

13

REDEFINING THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AT GREAT ZIMBABWE

Weber Ndoro

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the cultural landscape on which the site of Great Zimbabwe is situated and how this has developed. The concern here is not only to offer a diachronic synthesis, but also to show that at any given moment the immediate landscape would have been of cultural importance. The main thrust is to generate an understanding of the evolutionary dynamics that have shaped and continue to structure the social-cultural landscape around Great Zimbabwe.

The approach followed here started from the need to understand the dynamics and historical development of the present-day cultural landscape in order to arrive at its present cultural significance rather than to understand better the detailed functions and appearance of landscapes in the past. The objective is to demonstrate that at any given time the cultural landscape is not static. This implies that the definition of Great Zimbabwe as a cultural place is always changing. Perceptions too are ever changing given both cultural and political influences. The approach also aims at giving a better understanding of what the cultural landscape is. This then leads to the development of methods of understanding the current landscape in archaeological terms and of assessing its cultural values in order to guide the decisions in the management of the cultural property and its landscape. Documenting and understanding cultural landscapes is important for preservation and presentation of cultural property because without it, the cultural significance remains incomplete.

Landscape research varies widely from the systematic/scientific environmental reconstruction approaches of Rossignol and Wandsnider (1992), to historical ecological approaches that look at the environment as cumulative human modification effects (Balee, 1998; Crumley, 1994; Whitehead, 1998), to the phenomenological perspectives of Tilley (1994) and Bender (1992). The latter also explores the cultural meanings associated with a landscape and the metaphors and symbolism through which meanings are expressed. In this chapter the landscape is seen as an arena of political discourse, not as something already understood but socially constructed and hence subject to continuous reinterpretation (e.g. Hewison, 1987; Bender, 1993; McGlade, 1999). In terms of