15: Africa Before 1800 CE
15.1: Ancient Africa

15.1.1: Ancient Africa

The origins of African art exist long before recorded history, beginning with the evolution of the human species. Over time, the continent became increasingly diverse in culture, politics, and religion.

Learning Objective

Discuss the cultures of Ancient Africa

Key Points

- The human species originated on the African continent, making it the oldest inhabited territory on Earth. It was here that cattle were first domesticated and metalworking invented. Climate change in the fifth millennium BCE triggered a migration to the western and tropical areas of the continent.
- For much of prehistory, Africa had no nation-states. The Egyptian civilization arose by the late fourth millennium BCE, impacting the northern part of the continent for the next 3,000 years. The fourth century BCE ushered in European exploration and conquest with Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE and the Roman conquest in the late first century BCE.
- The early seventh century CE witnessed the spread of Islam into North Africa and eventually into sub-Saharan Africa.
- Between the ninth and 18th centuries, Africa contained as many as 10,000 separate nation-states, as well as polities governed by units as small as familial clans.

Key Terms

Ife

The first of the Yoruba city-states or kingdoms, which established government under a priestly oba ("king").

Banu Hilal and Banu Ma'qil

A collection of Arab Bedouin tribes from the Arabian Peninsula who migrated westwards via Egypt between the 11th and 13th centuries.

Almoravids

A Berber dynasty from the Sahara that spread over a wide area of northwestern Africa and the Iberian peninsula during the 11th century.

Nri Kingdom of the Ig

One of several independent kingdoms that developed in the forested regions of the West African coast.
Hausa states

The early dynastic states that had spread across Africa by the ninth century, including Ghana, Gao, and the Kanem-Bornu Empire.

San people

Familial groups of hunter-gatherers in Southern Africa between the ninth and 18th centuries.

Africa is considered the oldest inhabited territory on Earth, where the human species originated. During the middle of the 20th century, anthropologists discovered evidence of human occupation as early as seven million years ago. Their findings included fossil remains of early hominid species thought to be ancestors of modern humans.

Early Civilizations

Throughout humanity's prehistory, Africa had no nation-states and was instead inhabited by groups of hunter-gatherers such as the Khoi and San. The domestication of cattle preceded agriculture. It is speculated that by 6,000 BCE, cattle were already domesticated in North Africa. In 4,000 BCE, climate change led to increasing desertification, which contributed to migrations of farming communities to the more tropical climate of West Africa.

By the first millennium BCE, ironworking began in Northern Africa and quickly spread across the Sahara into the northern parts of sub-Saharan Africa. By 500 BCE, metalworking was fully established in many areas of East and West Africa. Copper objects from Egypt, North Africa, Nubia, and Ethiopia dating from around 500 BCE have been excavated in West Africa, suggesting that trans-Saharan trade networks had been established by this date.

At about 3300 BCE, the Pharaonic civilization of Ancient Egypt came to power, a reign that lasted until 343 BCE. Egyptian influence reached deeply into modern Libya, north to Crete and Canaan, and south to the kingdoms of Aksum and Nubia.

European exploration of Africa began with Ancient Greeks and Romans. In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great founded Alexandria in Egypt, which would become the prosperous capital of the Ptolemaic dynasty after his death. Following the conquest of North Africa's Mediterranean coastline by the Roman Empire, the area was integrated economically and culturally into the Roman system. Christianity soon spread across the region.

In the early seventh century, the newly formed Arabian Islamic Caliphate expanded into Egypt and then into North Africa. Islamic North Africa became a diverse hub for mystics, scholars, jurists, and philosophers. Islam spread to sub-Saharan Africa, mainly through trade routes and migration.

Ninth to Eighteenth Centuries

Precolonial Africa possessed as many as 10,000 different states and polities characterized by many sorts of political organization and rule. These included small family groups of hunter-gatherers, such as the San people of southern Africa; larger, more structured groups, such as the family clan groupings of the Bantu-speaking people of central and southern Africa; heavily structured clan groups in the Horn of Africa; the
large Sahelian kingdoms; autonomous city-states and kingdoms such as those of the Akan; Edo, Yoruba, and Igbo peoples in West Africa; and the Swahili coastal trading towns of East Africa.

By the ninth century a string of dynastic states, including the earliest Hausa states, stretched across the sub-Saharan savanna from the western regions to central Sudan. The most powerful of these states were Ghana, Gao, and the Kanem-Bornu Empire. Ghana declined in the 11th century and was succeeded by the Mali Empire, which consolidated much of western Sudan in the 13th century. Kanem accepted Islam in the 11th century.

In the forested regions of the West African coast, independent kingdoms such as the Nri Kingdom of the Igbo grew up with little influence from the Muslim north. The Ife, historically the first of the Yoruba city-states or kingdoms, established government under a priestly oba ("king").

The Almoravids were a Berber dynasty from the Sahara that spread over a wide area of northwestern Africa and the Iberian peninsula during the 11th century. The Banu Hilal and Banu Ma'qil were a collection of Arab Bedouin tribes from the Arabian Peninsula who migrated westwards via Egypt between the 11th and 13th centuries. Following the breakup of Mali, the Songhai Empire was founded in middle Niger and the western Sudan. Its leader Sonni Ali and his successor Askia Mohammad I (1493–1528) made Islam the official religion, built mosques, and brought scholars to Gao Muslim.

Slavery had long been practiced in Africa. Between the seventh and 20th centuries, the Arab slave trade took 18 million slaves via the Trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean routes. Between the 15th and 19th centuries, the Atlantic slave trade took an estimated seven to 12 million slaves to the New World.

Ancient African Kingdoms and Empires

This map depicts a sample of the diverse cultures, kingdoms, and empires of pre-colonial Africa.

15.1.2: Art of Ancient Africa
The art of ancient Africa is characterized by surviving sculptures, rock art, and architectural ruins.

**Learning Objective**

Provide an overview of sculpture, architecture, and rock art produced by cultures of ancient Africa

**Key Points**

- Africa is home to a rich history and diverse visual art. However, because most ancient art consisted of perishable materials, few works survive.
- Human and animal forms are common in ancient African art, appearing in rock art imagery and sculptures in the round. Some cultures influenced the art of Europeans with whom they had contact.
- While abstraction and stylization dominated the art of ancient Africa, some cultures produced strikingly naturalistic depictions of human heads, snail shells, and other organic forms.
- Ancient architecture tended to be load-bearing and constructed from a variety of durable and perishable materials.
- A rare surviving example of two-dimensional art, rock art provides a glimpse into a northern Africa that was a grassland as opposed to its modern desert.

**Key Term**

votive

Dedicated or given in fulfillment of a vow or pledge.

African art constitutes one of the most diverse legacies on earth. Though many casual observers tend to generalize "traditional" African art, the continent consists of a breadth of people, societies, and civilizations, each with a unique visual culture. As the birthplace of the human species, Africa is the home of some of the oldest existing art forms. But because most were produced from wood and other highly perishable materials, few artworks produced before the 19th century survive. Examples include terra cotta sculptures, rock carvings, and architectural ruins.

The art of ancient African was just as diverse as its cultures, languages, and political structures. Most cultures preferred abstract and stylized forms of humans, plants, and animals, but they had a range of distinct approaches and techniques. Some cultures preferred more naturalistic depictions of human faces and other organic forms.

The Nubian Kingdom of Kush in modern Sudan was in close and often hostile contact with Egypt, and produced monumental sculpture mostly derivative of styles that did not spread to the north. In West Africa, the earliest known sculptures are from the Nok culture, which thrived between 500 BCE and 500 CE in modern Nigeria. These clay figures typically had elongated bodies and angular shapes.
**Nok Rider and Horse, 53 cm tall (1,400 to 2,000 years ago)**

The Nok culture appeared in Nigeria around 1000 BCE and vanished under unknown circumstances around 500 CE in the region of West Africa, in modern Northern and Central Nigeria. Scholars think its social system was highly advanced. The Nok culture was the earliest sub-Saharan producer of life-sized terra cotta.

**Human and Animal Forms**

The human figure has always been a primary subject of African art, and this emphasis even influenced certain European traditions. For example, in the 15th century, Portugal traded with the Sapi culture near Côte d’Ivoire in West Africa, whose residents created elaborate ivory saltcellars that were hybrids of African and European designs. This was most notable in the addition of the human figure, which typically did not appear in Portuguese saltcellars. European subjects can be distinguished by their clothing and hairstyles. The human figure might symbolize the living or the dead. Possible subjects include chiefs, dancers, drummers, or hunters. They might be anthropomorphic representations of gods or ancestors or even have votive functions.
Saltcellar, 16th Century

Saltcellar by an Edo or Yoruba artist representing a Portuguese man decorated with horses among geometric patterns.

Even before contact with the Europeans, some African cultures opted for naturalistic depictions over the dominant preference for abstraction and stylization. This can be seen in the Yoruba portrait bronzes of Ile-Ife, which include indented and incised details that might represent ritual scarification.
Yoruba head


The bronzes of Igbo-Ukwu pay special attention to detail depicting birds, snails, chameleons, and other natural aspects of the world. The objects are so fine that small insects were included on some surfaces. Each bronzes was produced in one piece.

Ceremonial vessel

Architecture and Saharan Rock Art

Architectural ruins in locations such as Mali and Zimbabwe demonstrate the popularity of load-bearing architecture in such diverse materials as adobe and stone. In areas like Mali and Igbo-Ukwu, buildings constructed from perishable materials continue to be built or rebuilt in traditional styles that provide a window into the past.

Painted and incised scenes on caves, boulders, and other rock formations in the Sahara provide a glimpse of life in this now-desert region when it was a grassland with ample water supplies over 10,000 years ago. Imagery includes scenes such as farming, hunting, and swimming.

15.1.3: Rock Art in the Sahara

Ancient rock art in the Sahara provides a window into the art and culture of the prehistoric peoples of Africa.

Learning Objective

Define rock art and locate examples such as the Cave of Swimmers, Tassili n’Ajjer, and Jebel Uweinat.

Key Points

- The Sahara, located in northern Africa, was the home of many complex human settlements dating from the Neolithic period.
- Images carved and painted on natural rocks depict vibrant and vivid scenes from the Neolithic period, such as animals, hunting, and dancing.
- Among the most famous sites are the Cave of Swimmers in Libya, Tassili n’Ajjer in Algeria, and Jebel Uweinat near the border of Libya, Egypt, and Sudan.

Key Terms

pictograph

A painting or drawing on a rock face, typically made with mineral earths and other natural compounds.

pastoralist

A person involved in raising livestock.

petroglyph

An engraving or carving into a rock face, usually created with a hammerstone, chisel, or fine metal blade.

Ancient rock and cave art can be found throughout the Sahara desert, providing a significant window into the art and culture of the prehistoric peoples of Africa. The Sahara, located in northern Africa, was the
home of many complex human settlements dating from the Neolithic period. The region has a long history of climate change, and the desert area of today was once a savanna. Images carved and painted on natural rocks depict vibrant and vivid scenes from the Neolithic Subpluvial period. Most Saharan rock art dates to a period that climatologists call the Neolithic Subpluvial period. This was the most recent of a number of periods known as "Wet Sahara" or "Green Sahara," during which the region was much less arid and supported a richer biota and human population than the modern desert.

**The Saharan Desert**

Djibouti lies on the eastern edge of the Sahara desert, which has not supported foliage-dependent animals such as giraffes for approximately 10,000 years. This image informs us that the Sahara was once a grassland that contains plant life similar to that of modern sub-Saharan Africa.

Most rock art depicts hunting scenes, but others include animals, dancing, and people involved in everyday life. With the help of these pictographs and petroglyphs, archaeologists and scientists can piece together information about the complex societies that once inhabited the region.

**The Cave of the Swimmers**

The Cave of Swimmers is among the most famous examples of rock art in the Sahara. Located in the mountainous Gilf Kebir plateau of the Libyan Desert, the cave and its art were discovered in 1933 by the Hungarian explorer László Almásy. It contains Neolithic pictographs of people swimming estimated to have been created between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago, when wet climatic conditions maintained bodies of water deep enough for swimming and diving.
Cave of the Swimmers, Egypt

Painting of men swimming in the Cave of the Swimmers, Wadi Sura, Gilf Kebir, Western Desert, Egypt.

Tassili n’Ajjer

Tassili n’Ajjer is a mountain range in the Algerian section of the Sahara Desert, noted for its prehistoric rock art depicting herds of cattle, large wild animals such as antelopes, and human activities such as hunting and dancing. The art has strong stylistic links to the pre-Nguni Art of South Africa, executed in caves by the San Peoples before the year 1200 BCE. First discovered in 1933, more than 15,000 petroglyphs have been identified at Tassili n’Ajjer.

Sleeping antelope

Petroglyph depicting a sleeping antelope, located at Tin Taghirt on the Tassili n’Ajjer in southern Algeria.
Hunters or pastoralists

Neolithic cave painting of either hunters or pastoralists during the Neolithic Subpluvial period. Tassil n’Ajjer (Plateau of the Chasms).

Jebel Uweinat

Jebel Uweinat is a large mountain made of granite and sandstone located at the borders of Libya, Egypt, and Sudan. It harbors one of the richest concentrations of prehistoric rock art in the entire Sahara, mainly of the Neolithic cattle pastoralist cultures, but also a number of older paintings from hunter-gatherer societies.

Other important regions of rock art include Tadrart Acacus, Libya; South Oran, Algeria; Tibesti, Chad; Mesak Settafet, Libya; Djelfa, Algeria; Ahaggar, Algeria; Draa River, Morocco; Figuig, Morocco; the Air Mountains, Niger, and throughout Mauritania. One petroglyph in Mauritania depicts pastoralists on horseback as they tend their livestock.

Livestock petroglyph
Mauritanian Petroglyph of bovine animals and abstract people on horseback.

Attributions

- **Ancient Africa**

- **Art of Ancient Africa**

- **Rock Art in the Sahara**
- "640px-Sleeping_Antelope_Tin_Taghirt.jpg." [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=14842019](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=14842019) Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).
- "African_cave_paintings.jpg." [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6006212](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6006212) Wikimedia Commons [Public domain](https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/).
15.2: Sculpture of the Sub-Saharan Civilizations

15.2.1: Sculpture of the Nok

Two of the best examples of ancient terra cotta sculptures are from the Nok culture in Nigeria and from an ancient culture who lived near modern Lydenburg, South Africa.

Learning Objective

Compare the ancient terra cotta sculptures from the Nok culture in Nigeria to those found near present-day Lydenburg, South Africa

Key Points

- The Nok culture, existing in Nigeria from around 1500 BCE to 200 CE, was the earliest sub-Saharan producer of life-sized terra cotta sculptures.
- The large Nok sculptures are hollow, with detailed, stylized features. Striking similarities between terra cotta Nok sculptures and later wooden sculptures by Yoruba sculptors have led scholars to speculate whether the two cultures are related.
- While the function of Nok sculptures is largely unknown, theories include use as grave markers, ancestral portrayal, or charms to protect against crop failure, infertility, or illness.
- The Lydenburg Heads are human-shaped terra cotta sculptures discovered in Lydenburg, South Africa. Their image has since become associated with awards for achievement in the arts.

Key Terms

terra cotta

A hard red-brown unglazed earthenware, used for pottery and building construction.

finial

Any decorative fitting at the peak of a flagpole, fence post or staircase newel post.

The earliest identified Nigerian culture is the Nok culture, which thrived between 1500 BCE and 200 CE on the Jos Plateau in northeastern Nigeria. Information is lacking from the first millennium BCE following the Nok ascendancy. However, by the second millennium BCE, active trade routes had developed from Ancient Egypt via Nubia through the Sahara to the forest. Savanna peoples acted as intermediaries in exchanges of various goods. Reasons for the Nok's sudden disappearance remains unknown.

Nok and Lydenburg Terra Cotta
Sculptures

Ancient terra cotta sculptures in the form of human bodies or heads have been found in several areas of sub-Saharan Africa, providing glimpses into the cultures that existed in the region. Two of the best examples are from the Nok culture in present-day Nigeria and from an ancient culture living near the present-day town of Lydenburg, South Africa.

Nok

Similarities in artwork suggest the Nok culture evolved into the later Yoruba culture of Ife. One example is this sculpture of a woman, which bears a striking resemblance to an early 20th-century sculpture of a king and queen mother by the Yoruba artist Olowe of Ise. The Nok culture was the earliest sub-Saharan producer of life-sized terra cotta sculptures.

Female figurine

Terra cotta. 48 cm tall. Nok culture. c. 515-1215 CE.

The first scattered fragments were discovered on the Jos Plateau during a tin mining expedition in 1928. The terra cotta figures are hollow, and while some include plant and animal motifs, the most well-known are of human heads and bodies that often reach life-sized proportions. These human sculptures contain very detailed and stylized features, abundant jewelry, and varied postures. Some even illustrate physical ailments, disease, or facial paralysis. While their function is largely unknown, theories include use as ancestor portrayal, grave markers, finials for roofs of buildings, or charms to protect against crop failure, infertility, or illness.
Nok Sculpture

Nok sculptures may have been used as grave markers, charms, or portrayals of ancestors. Terra cotta. Sixth century BCE-sixth century CE. Nigeria.

Researchers suggest that Nok ceramics were likely shaped by hand from coarse-grained clay and then sculpted with a technique similar to wood carving. After drying, the sculptures were covered with slip and polished to produce a smooth, glossy surface. The firing process probably resembled that used today in Nigeria, in which the sculptures are covered with grass, twigs, and leaves and burned for several hours.

Lydenburg

Lydenburg, a town in Mpumalanga, South Africa, is also known for the discovery of some of the earliest forms of African sculpture. The Lydenburg Heads (400-500 CE) are terra cotta sculptures similar to those of the Nok. Found in the area in the late 1950s, their function is still unknown, although they likely served a ritualistic purposes as masks, ornamentation, or part of ceremonial regalia.
Lyndenburg Head

The Lydenburg Heads are the earliest known examples of African sculpture in Southern Africa. Two of the heads are large enough to have been ceremonial helmet masks. The five smaller heads have a hole on either side of the neck, by which they could have been attached to a pole or costume during a performance. One of the small heads has an animal-like nose and mouth, which would have been of symbolic importance to the makers of the heads.

Since their discovery, these heads have come to symbolize African art and won multiple awards. The image of the Lydenburg head can be seen both on the badge given by the South African Order of Ikhamanga representing achievement in the arts and in the Golden Horn trophy of the South African Film and Television Awards, which signifies excellence in visual creative arts, performance, and drama.
The Order of Ikhamanga

An image of the Order of Ikhamanga, where the Lydenburg head can be seen in the center.

15.2.2: Sculpture of the Igbo-Ukwu

The Nigerian town of Igbo-Ukwu is notable for archaeological sites where highly sophisticated bronze artifacts were discovered.

Learning Objective

Describe the discovery, production, and function of Igbo bronze art, masquerades, sculptures, and mbari

Key Points

- Excavations in Igbo-Ukwu have found highly sophisticated bronze artifacts from the earliest known age of bronze casting, dating to the ninth or tenth century CE.
- The three sites were discovered from 1938-1959 and include Igbo Isaiah (a shrine), Igbo Richard (a burial chamber), and Igbo Jonah (a cache).
- These artifacts are likely from the burial of a highly important person. They include ritual vessels, pendants, crowns and breastplates, jewelry, ceramics, copper and iron objects, and thousands of glass beads.
- The bronze castings, made in stages using the lost wax technique, illustrate the artisans’ high level of skill.
- In addition to the artifacts at Igbo-Ukwu, the Igbo people are known for hammered jewelry, masks, Mbari houses, and mud sculptures.

Key Term

cache

A store of things that may be required in the future such as food, which can be retrieved rapidly but is protected or hidden in some way.

Igbo-Ukwu, a town of the Igbo people in southeastern Nigeria, is notable for three archaeological sites where excavations have found bronze artifacts from a sophisticated metal-working culture dating to the ninth or tenth century. This is the earliest known example of a bronze-casting society in the region by hundreds of years.

The first of the sites, Igbo Isaiah, is a shrine uncovered in 1938 by Isaiah Anozie, a local villager who stumbled upon the bronze works while digging beside his home. Subsequent excavations by Thurston Shaw in 1959 resulted in the discovery of two other sites: Igbo Richard, a burial chamber, and Igbo Jonah, thought to be a cache.

Some metal objects were hammered into their current forms, including many pieces of jewelry. A woman's anklet now housed in the British Museum consists of a central leg tube that extends over an inch beyond the center (approximately 2.75 inches in diameter). Its disk is incised with intricate abstract designs.
**Igbo brass anklet**

Anklet beaten from a solid brass bar.

**Igbo Bronze Art**

Most bronze sculptures were made in stages using the lost wax technique, an ancient casting process commonly using wax. Many of the castings integrated small decorative items and designs, showing the artisans' high level of skill. Some of the bronzes were likely part of the furniture in the burial chamber of a king or other noble. In addition to a variety of ritual vessels, bronze items include pendants, crowns and breastplates, staff ornaments, swords, and fly-whisk handles.
Human and ram's head pendants

The elaborate designs and casting in bronzes such as this one point to the Igbo people's high level of skill.

The elaborately designed human head and ram head are displayed on a wall.

Igbo Ukwu bronze

A ceremonial vessel made around the ninth century CE.
A photo of the elaborately designed vessel.

Other artifacts discovered in the sites include jewelry, ceramics, a corpse adorned in what appears to be regalia, and many assorted copper and iron objects. Tens of thousands of glass beads were also discovered, suggesting a long-distance trading system with places as far away as Egypt, Venice, or India.

Other Examples of Igbo Art

Prior to British colonialism, the Igbo were a fragmented and diverse group, a quality reflected in its artistic styles. Besides the bronze artifacts discovered in the twentieth century, Igbo art is generally known for various types of masquerade masks and outfits symbolizing people, animals, or abstract images. The New Yam Festival is an annual cultural festival held at the end of the rainy season in early August to symbolize the conclusion of a harvest and the beginning of the next work cycle. The celebration ties individual Igbo communities together as essentially agrarian and dependent on yam.

New Yam Festival

On the right, a participant wears an elaborate mask and headdress with attire made of raffia. The festival in this photograph was organized by Igbo residents of Dublin, Ireland.

A photo from the festival featuring an elaborately dressed participant and others.

Igbo art is also famous for *Mbari houses*, large open-sided square planned shelters containing life-sized mud sculptures. These painted figures—sculpted in the form of deities, animals, legendary creatures, ancestors, officials, craftsmen, and foreigners—are made to appease the earth goddess. The process of building Mbari houses often takes years and is regarded as sacred. Therefore, new ones are regularly constructed, while old ones are left to decay.
Construction of a *Mbari* house

Detail of the upper level and roof.

A black and white photo of a group of men working on the roof of a Mbari house.

A unique structure of Igbo culture is the *Nsude* Pyramids, a group of ten pyramidal clay and mud structures built as temples for the goddess *Ala/Uto*, believed to reside at the top. Everyday houses were made of mud and thatched roofs and had bare earth floors with carved doors. Some houses had elaborate designs both in the interior and exterior, including Uli art designed by Igbo women.

**15.2.3: Ile-Ife and Benin Sculpture**

The Yoruba and Benin cultures produced bronze and ivory sculptures in modern Nigeria from the 13th through the 19th centuries.

**Learning Objective**

Describe the characteristics of Ile-Ife and Benin sculpture

**Key Points**

- Ife is home to the Yoruba people in southwestern Nigeria. The city was established near the ninth century CE, and reached its artistic peak between 1200 and 1400 CE.
- Ife is most well-known for its bronze sculptures, typically in a naturalistic style. Stone and terra cotta artwork was also common, and leaders were often depicted with large heads to indicate their power.
- The Benin Empire, which ruled Nigeria from the 11th to the late 19th century, produced sculptures in a wide variety of media for political, social, and religious purposes.
- In the 15th century, contact with Portuguese traders and colonists resulted in the incorporation of European styles into Benin art.

**Key Terms**

terra cotta
A hard red-brown unglazed earthenware used for pottery and building construction.

deities

Divine beings; gods or goddesses.

Yoruba

Ife is the home to the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, located in the present-day Osun State. The Yoruba people comprise one of the largest ethnic groups in Sub-Saharan Africa, constituting close to 40 million people predominantly in Nigeria. Evidence of habitation at the site dates to as early as 600 BCE. Some evidence suggests the Yoruba developed from the Nok culture (1000 BCE–500 CE).

The meaning of the word "ife" in Yoruba is "expansion." According to Yoruba faith, the city of Ife is where all of humanity originated: Oduduwa created the world where Ife would be built, and his brother Obatala created the first humans out of clay. The city was a settlement of substantial size between the ninth and 12th centuries CE. Production of Yoruba artwork reached its peak between 1200 and 1400 CE, after which it declined as political and economic power shifted to the nearby kingdom of Benin.

Artwork of Ife

Ife is best known for its naturalistic bronze sculptures. Hollow-cast bronze art created by the Yoruba culture provides an example of realism in precolonial African art. Important people were often depicted with large heads, as the Yoruba believed that the Ase, or inner power and energy of a person, resided in the head. Their rulers were often depicted with their mouths covered so that the power of their speech would not be too great.

Ife Bronze Sculpture
Sculpture of a king’s head, held in the British Museum.

Stone and terra cotta artwork were also common in Ife. More elaborate festivals organized to worship deities were also common. These would often extend over several days and involve theatrical dramatizations in the palace and kingdom.

In his book "The Oral Traditions in Ile-Ife," Yemi D. Prince referred to the terra cotta artists of 900 CE as the founders of art guilds, cultural schools of philosophy similar to Europe's old institutions of learning. These guilds may be some of the oldest non-Abrahamic African centers of learning still in existence.

### Benin

The Benin Empire was a precolonial African kingdom that ruled Nigeria from the eleventh century to 1897. Not to be confused with the present-day country of Benin, this empire dissolved into what is today the Edo State of Nigeria, marked by the capital, Benin City. At its height, the empire developed an advanced artistic culture and produced beautiful artifacts of bronze, iron and ivory.

### Art of Benin

The Benin Empire was known for its many works of art, including religious objects, ceremonial weapons, masks, animal heads, figurines, busts, and plaques. Typically made from bronze, brass, clay, ivory, terra cotta, or wood, most pieces were produced at the court of the Oba (king) and used to illustrate achievements of the empire or narrate mythical stories. Iconic imagery depicted religious, social, and cultural issues central to their beliefs, and many bronze plaques featured representations of the Oba.

Various works promoted theological and religious piety, while others narrated past events and achievements (actual or mythical). During the reign of the Kingdom of Benin, the characteristics of the artwork shifted from thin castings and careful treatment to thick, less defined castings and generalized features.
Sculpture of the Benin Kingdom

This sculpture, one of the many examples of Benin Bronzes held in museums around the world, depicts the generalized figures that frequently appear in Benin art. 16th-18th century. Nigeria.

One of the most common artifacts today is the ivory mask based on Queen Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie who ruled from 1504-1550. Now commonly known as the Festac mask, it was used in 1977 as the logo of the Nigeria-hosted Second Festival of Black & African Arts and Culture.
Pendant ivory mask of Queen Idia

Iyoba ne Esigie (meaning: Queen mother of Oba Esigie), court of Benin, 16th century.

Another object unique to Benin art is the Ikegobo ("altars to the hand"), a cylindrical votive object. Used as a cultural marker of an individual's accomplishments, Ikegobo were dedicated to the hand, from which the Beninese considered all will for wealth and success to originate. These commemorative objects were made of brass, wood, terra cotta, or clay depending on the patron's hierarchical ranking.

Portuguese Influence

The peak of the Benin art occurred in the fifteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries and traders. By that point, Benin was already highly militarized and economically developed. However, the arrival of the Portuguese catalyzed a process of even greater political and artistic development.

Because of Benin's military strength, Portuguese missionaries were unable to enslave its people upon their arrival in the fifteenth century. Instead, a trade network was established in which the Benin Empire traded beautiful works of art for luxury items from Portugal, such as beads, cloth, and brass manillas for casting. The wealth of Benin's art was credited with preventing the empire from becoming economically dependent on the Portuguese.

As trade flourished, Benin art began to depict European influence through technique, imagery, and themes. Bronze work reached its height during this era, and today the Benin Bronzes are regarded as some of the finest works of that time. These depict a variety of scenes including animals, court life, Portuguese sailors, and relationships between the Benin Empire and the Portuguese. They were cast in matching pairs (although each was individually made), and may have originally been nailed to walls and pillars in the palace as decoration.

Benin plaque

The background portrays the floral pattern characteristic of plaques made at this time and reflective of Portuguese influence. The image in the plaque consists of an Oba (king) surrounded by his subjects. Apart
from military and political strength, the plaque illustrates the relationship between the Portuguese and the Benin traders. 16th century.

In 1897, the British led the Punitve Expedition in which they ransacked the Benin kingdom and destroyed or confiscated much of their artwork. Over 3,000 brass plaques were seized and are now held in museums around the world.

In 1936, Oba Akenzua II began a movement to return the art to its place of origin. Nigeria bought approximately 50 bronzes from the British Museum between the 1950s and 1970s and has repeatedly called for the return of the remainder.

15.2.4: Sculpture of the Kingdom of Kongo

The Kingdom of Kongo was a highly developed state in the 13th century, best known for its nkisi (power objects).

Learning Objective

Discuss the function of Kongoles nkisi and nkondi

Key Points

- The Kingdom of Kongo was first established in the 13th century and was a highly developed state by the time of European contact.
- Kongo had an extensive trading network that included ivory, copperware, ferrous metal goods, cloth, and pottery.
- *Nkisi* are containers such as ceramic vessels, gourds, animal horns, or shells designed to hold spiritually-charged substances. They were believed to aid in communication with the dead.
- *Nkisi* made in the shape of humans or animals were often used in divination practices for healing or good fortune.
- *Nkondi*, whose etymological root comes from the word meaning "to hunt," are believed to protect the user from forces of evil.

Key Terms

anthropomorphic

Having the form or attributes of a human.

ferrous

Iron-based.

zoomorphic

Having the shape, form, or likeness of an animal.

The Kingdom of the Kongo was an African kingdom located in west central Africa in what is now northern Angola, Cabinda, the western portion of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the southernmost part of Gabon. At its greatest extent, it reached from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Kwango River in the
east, and from the Congo River in the north to the Kwanza River in the south.

Map of Precolonial Africa

The Kingdom of Kongo is circled in red.

The first king of the Kingdom was Lukeni lua Nimi (circa 1280-1320). By the time of the first recorded contact with the Europeans, the kingdom was a highly developed state at the center of an extensive trading network. Apart from natural resources and ivory, the country manufactured and traded copperware, ferrous metal goods, raffia cloth, and pottery. The eastern regions were particularly famous for cloth production.

An example of Kongo pottery
Made of ceramic and vegetable dye, such pottery was widely manufactured in the Kingdom of Kongo.

Artistically, the Kingdom of Kongo is perhaps best known for its nkisi (singular: minkisi), objects believed to be inhabited by spirits. Early travelers often called nkisi “fetishes” or “idols,” as some were made in human form. Modern anthropology has generally called them either "power objects" or "charms." As in many African cultures, the Kongo religion placed great importance on communication with ancestors, believing that exceptional human powers could result from this communication. Nkisi were containers such as ceramic vessels, gourds, animal horns, or shells, designed to hold spiritually charged substances. Sometimes considered "portable graves," elements like earth or relics from the grave of a powerful individual were often placed in the bellies of nkisi. The powers of the dead thus infused the object, placing it under control of the ngaga (healer, diviner, or mediator).

Nkisi were often used in divination practices, for healing, or for good fortune in hunting, trade, or sex. Most famously, nkisi take the form of anthropomorphic or zoomorphic wooden carvings. Birds of prey, dogs (closely tied to the spiritual world in Kongo theology), lightning, weapons, and fire are all common themes. The substances chosen for inclusion in nkisi are frequently called "bilongo" or "milongo" (singular nlongo) a word often translated as “medicine.” However, their operation was not primarily pharmaceutical, as they were not applied to or ingested by the infirm. Rather, they were frequently chosen for metaphoric reasons, such as correcting illicit behavior.

Minkisi
The light area on the figure’s abdomen is a glass “window” that would hold “medicine” used for correcting illicit or immoral behavior.

*Nkondi* - often referred to as "nail fetishes" - are an aggressive type of *nkisi* that were thought to be activated by having nails driven into them. Each nail or metal piece represented a vow, a signed treaty, and efforts to abolish evil. Although *nkisi nkondi* have probably been made since at least the 16th century, the nailed figures were most likely made in the northern part of the Kongo in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

**Female power figure of the Vili people - Democratic Republic of Congo**

While this figure was made by the Vili people, it is similar to the *nkisi nkondi* made by people in the Kongo Kingdom.

The name *nkondi* derives from the verb -*konda*, meaning "to hunt" and thus *nkondi* means "hunter" because they can hunt down and attack evildoers or enemies. The object's primary function is to house a spirit that can hunt down the source or sources of evil that threaten an individual or an entire village. While some *nkondi* figures appear relatively benign, like the example above, others assume more aggressive body language and facial expressions to demonstrate their ability to attack evildoers successfully.
Minkisi nkondi

This figure assumes a more aggressive facial expression and body language.

Some nkondi assume zoomorphic forms, such as this sculpture of a protective wild animal.
Detail of a zoomorphic nkondi


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15.3: Architecture of the Sub-Saharan Civilizations

15.3.1: Architecture of Djenne

Djenné, once a thriving town in Mali, is known for its Great Mosque. This is the largest example of Sudanese-style mud-brick architecture.

Learning Objective

Locate Djenné in time and place, and describe its Sudanese-style mud-brick architecture

Key Points

- From the 11th to 13th centuries, Djenné was a leading commercial center in west Africa. After its decline during the rise of the Mali Empire, it continued to operate as an important trading post through the 17th century.
- The town, designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988, is famous for its distinctive Sudanese-style mud-brick architecture.
- The Great Mosque, originally built in the 13th or 14th century and then rebuilt in 1907, is the largest mud brick building in the world. It is considered by many architects the greatest achievement of the Sudano-Sahelian architectural style, with clear Islamic influence.

Key Terms

pilaster

A rectangular column that projects partially from the wall to which it is attached; it gives the appearance of support, but is only for decoration.

load-bearing

Architectural structural system in which the walls form the main source of support for the building.

parapet

Part of a perimeter that extends above the roof.

minaret

A tower outside a mosque from which a muezzin leads the Call to Prayer.

qibla

The direction that should be faced when a Muslim prays during the Call to Prayer.
façade

The face of a building, especially the front.

History

Djenné is a town and an urban commune in the inland Niger Delta region of central Mali. Between the 11th and 13th centuries, Djenné was a leading commercial center in West Africa. As a major terminal in the gold, salt, and slave trade of the trans-Saharan trade route, it flourished for several centuries. Much of the trans-Saharan trade in and out of Timbuktu passed through Djenné.

Djenné was also a chief center of Sudanese Islam in this period. Its Great Mosque was an important pillar of religious life. However, the rise of the Mali Empire in the 13th century contributed to the civilization’s steady decline, and its brief period of dominance ended when it was reduced to a tributary state. Between the 14th and 17th centuries, Djenné and Timbuktu were both important trading posts in a long-distance trade network. Both towns became centers of Islamic scholarship, and in the 17th century Djenné was a thriving center of learning.

The town is famous for its distinctive Sudanese-style mud-brick architecture, most notably the Great Mosque. To the south of the town is Djenné-Jéno, the site of one of the oldest-known towns in sub-Saharan Africa. Djenné, together with Djenné-Jéno and the Great Mosque, was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988.

Architecture

Nearly all of the buildings in the town consist of load-bearing walls made from sun-baked mud bricks coated with mud plaster. Because the walls are load-bearing, doors and windows must be small and few, often resulting in dark interiors. In Djenné, the mud-brick buildings need to be replastered with mud at least every other year. Even then, the annual rains can cause serious damage. Older buildings are often entirely rebuilt.

Traditional houses are two stories with flat roofs built around a small central courtyard. Constructed with imposing façades featuring pilaster-like buttresses, many have elaborate arrangements of pinnacles forming a parapet above the entrance door. The façades are decorated with bundles of rodier palm sticks called toron, that project away from the wall and serve as a type of scaffolding. Ceramic pipes extend from the roofline to protect the walls from rain water damage. Many houses built before 1900 are in the Toucouleur-style and have a massive covered porch set between two large buttresses. These houses generally have a single small window onto the street set above the entrance door.
A house in Djenné

Many houses in Djenné are built with Toucouleur-style façades.

The Great Mosque

The rise of Islam witnessed a steady construction of mosques in the region. Sudano-Sahelian architecture reproduces the sacred architecture of Mecca in mud-brick and other local materials. Similar styles are evident in mosques in Ghana and Tunisia.

The Great Mosque of Djenné is the largest mud-brick or adobe building in the world, considered by many architects to be the greatest achievement of the Sudano-Sahelian architectural style with definite Islamic influences. As well as being the center of religious and community life, it is one of the most famous landmarks in Africa. The actual date of construction of the original mosque is unknown, but dates as early as 1200 and as late as 1330 have been suggested.

Falling into disrepair over the centuries, the French administration arranged for the original mosque to be rebuilt in 1907. The position of at least some of the outer walls appears follows those of the original mosque, but it is unclear as to whether the columns supporting the roof kept to the previous arrangement. What was almost certainly novel in the rebuilt mosque was the symmetric arrangement of three large towers in the qibla wall. There has been debate as to what extent the design of the rebuilt mosque was subject to French influence.
Great Mosque of Djenné

Originally built in the 13th or 14th century, the Great Mosque seen today was completed in 1907.

The qibla, which faces the direction of Mecca, is dominated by three large, box-like minarets jutting out from the main wall, each topped with an ostrich egg. The central minaret is approximately 48 feet tall. The eastern wall is roughly three feet thick and strengthened on the exterior by 18 buttresses. The corners are formed by rectangular buttresses topped by pinnacles.

The prayer hall, measuring about 85 by 164 feet, occupies the eastern half of the mosque behind the qibla wall. The mud-covered, rodier-palm roof is supported by nine interior walls running north-south and pierced by pointed arches that reach almost to the roof. In the prayer hall, each of the three towers in the qibla wall has a niche or mihrab. The imam conducts the prayers from the mihrab in the larger central tower. A narrow opening in the ceiling of the central mihrab connects with a small room situated above roof level in the tower. To the right of the mihrab in the central tower is a second niche, the pulpit or minbar, from which the imam preaches his Friday sermon.

15.3.2: Architecture of Aksun and Lalibela

Aksum and Lalibela were cities in northern Ethiopia that accomplished great feats of architecture.

Learning Objective

Identify the famous rock-cut churches of Lalibela and the stelae, obelisk, and Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion of Aksum.

Key Points

- Aksum was the original capital of the Kingdom of Aksum, a naval and trading power that ruled the region from about 400 BCE to the 10th century.
- The stelae were large stone towers that served as grave markers and reached up to 33 meters high.
- In 1937, the 24-meter tall, 1,700-year-old Obelisk of Aksum was discovered. Today it is widely
regarded as one of the finest examples of engineering from the height of the Aksumite empire.

- The Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion, believed to house the Ark of the Covenant, bears a design similar to that of Eastern Orthodox churches in Europe. Its most recent building, constructed in the 1950s, has a dome similar to the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.
- Lalibela is a holy town most famous for its churches carved from the living rock, which play an important part in the history of rock-cut architecture. Its buildings, built in the 11th and 12th centuries, are considered symbolic representations of Jerusalem.

**Key Terms**

**Obelisk**

A tall, square, tapered stone monolith topped with a pyramidal point, frequently used as a monument.

**rock-cut architecture**

The creation of structures by excavating solid rock where it naturally occurs.

**Aksum**

Aksum (sometimes spelled Axum) is a city in northern Ethiopia that was the original capital of the Kingdom of Aksum. A naval and trading power, the kingdom ruled the region from about 400 BCE to the 10th century, reaching its height under King Ezana (baptized as Abreha) in the fourth century.

The stelae are the most identifiable part of the Aksumite legacy. These stone towers marked graves and were often engraved with a pattern or emblem denoting the person's rank. The largest number are in the Northern Stelae Park, ranging to the grand size of the Great Stele (33 meters high, 2.35 meters deep, and 520 tons), which is believed to have fallen and broken during construction. The stelae have most of their mass above-ground but are stabilized by massive underground counterweights.

**The Northern Stelae Park at the town of Axum, Ethiopia**

The stelae in Northern Stelae Park range to 33 meters high.
The Obelisk of Aksum after its return to Ethiopia in 2005

The obelisk is an example of the stelae built by the Aksum kingdom.

Aksum is best known for the 1937 discovery of the 24-meter tall, 1,700-year-old Obelisk of Axum. Broken into five parts, it was found on the ground and shipped by Italian soldiers to Rome to be erected. The obelisk is widely regarded as one of the finest examples of engineering from the height of the Aksumite empire, and in 2005 it was finally returned to Aksum.

The Church of St. Mary of Zion, an Orthodox church built in 1665 and said to contain the Ark of the Covenant, is actually a reconstruction. The original church is believed to have been built during the reign of Ezana, the first Christian ruler of the Kingdom of Axum during the fourth century. It has been rebuilt several times since then. St. Mary of Zion was the traditional place where Ethiopian Emperors came to be crowned. In fact if an Emperor was not crowned at Axum or did not at least have his coronation ratified by a special service at St. Mary of Zion, he could not hold the official title.
Old Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion

This location remains open only to men.

Like many Eastern European churches, the Church of St. Mary of Zion is a centrally-planned structure with a dome serving as its focal point. In the 1950s the Emperor Haile Selassie built a new modern cathedral, open to both men and women, next to the old cathedral. Its dome bears a striking resemblance to the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey. The old church remains accessible only to men, as Mary, symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant allegedly resting in its chapel, is the only woman allowed within its compound.

New Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion

The dome and bell tower of the new Cathedral of Our Lady Mary of Zion, built by Emperor Haile Selassie in the 1950s.

Other points of interest include archaeological and ethnographic museums, the Ezana Stone monument documenting the conversion of King Ezana to Christianity, King Bazen's megalith Tomb, Queen of Sheba's Bath, the Ta'akha Maryam and Dungur palaces, the monasteries of Abba Pentalewon and Abba Liqanos, and the Lioness of Gobedra rock art.
Lalibela

Lalibela is a town in northern Ethiopia famous for its monolithic rock-cut churches. One of Ethiopia's holiest cities second only to Aksum, Lalibela is a center of pilgrimage for much of the country. During the reign of Saint Gebre Mesqel Lalibela in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, the current town was known as Roha. St. Lalibela is said to have seen Jerusalem, then attempt to build a new Jerusalem as his capital in response to the capture of old Jerusalem by Muslims in 1187. As such, many features of the city have Biblical names—even the town's river is known as the River Jordan. It remained the capital of Ethiopia from the late 12th century into the 13th century. The rural town is known around the world for its churches carved from living rock, which play an important part in the history of rock-cut architecture. There are thirteen churches, assembled in four groups:

1. The Northern Group includes Biete Medhane Alem (home to the Lalibela Cross and believed to be the largest monolithic church in the world), Biete Maryam, Biete Golgotha (known for its arts and said to contain the tomb of King Lalibela), the Selassie Chapel, and the Tomb of Adam.
2. The Western Group includes Biete Giyorgis, a cruciform structure, said to be the most finely executed and best-preserved church.
3. The Eastern Group includes Biete Amanuel (possibly the former royal chapel), Biete Merkorios (possibly a former prison), Biete Abba Libanos, and Biete Gabriel-Rufael (possibly a former royal palace), linked to a holy bakery.
4. The last group lies further afield. Located here are the monastery of Ashetan Maryam and the Yimrehane Kristos church (built in the eleventh century in the Aksumite fashion but within a cave).

Biete Giyorgis, the Church of St. George, in Lalibela, Ethiopia (top view)

Biete Giyorgis is one of the finest examples of rock-cut architecture in Ethiopia.
Biete Giyorgis, ground view

Entrance of Biete Amanuel

15.3.3: Architecture of Great Zimbabwe

Perhaps the most famous site in southern Africa, Great Zimbabwe is a ruined city constructed by the
Learning Objective

Distinguish the features of the Hill Complex, the Greate Enclosure, and the Valley Complex of Great Zimbabwe.

Key Points

- Small cattle-herding communities began to appear in the vicinity of what would become Great Zimbabwe from the fourth through seventh century CE. As the people began to exploit the nearby gold mines, their leaders became very rich and were able to form a centralized state.
- Capable of sustaining up to 18,000 people, Great Zimbabwe was built between 1100 and 1400 as a massive capital city and home to the king.
- Elaborate artifacts, including the famous soapstone Zimbabwe Birds, suggest that Great Zimbabwe was the hub of an extensive global trade network.
- By 1500, Great Zimbabwe was abandoned, either because of changes in the environment or changes in trade networks.
- Though European colonists long attempted to deny that Great Zimbabwe had been built by native Africans, it has become a major cultural landmark and source of pride in Africa.

Key Term

pastoralist

A person whose primary occupation is the raising of livestock.

Perhaps the most famous site in southern Africa, Great Zimbabwe is a ruined civilization constructed by the Mwenemutapa. A monumental city built of stone, it is one of the oldest and largest structures in southern Africa. Located about 150 miles from the modern Zimbabwean capital of Harare, Great Zimbabwe was the capital of a medieval kingdom that occupied the region on the eastern edge of Kalahari Desert.

Development of Great Zimbabwe

As there are no written records from the people who inhabited Great Zimbabwe, knowledge of the culture is dependent on archaeology. Small farming and iron-mining communities began to appear in the area between the fourth and seventh centuries CE. Most were cattle pastoralists, but the discovery of gold and new mining techniques contributed to a rise in trade with caravan merchants to the north. As local leaders became rich from trade, they grew in power and created the centralized city-state of Great Zimbabwe.

Monument Construction

Construction of the monument began in the 11th century and continued through the fourteenth century, spanning an area of 1,780 acres and covering a radius of 100 to 200 miles. At its peak, it could have housed up to 18,000 people. The load-bearing walls of its structures were built using granite with no mortar, evidence of highly skilled masonry. The ruins form three distinct architectural groups known as the Hill Complex, the Greate Enclosure, and the Valley Complex.
Complex (occupied from the ninth through 13th centuries), the Great Enclosure (occupied from the 13th through 15th centuries), and the Valley Complex (occupied from the 14th through 16th centuries).

One of the most prominent features of Great Zimbabwe was its walls, some of which reached 11 meters high and extended approximately 820 feet.

**Close-up of Great Zimbabwe**

Great Zimbabwe is most famous for its enormous walls, built without mortar.

There are stone structures linked by passageways and some parts of the site incorporate natural rock formations into the design, evident in at least one structure in the Hill Complex.

**Hill Complex**

Ruins of a building from the Hill Complex, where the naturally occurring rock formations were built into part of the foundation.

Notable features of the Hill Complex include the Eastern Enclosure, a high balcony enclosure overlooking the Eastern Enclosure, and a huge boulder in a shape similar to that of the Zimbabwe Bird. The Great Enclosure is composed of an inner wall encircling a series of structures, and a younger outer wall. The most
Important artifacts recovered from the monument are the eight Zimbabwe Birds. These were carved from soapstone on the tops of monoliths the height of a person. Slots in a platform in the Eastern Enclosure of the Hill Complex appear designed to hold the monoliths with the Zimbabwe birds, but archaeologists cannot be sure that this is where the birds rested.

**Eastern Enclosure**

View west from the Eastern Enclosure, Great Zimbabwe, showing the granite boulder (far right) that resembles the Zimbabwe Birds. A copy of one of the famous sculptures is shown below for comparison.
Zimbabwe Bird

Copy of Zimbabwe Bird soapstone sculpture.

The Conical Tower was constructed between the two walls. The Valley Complex is divided into the Upper and Lower Valley Ruins, with different periods of occupation.
The Conical Tower

The Conical Tower is 18 feet (5.5 meters) in diameter and 30 feet (9.1 meters) high.
Valley Complex ruins

Ruins of the foundations demonstrate the same level of skill seen in the more intact walls elsewhere in Great Zimbabwe.

One theory suggests that the complexes were the work of successive kings. Perhaps the focus of power moved from the Hill Complex to the Great Enclosure in the 12th century, then to the Upper Valley, and finally to the Lower Valley in the early 16th century. A more structuralist interpretation holds that the different complexes had different functions. For example the Hill Complex was a temple, the Valley Complex was built for the citizens, and the Great Enclosure was used by the king.

Cultural Aspects of Great Zimbabwe

Great Zimbabwe shows a high degree of social stratification, characteristic for centralized states. For the elite, there seems to have been a great deal of wealth. Plentiful pottery, iron tools, copper and gold jewelry, elaborately worked ivory, bronze spearheads, gold beads and pendants, and soapstone sculptures have all been found at the site. Some of the artifacts, such as ceramics and glass vessels, appear to have come from Arabia, India, and even China, suggesting that Great Zimbabwe was a major trade center. Smaller stone settlements called *zimbabwes* can be found nearby. These are thought to be seats of authority for local governors acting under the king of Great Zimbabwe. These smaller settlements would have been supported by surrounding farmers.

Great Zimbabwe was abandoned by 1500, possibly due to land exhaustion, drought, famine, or a decline in trade. Zimbabwean culture would continue in Mutapa, centered on the city of Sofala. The site of Great Zimbabwe is considered a source of pride in the region, and the modern nation of Zimbabwe derived its name from the site. Nonetheless, when European colonizers first found the ruins in the late 19th century, most did not believe that the site could have been built by indigenous Africans. In fact, political pressure was put on historians and architects to deny its construction by black people until Zimbabwe's independence in the 1960s.

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Architecture of Aksun and Lalibela

Architecture of Great Zimbabwe