

Historical Overview

The continent of Africa played host to a number of ancient civilizations. The first civilization in Africa, and one of the first in history, was that of the ancient Egyptians, who built their empire along the Nile River over 4,000 years ago. Other ancient African civilizations included Nubia, located south of Egypt, and ancient Ethiopia. In West Africa, the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhay grew wealthy and influential from caravan trade.

This program focuses on two other ancient African civilizations: the cities of the Swahili Coast in eastern Africa and Great Zimbabwe in the south. The Swahili Coast civilization created a trading empire in the 13th - 15th centuries AD based in cities along the coast of the Indian Ocean. With sea trade routes reaching as far as China, the cities of the Swahili Coast created a rich, new culture and language with strong Islamic influences. The civilization of Great Zimbabwe, with its wealth of gold and ivory, became a powerful trading partner with the Swahili Coast. The ruins of the capital city of Great Zimbabwe were the largest in Africa, south of the pyramids. Archaeologists continue to search for clues as to why these two great African civilizations collapsed by the 16th century.

Vocabulary

archaeologist — A scientist who studies past cultures by analyzing their remains.

artifacts — Objects from the past that serve as evidence of past cultures.

Swahili — An ancient culture of coast dwellers and a language of East Africa that developed from trade.

trade route — A path merchants follow to exchange goods.

merchant — A person who makes a living by buying and selling goods.

caravan — A group of merchants who travel together, often through desert or difficult terrain.

ivory — A precious material derived from elephant tusks.

dhow — A small sailboat used for centuries to trade goods in Africa and Asia.

Islam — A world religion whose members follow the prophet Mohammed.

mosque — An Islamic temple.

Mankala — An African game using twelve holes and playing pieces like stones, shells or nuts.

Great Zimbabwe — The capital city of an ancient trading empire in southern Africa.

stone mason — A skilled builder who works with stone.

carbon dating — A technique of measuring the amount of carbon-14 remaining in organic matter to determine its age.

soapstone bird — Sculptures made of soapstone found among the ruins at Great Zimbabwe; they are believed to have religious significance.

Timeline

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| c.AD850 | Swahili trade began along the east African coast |
| c.AD 1250 - 1450 | Great Zimbabwe grew wealthy from trade with the Swahili |
| c.AD 1450 | Great Zimbabwe economy collapsed |
| c.AD 1500 | Swahili Coast cities declined |

Focus Questions

1. Explain the two main reasons why Africa's ancient history is difficult to reconstruct.
2. What are some regions in Africa where early civilizations developed?
3. What does "Swahili" mean and how does the meaning relate to the location of the Swahili civilization?
4. Describe the routes followed and goods traded by Swahili merchants that made the cities of the Swahili Coast wealthy and powerful.
5. Why did archaeologists originally believe that the Swahili people were not African?
6. What styles of architecture are archaeologists uncovering as they excavate the ruins of the Swahili cities?
7. Where did Swahili traders obtain the gold that they traded to all parts of Europe and Asia?
8. What makes the city of Great Zimbabwe unique in sub-Saharan Africa?
9. Describe the walls of Great Zimbabwe. What purpose did the walls serve? What special techniques did stone masons use to construct them?
10. What was the economic foundation of Great Zimbabwe's wealth and power?
11. How have archaeologists used carbon-14 dating to determine the age of Great Zimbabwe?
12. What do the Shona people who live in Zimbabwe today have in common with their ancestors who built Great Zimbabwe?
13. Give two theories for the mysterious decline of Great Zimbabwe.
14. When did the cities of the Swahili Coast lose their economic power?