

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Joseph O. Vogel.** *Great Zimbabwe: The Iron Age in South Central Africa.* New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1994. xxvi + 299 pp. \$49.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8153-0398-5.

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This is an extraordinarily useful book. It is a bibliography of published sources on Great Zimbabwe but much, much more. Vogel notes that he began assembling a bibliography of relevant sources forty-odd years ago and gradually came to appreciate the range of materials available, from archaeology to ethnographies and travellers' accounts. As he soon realized, "the politics of the perception of the past remains a recurrent theme in understanding various interpretations of the past." (9) Some settlers wanted very much to believe that they lived in a land linked to Solomon!

The brief introduction sets the scene: the fabulous and far-out baggage that would skew European interpretations of the site, on the one hand, and the historical reality of civilization on the Zimbabwe plateau and its integration into the Indian Ocean system, on the other. It provides a template for each of the succeeding chapters. Most begin with an informative overview of the topic, followed by numbered, annotated bibliographical references. It may or may not come as a surprise to learn that these references reach a grand total of 1022.

There is no very neat way to organize all the materials. Vogel therefore opts for a number of disparate and somewhat arbitrary subject headings, from types of sources to themes discussed to disciplinary approaches. He covers historical treatments from the Arab and Portuguese periods, ethnohistorical reconstructions and oral traditions, and the debates about who was responsible for building Great Zimbabwe. He also deals with many specialized topics related to agriculture, traditional cultural practices, metal working and other traditional crafts and technologies, and trade.

Vogel's long experience as an archaeologist in this region enables him to go beyond Great Zimbabwe itself. Almost a third of the bibliography is devoted to the Iron Age in South East Africa, covering East Africa, southern Zaire, Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, South Africa, and Mozambique, as well as modern-day Zimbabwe as a whole. There is even a substantial section on San and Bantu contacts. The book concludes with "Surveys of Chronology and Synthesis", a register of authors, and an index.

As one who has already benefited from Vogel's compendium, I can testify to its usefulness for the researcher. But it will also be a goldmine for students and teachers wanting to reconstruct the debates that have swirled around the site since rumors first reached Portuguese ears and that have continued virtually to the present. It provides a wonderful case study in the historiography of the region which early on became enmeshed in colonial politics.

It is of course no accident that the newly independent nation chose the name Zimbabwe in 1980. At the same time the book provides insights into the approaches of specific disciplines to the problems of interpreting the site over the past century, from Bent to Huffman. And the recent conference in Harare reminds us that these debates are far from over.

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