

April 2023



Dear Club Members,

In April 1928 archaeologist Gertrude Caton-Thompson led the first all-female excavation team to study the ruins of a stone city in modern day Zimbabwe. Her team consisted of Elinor Wight Gardner, a geologist, Kathleen Kenyon, another archaeologist, and architect Dorothy Noire. Together they came to the conclusion that this stone built city had been constructed by the native African population rather than by any other invading power. This caused great controversy, because it was not believed that this level of construction was something that the local people could have been capable of during the European Medieval period.

Caton-Thompson's start in archaeology was in 1911, when on a trip to Egypt she saw the excavations being carried out. She also attended a British Museum course on Ancient Greece. By 1912, an inheritance led to her being independently wealthy and free to pursue her passions. In 1915 she went on a Palaeolithic excavation in France as a bottle washer. During World War I she also worked for the British Ministry of Shipping, before attending University College London in 1921, going on to attend further courses at Newnham College Cambridge.

In the 1920's she went on to work on many digs in Egypt where she was meticulous in her recording. She used 6 inch levels on her excavations, and took careful records of the position of each artefact. She was also the first to use air surveys to locate possible archaeological sites. In many ways she was a generation ahead of her time, pioneering many of the methods that are now standard.

She was mostly held in high regard by the establishment, and this led to her invitation to investigate the ruins of a site near Lake Mutirikwe in south eastern Zimbabwe. The earliest European document mentioning the ruins was by Portuguese explorers Vincente Pegado. Locally the remaining buildings were known as Symbaoe, which means royal court. The first European rediscovery of the site was in 1871, when there was much speculation about it being a palace of the Queen of Sheba. The first excavation of the site was by J Theodore Bent, and he suggested that either the Phoenicians or the Arabs must be the builders of the city.

The first scientific excavations were performed by David Randall-MacIver in 1905-06, he was the first proponent of a medieval date of construction, and found artefacts of Bantu origin, leading him to suggest the city must have been built by the ancestors of the current modern day native Shona population. In 1929 Gertrude Caton-Thompson visited the site, and found evidence to confirm the stonework dated to the 14th and 15th centuries, and that the artefacts on the site were Bantu in origin.

Despite the consensus about the origin of the city, the official line of the Rhodesian government was that the builders of the city were not black. Rhodesia was the state that succeeded the British colony of Southern Rhodesia, it was governed by the minority non-white population. The black nationalist groups who opposed this minority rule took their name from the city, which led to the

country being remained from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe when they took power in 1980. The most famous artefacts recovered from the house are the Zimbabwe Birds. These are soap stone carvings, that sat on top of stone monoliths the height of a person. The icon was used on the flag of Rhodesia, but was retained when the country became Zimbabwe, and still features on the country's flag and national crest.

Evidence points to Great Zimbabwe being a centre for trade, it's believed as much as 20 million ounces of gold was extracted from nearby mines, and the exhaustion of these mines is likely one of the reasons why the city was abandoned around 1450. Many items have been excavated which suggests trade with Arabia, and even as far away as China.

Your fibre today is inspired by some of those pottery fragments. These fragile pieces are some of the best evidence for trying to understand the complex site, built over centuries, and inhabited by up to 20,000 people. The site itself is now incredibly precarious, the early excavations have caused damage in some areas, causing structures to collapse. Dr David Collett, a British archaeologist contracted by the Zimbabwean government estimates it would take 50 archaeologists 200 years to completely survey the site, but there are just 6 professionals in the whole country. Temporary repairs are trying to secure the site as much as possible, but modern tourism is placing the area under further pressure.

As for Gertrude herself, she retired from fieldwork after the second world war. She bought and shared a house with Dorothy Hoare, a colleague from Cambridge. Even after Hoare's marriage they continued to live together. Even after Hoare and her husband retired from academia, Gertrude moved with them to Worcestershire, living with them, and their son until her death in 1985, aged 97. In her lifetime she was the first female President of the Prehistoric Society, and elected vice president of the Royal Anthropological Institute, in 1934 she was the first female recipient of the Rivers Medal from the same institute, she was also a founding member of the British School of History and Archaeology in East Africa. One year after her death Great Zimbabwe was made a UNESCO world heritage site.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label
50% Merino, 25% Tussah Silk, 25% Hebridean

Further Reading-

Great Zimbabwe

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/zimb/hd_zimb.htm

<https://www.historytoday.com/archive/great-zimbabwes-trading-past>

<https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=162514§ion=3.4>

https://inkspire.org/post/fighting-for-the-truth-the-story-of-great-zimbabwe/-MOKIFAaVK_l1AWgv-7l

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/aug/18/great-zimbabwe-medieval-lost-city-racism-ruins-plundering>

<https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1429/the-impact-of-prejudice-on-the-history-of-great-zi/>

Gertrude Caton-Thompson

<https://trowelblazers.com/2014/05/09/gertrude-caton-thompson/>

<https://www.ladyscience.com/gertrude-caton-thompson-archaeology/no24>

<https://sheroesofhistory.wordpress.com/2017/11/09/gertrude-caton-thomas/>