

TOPIC : DEVELOPMENT OF ZIMBABWEAN SOCIETIES

SUBTOPIC : STATE FORMATION - THE GREAT ZIMBABWE STATE

OBJECTIVES

BY THE END OF THE SUBTOPIC LEARNERS SHOULD BE ABLE TO:

- ✓ Outline factors leading to the formation of Great Zimbabwe state.
- ✓ Identify group of people who traded with the Great Zimbabwe.
- ✓ Describe the political, economic and social organisation of the Great Zimbabwe State.
- ✓ Explain factors leading to the collapse of the Great state.

Origins of the state



Great Zimbabwe monument

- Information of the history of Great Zimbabwe was recovered from archaeology and oral tradition.

- The Great Zimbabwe state was founded and is believed to have existed around 1150-1450 AD.
- Its founding and only recorded ruler was king "*Chibata matosi*".
- The state was erected approximately 40km in the south easterly direction from Masvingo town near Lake Mutirikwi.
- Its name "Dzimba dzemabwe" meaning houses of stones was due to the stone structures by which it was constructed.
- The state was built by the Bantu group of people known as the "MASHONA", who were the predecessors of the "*Mapungubwe*" and "*Torwa*" people.
- Great Zimbabwe is believed by its peak to have had 10 000 people, with mining and hunting contributing the largest trading goods.

Construction of the state

- The stone structures were made of granite rock boulders.
- There was no mortar that was used.
- Some historical arguments suggest the structures were built over a period of 300 years through slave labour.
- The stone structures were built for:
 - Prestigious reasons
 - Defence from other tribes.
 - Religious centre (the great enclosure)
 - As a home for the ruling class Trade centre

Reasons for the rise of the state

- The Great Zimbabwe Empire came about due to many factors, among them:

(a) Availability of grazing land



Grazing lands

- The surrounding plateau of the South west of Zimbabwe was rich with pastures (guruuswa) and thus provided a conducive plain to breed livestock.
- Having large cattle herds, this area was eye-catching to the Shona people from "*Mapungubwe*".
- It is also believed that the area was free of tsetse flies and malaria, therefore allowing cattle rearing to take place.
- Therefore, the availability of pastures played a major role in the formation of the state.

(b) Soil fertility

- The location of the Great Zimbabwe state had fertile clay and loam soils.
- This was attractive for agricultural production.
- This together with good grazing pastures attested to a good climatic condition in the region.

- The rich land was needed for growth of food production which was important to the state.

(c) Availability of gold deposits

- The Great Zimbabwe state was rich in minerals such as gold, iron and copper.
- The rich ruling class owned the minerals in the area.
- The continuous production of iron, copper and primarily gold, led to people clustering the area and forming an organized state.

(d) Trade

- The Great Zimbabwe was known for its trade in gold, iron and copper.
- The location of the Great Zimbabwe was appropriate as it was closer to the Indian Ocean.
- It enabled the state to trade with the Chinese and the Arabs.
- All trade routes that converged in Great Zimbabwe promoted people to cluster in the area.
- The availability of large herds of elephants allowed for plenty ivory which was needed for trade.

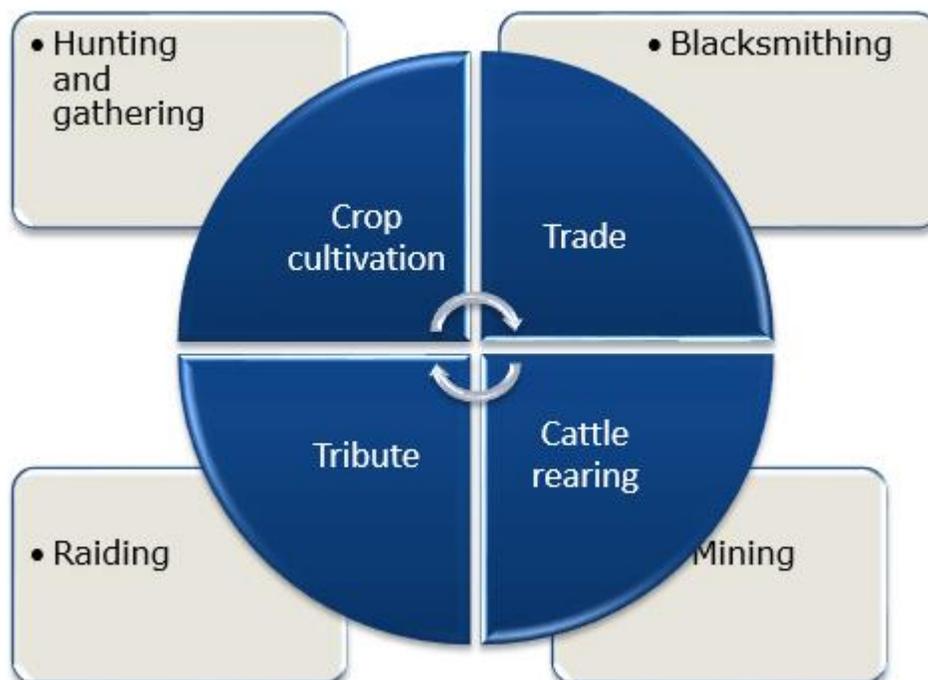
(e) Availability of granite

- Availability of granite also led to the rise of the state as it enabled the masons to build stone structures.

Organisation of the state

- The Great Zimbabwe state based on three main pillars of economic, social and political organization.
- The state was mainly founded on agriculture, trade as well cattle rearing.

A. Economic organisation



Economic activities

1. Crop cultivation
 - The soil was fertile and the main crops grown were rapoko, millet, beans, gourds, cowpeas and sorghum.
 - The invention of iron tools allowed the clearing of larger fields and permanent crop production.
 - Produces from agriculture were paid as tribute to the king and given as food hand-outs to the subjects in times of drought.

- Crop cultivation was mainly done by women and children.

2. Cattle rearing

- The Shona people were pastoralists who kept animals such as cattle, goats and sheep.
- Cattle were also used as a measure of wealth among the Great Zimbabwe people.
- This was an important supplement to their diet as it helped in times of crop failure.

Importance of cattle

- Cattle were kept for the following reasons;
 - As a form of transport.
 - Provide meat during ritual ceremonies.
 - For paying tribute.
 - Used for paying lobola/roora.
 - Used as a trade commodity.

3. Mining

- It was with the advent of iron tools that allowed for large scale mining activities.
- The Shona people mined for iron, gold and copper.
- Copper was used to make jewellery for example copper bangles.
- Mining was seasonal among the Shona, in the rainy season no work was done.
- Iron tools such as spears and arrows were used for hunting as well as for raiding, whilst axes and hoes were used in agriculture (*tree cutting and land clearing*).
- Mining was therefore the main contributor to trade goods such as gold and ivory.

4. Trade

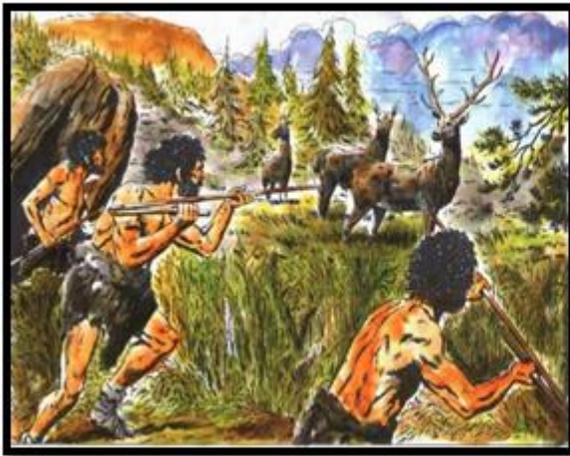
- The Great Zimbabwe state was a trading centre.
- Trade was done both internally, with the smaller neighbouring states among them Gokomere, Zhizho and Mabveni and externally with the Arabs and the Swahili on the Indian coast.
- Trade was controlled by the ruling class.
- Trade was also done among the subjects in form of barter trade, for example: an axe for grain.
- The main trading commodities were gold, ivory and leopard skins while in return foreign traders brought beads, glass wear and feathers.



Trading commodities

5. Hunting and gathering
 - The Shona people were skilled hunters.

- They used iron spears and axes to kill and skin large animals.
- They hunted for leisure, tribute and trade purposes.
- The main highly valued hunting products were ivory and leopard skins.
- Animals that were killed included elephants, kudu and rabbits among others.
- There was division of labour, hunting was done by men, while women were responsible for child rearing and gathering of wild berries and fruits.



Men hunting



women gathering fruits

Other factors

- The Great Zimbabwe people also did small economic activities such as pottery, jewellery and fishing.
- These were complementary activities which were not done on a large scale, but helped to unify the state.
- Fishing was done to supplement the diet of the state.
- The Shona people made clay pots (hari/udiwo) which were used for cooking and decoration.

- They were also skilled bead workers, who made copper bangles and bead bracelets and they used these items in tribute and trade (*This was usually a privilege of the elite*).

B. Political organisation

- The king was the head of the state.
- He was the custodian of the land and he was responsible for external trade as well as judiciary matters.
- The king lived on the mountain summit, while the wives lived in the great enclosure for defensive purposes.
- The king's first wife was the chief advisor and was responsible in the day to day running of the state.
- The king was the head of the advisory council and was assisted in the state affairs by the sub chiefs and his mother.
- The king used religion to strengthen and justify his reign as it was believed that he was divinely chosen by Mwari- Musikavhanhu.
- The King also used tribute to control the Great Zimbabwe State and tribute was used as a weapon to show the loyalty of the people.
- The king also presided over rituals such as the rain making and the enchantment which was done before the army went to war.
- The king was then a source of inspiration because of the duties that he did.
- The kingship was hereditary and the king was either succeeded by his sons or brothers.
- The council of advisors known as the Dare also assisted the King to carry out the duties.

C. Social organisation and religion

- The Shona people were a religious people.
- They believed in a supreme God known as "Mwari" whom they worshiped through their ancestors.

- The king was responsible for all religious rituals, as well as communicating with “Mwari”.
- He was believed to have magical powers (for rain making) as he was divinely inspired and his reign was unquestioned.
- The Shona paid homage to the Hungwe bird (shiri ya Mwari) which was believed to carry divine messages to the divine God.



Hungwe (The Great Zimbabwe bird)

Dowry payment

- The Shona people believed in the payment of **bride price** during customary marriage.
- Payment was made to show respect to in-laws and to strengthen family ties.
- The more wives one had, the more their social status in the community was valued.
- Cattle were used for paying dowry/lobola/roora.

- In the Great Zimbabwe state women were viewed as property, and a large family was useful during the agricultural season to provide labour in the fields.

Division of labour

- The Shona people shared duties.
- Women were looking after children, cooking, cleaning, and washing as well as collecting wild berries and fruits.
- Men did mining, hunting and going to war/raid.
- Division of labour helped get more work done, however women were more exploited by men.

Class system

The state was divided into two main groups, the ruling class and the commoners.

- The ruling class included the king, his family, sub chiefs, and the headman.
- These enjoyed special privileges in diet, control of trade, wore special jewellery and skins.
- They lived in secluded stone enclosures.
- They made up a small portion of the state and monopolized most economic activities.
- On the other hand, the **commoners** made up the largest population in the state.
- They lived in open low lying shelters.
- Common men went to war, practiced mining, hunting and had to pay tribute to their leaders as a sign of loyalty.

Specialization

- The Great Zimbabwe state had **skilled men** who were divided into different sectors.
 - There were specialised iron smiths, farmers, miners and fishermen.
 - Due to these skills, men would practice barter exchange in order to meet the needs of their families.
 - This helped in unifying the state and promoting inter-dependence.

Decline of the Great Zimbabwe state



Factors leading to the decline of the state

- To think that such a state of its magnitude would collapse was unheard of, but it eventually did. Some of the reasons to explain the collapse of the *majestic "house of stone"* include:
 - (a) Exhaustion of land
 - The Great Zimbabwe Empire is believed to have declined due to depletion of its soil fertility.

- The growth of population over time led to over usage of the land, which could no more sustain the large population.
- As a result, reduced food production and grazing land, led to the migration of people to greener pastures.

(b) Exhaustion of minerals

- Being built on mining as its founding origin, the scarce availability of gold over the centuries led to a decline in trading activities.
- Due to this, the groups of the Shona people moved into pursuit of new deposits to meet the trading demands in the Indian coast.
- This forced people to migrate to find better conditions.

(c) Famine/ drought

- In conjunction with land exhaustion and overgrazing towards early to mid-15th century, the area where the Great Zimbabwe was located began to experience sporadic rainfall.
- This triggered droughts which brought effects of hunger, malnutrition and death of livestock forcing people to seek better conditions for survival for their livestock for example Nyatsimba Mutota migrated in search for salt deposits.

(d) Overpopulation

- As the state thrived in its prime years this led to a population increase.
- With many small neighbouring groups being joined and settling around the Great Zimbabwe capital, while the birth rate grew drastically.
- The effect was a strain on land, minerals and pastures leading to internal disputes and conflicts.
- In this regard, there was a mass movement of people in search for greener pastures in order to meet their daily survival needs.

(e) Ambitious leaders

- The decline of the Great Zimbabwe is also as a result of the rise of the Mutapa State by some ambitious leaders like Nyatsimba Mutota who established his own state.

(f) Succession disputes

- The system of succession was not clear in the state and it led to succession dispute among the members of the ruling class.
- These succession disputes brought about social unrest in the state leading to mass migration of people like Nyatsimba Mutota.

Other factors

- The state became too large for King to rule leading to the emergence of ambitious leaders who made the king to lose his political influence in the state.
- External threats from the Sotho and Tswana weakened the state.