

Africa: The Swahili Coast and Zimbabwe

Trade expanded steadily along the East African coast from about 1250, giving rise to between thirty and forty separate city-states by 1500. After 1200, masonry buildings as much as four stories high replaced mud and thatch dwellings, and archaeological findings include imported glass beads, Chinese porcelain, and other exotic goods. Coastal and island peoples shared a common culture and a language built on African grammar and vocabulary but enriched with many Arabic and Persian terms and written in Arabic script. In time, these people became known as “Swahili,” from the Arabic name *sawahil* (**suh-WAH-hil**) *al-sudan*, meaning “shores of the blacks.”

Ibn Battuta in Kilwa

Sometime after Ibn Battuta’s visit to Mogadishu in 1331, the more southerly city of Kilwa surpassed it as the Swahili Coast’s most important commercial center (see Map 13.2). Ibn Battuta declared Kilwa “one of the most beautiful and well-constructed towns in the world.” He noted its inhabitants’ dark skins and Muslim piety, and he praised their ruler for the traditional Muslim virtues of humility and generosity.

Great Zimbabwe

What attracted the Arab and Iranian merchants whom oral traditions associate with the Swahili Coast’s commercial expansion? By the late fifteenth century, Kilwa was annually exporting a ton of gold mined by inland Africans much farther south. Much of it came from or passed through a powerful state on the plateau south of the Zambezi River. At its peak in about 1400, its capital city, now known as **Great Zimbabwe**, occupied 193 acres (78 hectares) and had some eighteen thousand inhabitants.

Great Zimbabwe City, now in ruins (in the modern African country of Zimbabwe), whose many stone structures were built between about 1250 and 1450, when it was a trading center and the capital of a large state.

Between about 1250 and 1450, local African craftsmen built stone structures for Great Zimbabwe’s rulers, priests, and wealthy citizens. The largest structure, an enclosure the size and shape of a large football stadium with walls of unmortared stone 17 feet (5 meters) thick and 32 feet (10 meters) high, served as the king’s court. A large conical stone tower was among the many buildings inside the walls.

As in Mali, mixed farming and cattle herding provided the economic basis of the Great Zimbabwe state, but long-distance trade brought added wealth. Trade began regionally with copper ingots from the upper Zambezi Valley, salt, and local manufactures. Gold exports to the coast expanded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and brought Zimbabwe to its peak. However, historians suspect that the city’s residents depleted nearby forests for firewood while their cattle overgrazed surrounding grasslands. The resulting ecological crisis hastened the empire’s decline in the fifteenth century.



Embassy Photo/Visual Connection Archive

Royal Enclosure, Great Zimbabwe Inside these oval stone walls the rulers of the trading state of Great Zimbabwe lived. Forced to enter the enclosure through a narrow corridor between two high walls, visitors were meant to be awestruck.