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THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE LANDSCAPE(S) OF THE ZIMBABWE CULTURE STATES

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INTRODUCTION

Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe, Murapa, Torwa and Changamire - Rozvi states existed in varied environments, ranging from the dry mopane woodland of the Shashi Limpopo basin, to the warm, to wet brachystegia woodland on the Zimbabwe Plateau margins in the south-central areas, to the northern plateau edges. The Changamire-Rozvi states are found in the predominantly dry grass veld to the south-west where varieties of acacia and mopane woodland grow. These varied landscapes shaped the states significantly in that we see considerable adaptation to local conditions. Given that severe droughts occur in Zimbabwe and adjacent regions today the climate has not changed significantly over the last 1000 years and what we experience today is probably a general reflection of past conditions. Besides, there are no records of short-term climate variation, which could be used to demonstrate that there were limited climatic episodes with a major impact on humans. Humans are however not passive respondents to such change: indeed a lot of this change is a result of human creativity and inventiveness.

This is so because humans are always seeking to better their own lives. It is therefore possible that as an unwelcome result, some centres of state power became overpopulated thereby encountering constraints from the land carrying capacity. This factor has been advanced as a possible explanation for the decline of Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe both as major towns and as centres of political power. However without placing too much emphasis on the environment (and the evidence for past changes in environment are very thin so far), it may be important to consider other factors such as wealth accumulation patterns and governance, and the effect they had on the environment. Written sources can greatly assist us in this exercise, but use can also be made of the nature of the archaeological evidence such as monumental buildings, relating their construction to the overall wealth accumulation patterns and governance.

This chapter makes a simple attempt at relating the physical environment to the archaeological, economic and other evidence connected with past forms of settlement on the Zimbabwe Plateau and adjacent lowland regions.