

Lost Cities of the South. PBS. 50 minutes. 1999. York vid #5686
(part of *Wonders of the African World* series)

For supplementary material, see: www.pbs.org/wonders/index.html

Episode overview:

When European settlers discovered ruins of great civilizations at Mapungubwe in South Africa and Great Zimbabwe in Zimbabwe (then the British colony Rhodesia), they concluded that these marvelous stone cities could not have been built by black Africans. In order to justify their oppression of the black majority population, the white imperialists created a grossly distorted history that denied African civilization and culture.

In fact, until the recent end of the apartheid era, the official South African version of history maintained that southern Africa was an empty land, completely uninhabited until the first Dutch settlers arrived there in 1652. The government rationalized that the exquisite art and surviving architecture of the Shona and Bantu people of South Africa and Zimbabwe were actually the creations of Arabs, Phoenicians, or other non-African peoples. Similarly, the government of Rhodesia censored guidebooks and until as recently as the 1970s instructed archaeologists to deny that the ancient city of Great Zimbabwe was built by Africans.

But the reality is that Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe, as well as Thulamela, a more recent discovery, were black civilizations that developed sophisticated international trading economies and remarkable architecture in southern Africa as early as the 11th century A.D. Great Zimbabwe was such a source of black national pride that when Rhodesia gained independence from the British in 1980, it named itself Zimbabwe after its own great precolonial civilization. Today, Great Zimbabwe remains a symbol of national unity, and its likeness is depicted on the national currency.

Additional notes from video website, www.pbs.org/wonders/fr_e6.htm: The Great Zimbabwe is the most famous of a large group of stone-walled enclosures on the Zimbabwean plateau. The modern Zimbabwe nation took its name from this major cultural monument.

In the language of the [Shona](#) people of eastern Zimbabwe, the word *zimbabwe* means "stone building." The highest point of the site is a fortress that has a commanding view of the surrounding grasslands, and can only be approached through a series of narrow defiles. According to scholars, the structure was erected by Shona people over the course of about four hundred years, beginning in the early 11th century.

At its height in the 13th century, Great Zimbabwe's capital was home to as many as 18,000 people. Subsistence to support such population concentrations remained crucial, and it is likely that cattle and agricultural surplus played a highly visible role in the maintenance of power.

The collapse of the Great Zimbabwe occupation is dated to the mid- to late 15th century, when most of the site was abandoned. Reasons posited for Great Zimbabwe's collapse have included the possible exhaustion of local gold, arable land, or water resources, and the disruption of the Indian Ocean trading sphere by the Portuguese. Majestic successor states such as Khami, located farther in the interior, soon sprang up, but none ever achieved the power of Great Zimbabwe, which remained an important religious shrine until the 19th century.

Additional notes from video website, www.pbs.org/wonders/fr_e6.htm Mapungubwe is a 1,000-year-old city located at the basin of the Limpopo River in South Africa. It reached its height during the 11th century and was the first in a number of trading states developed by the Bantu people who built their wealth through cattle herding.

Perched on a plateau 985 feet long and 164 feet high, Mapungubwe is surrounded by sandstone cliffs and can be reached only by rope. The people who lived there transported to the top 2,000 tons of soil for farming. They created intricate gold artifacts and pottery and traded goods as far away as India and China.

Since discovery of its ruins in the 1930s, Mapungubwe has been owned and excavated by the University of Pretoria. Because South Africa's apartheid system taught that South Africa was uninhabited until the white settlers arrived in the 17th century, it was considered an embarrassment for the South African government or to the conservative University to admit that they had discovered this ancient African city. So this great treasure found at Mapungubwe has remained in the University's basement, hidden away from the public for the past seventy years. Historians and archaeologists now can tell us that Mapungubwe is one of hundreds of similar ancient towns in Southern Africa that were settled by black Africans more than 1,000 years ago.

As you watch, consider:

1. What is the significance of The Palace of the Lost City?
2. Great Zimbabwe is becoming the focus for a new nationalism. What are the pros and cons of this?