigma	Cal Age ± 2 sigma	Context	Comment
The Hill Complex					
Periods 1 and 2 (development of farming communities)					
M-914	1075 ± 150	1040-1290	900-920 (1%) 950-1410 (99%)	Test I, level 13. Gumanye pottery, end of Period 2	Chivowa Hill dates 970 ± 35 (Pta-1919), 1060 ± 40 (Pta-1922) and Gumanye Hill 1020 ± 35 (Pta-1916)
Pta-1983	670 ± 40	721-741 (16%) 770-873 (84%)	682-891	Test V, Western Enclosure, Zhizo pottery	Huffman & Vogel 1991 Period Ib
M-913	320 ± 150	348-369 (5%) 378-651 (95%)	136-772	Test V, Western Enclosure, charcoal with fragments of *dhaka*, Gokomere/Ziwa pottery	Huffman & Vogel 1991 Period Ia
Periods 3 and 4 (development of stone walling and solid clay (dhaka) *floors and clay-built houses)*					
M-915	1440 ± 150	1320-1350 (11%) 1380-1520 (59%) 1540-1630 (30%)	1220-1690 (96%) 1730-1860 (4%)	End of Period 4, Test I, level 5, floor c	Huffman and Vogel 1991, Robinson 1961a
Pta-2706	1370 ± 50	1328-1337 (11%) 1391-1438 (89%)	1311-1360 (25%) 1379-1452 (75%)	Test I, level 7	Robinson 1961a
Pta-1192	1310 ± 50	1312-1359 (66%) 1380-1405 (34%)	1293-1420	Colophospermum Mopane lintel, covered passage	Robinson 1961a, Huffman and Vogel 1991
Pta-1986	1310 ± 45	1314-1357 (67%) 1381-1404 (33%)	1295-1417	Test I, floor g	Robinson 1961a, Huffman and Vogel 1991
Pta-2704	1280 ± 45	1304-1362 (80%) 1377-1391 (20%)	1288-1402	Test I, level 11, floor h1, sorghum	Robinson 1961a, Huffman and Vogel 1991
Pta-745	1280 ± 30	1306-1329 (37%) 1336-1361 (42%) 1378-1391 (21%)	1297-1395	PWD face above Test VI	Huffman and Vogel 1991
Pta-1985	1260 ± 45	1294-1323 (40%) 1346-1388 (60%)	1283-1397	Test I, level 11 floor i	Robinson 1961a

Pta-2705	1190 ± 50	1233-1245 (11%) 1264-1311 (68%) 1359-1379 (21%)	1218-1324 (76%) 1344-1389 (24%)	Above Test V: South Wall, dating early P walling	Robinson 1961a, Huffman and Vogel 1991
Pta-1984	1100 ± 40	1211-1270	1162-1172 (2%) 1175-1281 (98%)	Test I, floor j	Huffman and Vogel 1991
The Great Enclosure					
Trenches 3-6 and lintels from one of the adjoining walls					
SR-47	1380 ± 90	1320-1360 (31%) 1380-1460 (69%)	1280-1510 (96%) 1580-1620 (4%)	Earliest *dhaka* lens and P-walling, Enclosure 1	Summers 1961, Huffman and Vogel 1991
Pta-1594	1310 ± 40	1316-1355 (67%) 1382-1402 (33%)	1298-1413	Lintel	Summers 1961, Huffman and Vogel 1991
Pta-792	1300 ± 50	1309-1360 (72%) 1378-1400 (18%)	1290-1415	Lintel	Summers 1961, Huffman and Vogel 1991
Pta-2694	1250 ± 40	1292-1319 (44%) 1351-1385 (56%)	1283-1392	Trench 8, level 6, layer sealing midden	Summers 1961
Pta-2693	1240 ± 45	1292-1319 (44%) 1351-1385 (56%)	1276-1394	Trench 5, level 9, earliest *dhaka* lens and P-walling, Enclosure 1	Summers 1961
The valley and peripheral structures					
Pta-2429	1410 ± 40	1410-1442	1391-1458	Basal early *dhaka* floors, Trench 3, Nemanwa Ruin	Huffman and Vogel 1991
Pta-2423	1400 ± 50	1401-1444	1318-1353 (10%) 1384-1462 (90%)	Camp Ruins, Z4, midden, 30-43 cm	Huffman and Vogel 1991
Pta-1208	1350 ± 50	1322-1347 (34%) 1387-1426 (66%)	1302-1364 (40%) 1376-1444 (60%)	Camp Ruins, Z1, House 35	Huffman and Vogel 1991
Wits 774	1350 ± 40	1324-1343 (29%) 1389-1427 (71%)	1312-1359 (35%) 1379-1441 (65%)	Camp Ruins, Z4, midden, level 4 (71-83 cm), underneath Pta-2423	Huffman and Vogel 1991

Figure 5. Monumental walls in the Hill Complex. The eastern wall of the Western Enclosure bordering the Eastern Enclosure.

and Q walling on both the hill and in the valley, tentatively suggesting that both parts of the site were built according to a preconceived plan, which was then elaborated over time.

The P and PQ walls are supposed to have been built in Period IVa (Robinson 1961a; Huffman 2007) while the Q walls were constructed in Period IVb (Whitty 1961). On the hill, Chipunza (1994) concluded that P and PQ courses of the Western Enclosure mark the focus of settlement before it expanded to the Eastern Enclosure (Figure 5). Chipunza (1997) also considered the spatial connectivity, construction affinity and stylistic succession of the walls on the hill and concurred with Whitty (1961) that these structures had evolved over time.

A similar architectural development is noted in the valley. According to Summers and Whitty (1961), the construction of the Great Enclosure developed in stages as shown by the mixture of P and Q coursing (Figure 6). Wall construction began around the P-coursed enclosure (no. 1 on the plan) and from this initial core area, additional PQ walls were built over time (e.g. no. 15). In contrast to these early features, the most architecturally elaborate walls in the Great Enclosure such as the girdle wall and the conical tower were built in Q style (Figure 7). These Q walls have butted joints, revetments and rounded entrances.

Adjacent to the Great Enclosure, the Upper Valley enclosures were almost exclusively built in P and PQ style (Collett *et al.* 1992), but the Lower Valley enclosures were exclusively built in Q style and contain typical Q walling features. Therefore, these Lower Valley

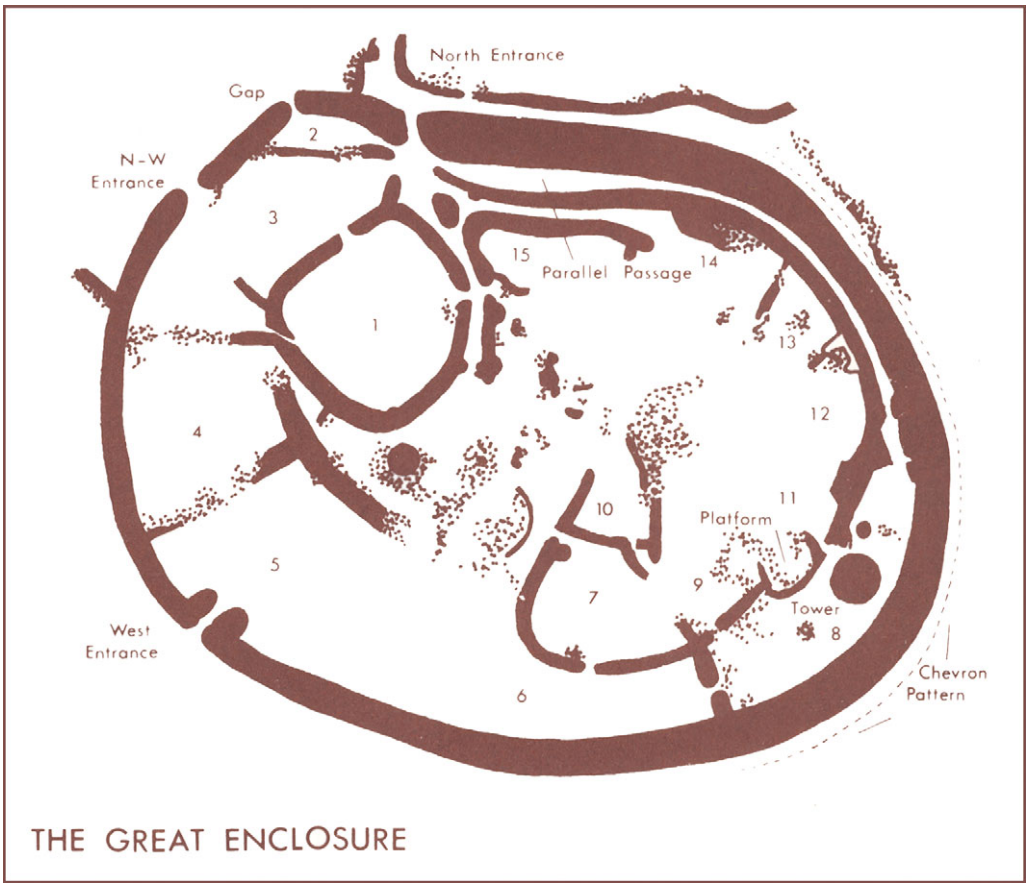

Figure 6. Plan of the Great Enclosure showing the constituent ruins, after Lance Penny (National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe).

enclosures are late additions to the site (Collett *et al.* 1992). Interestingly, they reproduce on a smaller scale the trademark features of the Great Enclosure and in particular the conical towers, curved batter walls and round entrances (Caton-Thompson 1931: 15).

Some of the walls of Great Zimbabwe were decorated with motifs which give them a strong visual appeal. For example, the girdle wall of the Western Enclosure of the Hill Complex is capped with stone monoliths and conical towers (Garlake 1973; Huffman 1996). There is a herringbone design inside the Water Gate, and a dentelle pattern in the Western Enclosure (Hill Complex). Vertical grooves (see Huffman 1996) also exist in the same enclosure and are fairly common in the valley enclosures. Perhaps the most spectacular decoration is the chevron design richly adorning the exterior girdle wall of the Great Enclosure (Figures 6 and 8).

On the missing link: the material culture of Great Zimbabwe (periods III and IV)

The assemblages of artefacts and other cultural material are crucial, not only for endorsing the architectural and stratigraphic sequences, but for the proper interpretation

of the different activities in each part of the site. However, this key aspect has been relatively neglected up to now. Only the material culture relating directly to the builders of Great Zimbabwe, i.e. belonging to Periods III and IV, will be considered here.

Figure 7. The conical tower in the Great Enclosure in Q style (courtesy of Innocent Pikirayi).

Period III *pottery* (Class 3) was only found on the hill. It was well fired, finely polished, with occasional graphite burnishing (Caton-Thompson 1931; Robinson 1961b; Garlake 1973). The most characteristic vessel types were shouldered jars with everted rims or straight necks. Decoration is very rare. With time, Class 3 pottery developed new features and this has been designated Class 4a or transitional pottery (Period IVa). Class 4a was found in virtually all the P and PQ walled enclosures. Eventually, transitional pottery gave way to Zimbabwe Pottery (Class 4b) which was prevalent during the state's florescence. Class 4 pottery is lavishly burnished with graphite and it consists of shouldered pots with tall necks and flared rims and spherical pots with very short necks and heavily rolled rims (Garlake 1973: 112; Huffman & Vogel 1991).

Metalworking evidence and metal objects have also been recovered from different areas. An iron smelting furnace (Hall 1905) and a gold melting furnace (Bent 1892) were recovered on the Hill Complex. Iron slag was recovered on the hill (Robinson 1961a), in the Great Enclosure (Willoughby 1892; Hall 1905; Caton-Thompson 1931) with the Valley Enclosures yielding both iron slag and iron blooms (Collett *et al.* 1992). Crucibles, ingots and casting spills were also found in Great Zimbabwe's walled enclosures (Bent 1892: 221). Additional evidence of metalworking includes tuyeres, iron hammers, chisels, pincers and wire drawing equipment (MacIver 1906; Hall 1910; Caton-Thompson 1931). Iron tools (chisels, knives, hoes, arrowheads, spearheads and axes) form part of the inventory of utilitarian objects. The assemblage of copper, bronze and gold objects largely consisted of beads, thin sheets and other objects used for ceremonial and decorative purposes. Therefore, metalworking evidence and metal objects were present in most of the constituent walled enclosures making up Great Zimbabwe.

A wide array of *soapstone objects* range from the famous birds to bowls (Figure 9), some imitating the architectural motifs already mentioned. Fragments of decorated and undecorated soapstone bowls have been found on the hill (Bent 1892) and within the Great (Willoughby 1892) and Valley enclosures (Caton-Thompson 1931). Perhaps the most important category of soapstone finds is the collection of eight soapstone

Figure 8. The decorated outer girdle wall, Great Enclosure showing the chevron design (courtesy of Innocent Pikirayi).

Figure 9. Soapstone bowls from Great Zimbabwe: 9a) complete soapstone bowl decorated with herringbone pattern (Iziko Museum of South Africa); 9b) fragment of soapstone bowl decorated with animal motifs, Hill Complex (housed in Iziko Museums of South Africa). Photographs by Shadreck Chirikure.

birds. Seven of the birds were recovered from the Hill Complex while the eighth was recovered in the Valley Enclosures (Matenga 1998). On the hill, only one bird was found in the Western Enclosure while the remaining six were recovered from the Eastern Enclosure. The Eastern Enclosure yielded meagre amounts of cultural debris and the existence of platforms and monoliths has suggested the use of this enclosure for priestly functions (Garlake 1973; Chipunza 1994; Huffman 1996). The flakes of worked soapstone found in the Hill Complex middens would suggest that soapstone working was practised here. The recovery of spindle whorls suggests weaving was an important activity carried out at Great Zimbabwe. Pottery and soapstone spindle whorls were recovered in varying proportions on the hill, and in the valley and Great Enclosures.

Figure 10. Period IVa glass beads from Great Zimbabwe courtesy of Marilee Wood.

Imported artefacts constitute a significant part of the material culture recovered at Great Zimbabwe. Glass beads (Figure 10) have been recovered in fair amounts at the site with the largest number being associated with the hoard found in the Renders Ruin in the valley (Hall 1905; Caton-Thompson 1931; and see below). Modest amounts of Chinese celadon and Near Eastern earthenware were found across the site. However, Arabian glass was only recovered in the Great and Valley Enclosures. The Lower Valley Enclosures are the only places to have yielded sixteenth-century Ming Dynasty pottery. Overall, the distribution of imports suggests that the occupants of the stone walls had access to exotic goods.

Material culture also includes immobile features. *Gravel floors* make their first appearance towards the end of Period III on the hill (Robinson 1961a), and become an integral feature of virtually all the stone enclosures in Period IV. A deep succession of such house floors was excavated in the Western Enclosure on the hill (Douslin 1922; Robinson 1961a; Figure 3). Despite coming in different sizes, some common features of the house floors include low benches, fire places and pot stands (Huffman 1996). Because of the history of plundering on the site, one cannot establish the development of house types used over time. House floors similar to those on the hill were found in the Great Enclosure and in the adjacent valley (MacIver 1906; Hall 1910; Caton-Thompson 1931; Summers *et al.* 1961).

While these categories of material culture were found in almost every enclosure, Richard Hall (1905) discovered a spectacular hoard in the Renders Ruin which contained gold wire, iron spoons, a lamp stand, copper box, two finger rings, several hundred thousand glass beads and several kilograms of wire, cowrie shells and coral. This probably signifies the presence of a resident trader at Great Zimbabwe. This practice has been historically documented in the Mutapa state, one of the successors to Great Zimbabwe (Pikirayi 1993; Chirikure *et al.* 2001). By extension, this hoard represents royal control over trade and exchange relationships in the Zimbabwe state.

Discussion

According to Huffman (1981; 1982; 1985), it is possible to understand the spatial correlates of Great Zimbabwe's dry stone walls using a binary-coded cognitive framework supported by ethnography. Huffman concluded that the kings at Great Zimbabwe resided in the Western Enclosure of the Hill Complex while the Eastern Enclosure served as a ritual centre. The Great Enclosure in the valley was interpreted as a centre for initiation (see Huffman 1985), while the Valley Enclosures were the residences of the royal wives (Huffman 1996).

Huffman's model has been criticised for presenting the picture of a society in stasis for 200 years (Beach 1998). Like Sinclair (1987), Beach (1998) made recourse to Shona ethnography and history of political succession to argue that the ruler's residences had more

likely changed during Great Zimbabwe's 200-year florescence. Thus the Great Enclosure was not an initiation centre nor were the valley enclosures residences for royal wives: they were centres adopted by successive rulers.

However, Sinclair and Beach did not support their hypothesis with archaeological evidence. If we were to do so, we can bring both the archaeological sequence and the archaeological spatial distribution to bear in order to create a new model. This does indeed endorse the idea of a shifting focus during the Great Zimbabwe periods III and IV and effectively eliminates Huffman's structuralist hypothesis.

The combined archaeological sequence and architectural chronology is consistent with an expanding and shrinking settlement. Because no other part of the site has Period III remains, the early foundations of Great Zimbabwe must be located on the hill. The earliest monumental walls at Great Zimbabwe are the P and PQ walls of the Western Enclosure (Hill Complex) (Chipunza 1994; 1997). Because the contemporary walls in the valley were less monumental (Summers & Whitty 1961), this is where the first rulers of the state lived. From this formative area, settlement then expanded into the areas with Period IVa occupation, including P and PQ walling in the Great Enclosure and the Upper Valley. The exclusively Q style Lower Valley enclosures were added in Period IVb. Over time, the development of the elaborate and monumental Q styled girdle walls of the Great Enclosure suggest that political succession was passed to an individual living there. Thus, there was a shift in the centre of power from the hill to the Upper Valley, and from the Upper Valley to the Lower Valley (Summers 1961; Garlake 1973).

It would seem that the rulers who were based in the Great Enclosure presided over the state during its most affluent period. Subsequently, the centre of power moved to the exclusively Q walled Valley Enclosures (Collett *et al.* 1992). This was the last place to be abandoned, long after the Great Enclosure and the Hill Complex had been deserted, or were serving lesser stately functions (Pikirayi 1993; Chirikure *et al.* 2001). Oral traditions claim a direct link between Great Zimbabwe and the Mutapa state. Therefore, the sixteenth-century Ming Dynasty porcelain from the lower valley would suggest that a small population in the valley continued to occupy the site after most of the inhabitants had moved to other areas (Collett *et al.* 1992).

The thesis of changing rulers' residences is adequately supported by the distribution of material culture found inside the stone walls of Great Zimbabwe. Although the dates of the assemblages change, there is a remarkable similarity in the range of objects and activities carried out in the earlier and later enclosures. Each assemblage covers not only utilitarian and ceremonial objects but also ritual and craft production activities. Imported material culture also has an all-encompassing distribution, just like the locally-produced objects. This almost homogenous distribution of imports in all the major areas would suggest some form of equal access to resources on the part of those living there. If the residences of rulers changed over time as we contend, then this similarity in assemblage is hardly surprising.

In the Shona world, political succession does not follow the principle of primogeniture (Bourdillon 1976). Instead, succession follows the system of 'houses' whereby if the founder of a state has many sons, political succession alternates in all these houses starting from the eldest to the youngest, and then reverts back to the house of the eldest son (Holleman 1952; 1969). Often, when a ruler dies, his successor does not move into the deceased's

residence. He usually rules from his present homestead and depending on his power and influence can extend its grandeur. Therefore, it would seem that the Hill Complex, the Valley and Great Enclosures were, at one time or another, residences of rulers during the 200-year long florescence of the state. The homestead of the founder of the state invariably assumes a religious significance (Gluckman 1937) and this probably explains why the Hill Complex has always remained the site of an important shrine (Ndoro 2001; Fontein 2006). It can be noted that the hypothesis of a changing centre of power is also applicable to other Zimbabwe type sites on the plateau. In northern Zimbabwe, the stone-walled enclosures are actually named after particular rulers such as Mutota (Mutota's Zimbabwe) and Rusvingo waKasekete (after Kasekete) (Beach 1980).

So far, the story presented by the material culture from Great Zimbabwe is consistent with the major parts using identical material culture and being spaces for typical male and female pursuits. This is at odds with structuralist interpretations of the site. Huffman (1996) confidently argued that royal wives occupied the valley for the duration of Great Zimbabwe's florescence. He based his argument on the existence of 'female symbols' which primarily take the form of vertical grooves on some of the stone structures. In a more recent publication, Huffman (2007: 405) argues that royal wives lived together under the authority of the first wife, and maintained that the valley complexes best served this function. The expectation is that the material culture recovered from within the Valley Enclosures should be consistent with an exclusively female domain. Yet, the material culture reveals the presence of both male and female activities, as is common in Karanga societies (Aschwanden 1982). In particular, the presence of metalworking slag and iron blooms all falling within the domain of male activities show that there was a sizeable male presence in the lower valley enclosures. Furthermore, that the lower valley enclosures were the last place to be abandoned raises serious questions regarding why royal men would leave royal wives behind when abandoning the site. This further casts doubts on the royal wives hypothesis and strengthens the point that the lower valley housed the rulers at a time when Great Zimbabwe's influence was waning.

Using Venda ethnography, Huffman (1996; 2007: 407) also argues that the Great Enclosure was used for circumcision and acted as a pre-marital school for boys and girls known as the *Domba*. He cited the existence of symbols for different age groups from the young to the old and ritual objects that supported his initiation centre hypothesis. Nevertheless, an examination of the distribution of material culture at Great Zimbabwe shows that the so-called ritual objects are found in stratigraphic contexts in the valley and on the hill (Matenga 1998). Apart from containing modest amounts of metalworking evidence such as wire drawing plates, some slag, gold cake and utilitarian and non-utilitarian objects, the Great Enclosure also possessed a fair share of imports, some of which have never been recovered on the hill (for example the Islamic glass) (Summers & Whitty 1961).

More importantly, the *Domba* did not take place regularly because it was dependent on the number of young people ready to participate and the nature of the harvest (Stayt 1931). As such, initiation centres tended to be impermanent structures built of perishable materials. The objects of instruction consisted of symbolic objects which were kept in the chief's hut when not in use (Stayt 1931). Archaeologically, the *Domba* institution is unlikely to have left significant fingerprints. By contrast, the Great Enclosure is a permanent building whose

construction took place over a long time. It had a broad-based material culture that included local pottery, spindle whorls, symbolic objects, metalworking evidence and lavish imports. This assemblage is similar to that found on the Hill Complex and in the valley; areas which Huffman agrees were not initiation centres. The presence of platforms and figurines (which Huffman used to support his hypothesis) is equally consistent with Shona cultural beliefs in which each household has a place to propitiate the ancestors (Bourdillon 1976; Aschwanden 1982; Gelfand 1973).

Identifying the ceremony and rituals of initiation among the ancient Karanga also remains tenuous in the absence of supporting written and oral evidence (see Ashwanden 1982). Although the Venda, who settled in northern South Africa in the seventeenth century, were once part of the Karanga people, they soon interacted with neighbouring Sotho-Tswana communities, creating a Venda identity which is in many ways different from the Karanga (Beach 1980). According to Stayt (1931: 125), the cultural practice of circumcision was not an indigenous institution amongst the Venda (see also Blacking 1985). It was introduced through centuries of interaction with the Lemba and Sotho-Tswana societies. As such, the *Domba* had no historical derivation from the Karanga, north of the Limpopo (Aschwanden 1982; Blacking 1985; Beach 1998). Nevertheless, the Venda retained some elements of the Karanga such as the concept of sacred leadership. This must question the suitability of a hybrid Venda culture as an analogy for the Karanga worldview.

Holl (1996) suggested that the structuralist interpretation should be synchronised with the chronological development and by implication, the material culture of the site. While Great Zimbabwe's expansion was probably situated in existing mental templates (Huffman 1986; Holl 1996), it is difficult to apply a structuralist model to understanding the meaning of space at different periods during the site's development. For example, the model cannot be used to understand the organisation of space while the lower valley was the only area inhabited. Does this mean that interpretations based on structuralist theories have no future at Great Zimbabwe? Far from it, but they must be supported by artefacts, architectural history and chronology.

Conclusion

A critical assessment of the chronology, architectural history and material culture has shown that Great Zimbabwe emerged from local farming communities as a series of aristocratic centres succeeding each other in a manner consistent with Shona systems of political succession and chiefly politics. The focus of power moved from the Western Enclosure on the hill in the twelfth century, to the Great Enclosure, the Upper Valley and finally the Lower Valley in the early sixteenth century, where Great Zimbabwe's prominence was destined to end.

This sequence invalidates structuralist hypotheses which assume that different parts of the ruin were active at the same time and could thus be dedicated to different activities, rituals or genders. Symbolic beliefs are part of the broad social structure which connects disparate facets of human experience within a chronological and cultural framework (Hodder 2007).

The priority at Great Zimbabwe is to give more value to the existing data and finds. Great Zimbabwe's archaeology is currently elite archaeology; more work needs to be done on the commoner areas that formed part of the settlement. We still await the publication

of the excavations conducted during the early 1970s. These results will throw some light on issues of production and the circulation of goods, as well as the use of space in non-elite residences. Pursuing some of these issues will awake the archaeology of Great Zimbabwe from its temporary siesta of the last 30 or so years.

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