Introduction to Kilwa Kisiwani

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Kilwa, which flourished from the 10th to the 16th century CE, with a brief revival as a slave-trading centre in the 18th century, is justly famous as one of the most important Swahili trading towns. Located on the island of Kilwa Kisiwani, Lindi Province, Tanzania, it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site (along with nearby Songo Mnara) in 1980. In 2004, UNESCO placed Kilwa on its World Heritage in Danger list. Extensive archaeological excavations undertaken between 1961-1966, under the directions of Dr. Neville Chittick of the British Institute in Eastern Africa, uncovered stone buildings, including mosques, houses, palaces, and tombs. Subsequent work has included smaller-scale research by the Tanzanian Antiquities Unit between 1990-2002, under the direction of E. S. Materu, and in 2005 by Professor Felix Chami of the University of Dar es Salaam. The British undertook some limited conservation in the 1960s, and in 2002, a joint French-Tanzania project worked on conservation of the Great Mosque.

The particular significance of Kilwa stems from the survival of two 16th-century chronicles—the *ChrÃ³nica dos Reyes de Quiloa*, recovered from Kilwa in 1505 and published by the Portuguese historian João de Barros in 1552, and the *History of Kilwa*, written in Arabic, c. 1550, and preserved in the British Museum (Or. 2666) since 1867. Considerable debate has taken place over the relationship between the two manuscripts, the king lists that are provided, and numismatic evidence, with locally minted coins that give additional names of rulers. Despite some controversy, however, Kilwa remains the only town in East Africa for which it is possible to outline a historical narrative, which, by implication links many of the other towns where no chronicles have survived from the pre-Portuguese period.

Modern archaeological work began at Kilwa in 1955 when Dr. James Kirkman excavated a trench alongside a sea-wall on the site during a visit to the site by Sir Mortimer Wheeler and Fr. Gervase Mathew. The site was chosen as the flagship project of the newly establish British Institute in Eastern Africa, to provided the opportunity to combine historical sources with scientifically recovered archaeological material. Chittick's excavations were very much in the style of projects undertaken in the Near East, rather than others in Africa. Several hundred workmen were employed each season to clear the ruins and to expose masonry buildings. Railway lines were laid down, and Decauville trucks employed to remove the spoil. Stratigraphic control was fairly limited, and where sections were drawn, individual layers could be up to one metre thick. Chittick also operated a ‘reward’ system where individual workmen were given extra wages if they made particular discoveries, potentially compromising the context of individual finds. The workmen undertook recovery of artefacts as they excavated and little sieving was done. Emphasis was placed on the recovery of imported pottery and glass, as well as small finds, and the local pottery, apart from some of the highly decorated wares, was collected haphazardly. Publication of the excavations in 1974 was however...
comprehensive and, along with the archive, allows considerable re-evaluation of site stratigraphy and history. All the finds were transferred to the National Museum in Dar es Salaam in 1976, where they remain, some still boxed in their original crates.

Chittick believed that Swahili towns like Kilwa were the result of colonisation by Arab and Persian traders who came to the region seeking gold, ivory, and slaves. These traders were hypothesised to have married ‘local’ women, thus creating an Afro-Arab culture that was Islamic and looked not to Africa but to the Middle East for its inspiration. As evidence in support of this idea, Chittick and other colonial historians pointed out the prevalence of stone architecture, the practice of Islam, the presence of exotic foreign imports, such as glass and pottery, and the nature of the language Kiswahili, which has some Arabic loanwords. Although rejected by Chittick himself, some earlier historians had even postulated a great ‘Zenj empire’, based in Kilwa, that ruled the whole coast until the arrival of the Portuguese.

Modern scholarship has rejected these theories, although ‘Arab colonies’ and similar terms still appear in secondary and tourist literature. Evidence garnered from excavations at Shanga, in Zanzibar and Pemba, and along the coast and interior of Tanzania, shows that the Swahili are an Iron Age African society that lived on the coast and islands and was capable of exploiting the maritime trade of the Western Indian Ocean. Studies of the pottery in particular have shown that these proto-Swahili sites (dating back to at least the first century CE) share the same pottery traditions as are found in the interior. Direct archaeological evidence for the conversion to Islam in the later eighth century CE has been found in the Lamu Archipelago, although no date has yet been established for when Kilwa underwent conversion. Modern research stresses the African nature of these towns, seeing them as within a hinterland and region, rather than as isolated colonies clinging to the edge of Africa.

The island of Kilwa Kisiwani was occupied even before the town of Kilwa arose. A small Late Stone Age site was found on the shore, and Professor Chami has recently investigated a Pastoral Neolithic site (c. 3000 BCE) on the island. The main occupation of the town is currently dated to c. 800 CE on the basis of a single six-metre-square sondage (trench ZLL) at the south end of the Great House and occasional finds elsewhere (trenches KK, D, K, and N). These levels were classed as Period I, and apparently continued until c.1200. There is some evidence for Islam in the form of a pottery shard inscribed in Arabic found in an early level. Otherwise, all the buildings seem to have been in timber and daub, with some stone architecture dating from c. 1000 CE.

Chittick dated the main development of Kilwa to Period II, from c. 1200 CE. He associated this with the arrival of the Shirazi Dynasty. The source for this dynasty comes from the History of Kilwa (and also briefly the ChrÁnica), which recalls seven ships from the Persian town of Shiraz arriving with the intent of founding settlements, one of which was Kilwa, founded by Ali ibn al-Hasan (or sometimes Husain). The Shirazi made a treaty with the local ruler, purchasing the island with cloth. Although modern opinion considers this story to be a ‘foundation myth’, Chittick believed it was based in a real historical event, although accepting that the Shirazi may not have come directly from
Persia but via the southern Somali or north Kenyan coast. His interpretation was supported by coins found in the Period II deposits that include copper issues in the name of Ali ibn al-Hasan, the supposed ‘founder’ of Kilwa.

Considerable difficulties remain in connecting the historical and archaeological record. For example, the coins of Ali bin al-Hasan are now dated to c. 1000 CE on the basis of a hoard discovered at Mtambwe Mkuu on Pemba Island and are part of a long tradition of indigenous coining that goes back to the ninth century. It is also clear that the Shirazi ‘arrival’ was not a sudden ‘event’ but a process of gradual urbanisation that included the construction of the Great Mosque, which took place around 1100 CE, as well as some houses to the south. The History of Kilwa hints at numerous changes of rulers and dynasties (and implied changes in Islamic doctrine) during this period and its full interpretation remains controversial.

There is more consensus on Chittick’s Period III, which dates to c. 1280–1400 and is associated with the Mahdali rulers. These were sharifs from the Hadhramaut (southern Arabia) who settled in Kilwa and were able to take over the sultanate, possibly through their considerable religious prestige as descendants of the Prophet. The most famous ruler among the Mahdali is al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman Abu-Mawahib (c. 1310–1333), who was ruling when Ibn Battuta, who wrote a lengthy description of the town, visited in 1331. Al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman was a major builder, and to his rule can be attributed the two major architectural treasures of Kilwa—the southern extension of the Great Mosque and his unfinished palace Husuni Kubwa. Both make extensive use of domes and vaults, and Husuni Kubwa (a combined market and royal palace) is the most innovative of all Swahili architecture. Chittick’s excavation recovered its complete plan and dating evidence that placed its construction c. 1300–1320. The early 14th century was also the most prosperous for the town, possibly due to the expansion of the gold trade with southern Africa. Some have speculated that there was a specific link between Kilwa and Great Zimbabwe because of a single coin of al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman found at Great Zimbabwe. Remarkably, al-Hasan is the only East African ruler who is known to have issued gold coins as well as copper ones.

The later 14th century appears to have been a period of general decline: the Great Mosque extension suffered deterioration and Husuni Kubwa was abandoned (if ever fully occupied). Interestingly, Great Zimbabwe was also abandoned at this time. There seems to have been some recovery of the town in the mid-15th century that included the restoration of the mosque extension (c. 1421–1442) and the extensive construction of houses south of the mosque (Great House) at Makutani (this may have been the 15th-century sultan’s palace), as well as a number of urban mosques, including the exquisite Small Domed Mosque. The History of Kilwa hints at complex dynastic politics, the rising power of court officials, and increasing influence from the rival town of Malindi (Kenya).

There was still sufficient gold in the town to make it the target of early Portuguese interest. Pedro Cabral visited in 1500, and Vasco da Gama extracted sufficient tribute in 1502 that the King of Portugal presented some of the gold to the monastery of Belém.
with which to construct a golden custódia, which still survives in Lisbon. In 1505, the Portuguese occupied the town and built a fort, fragments of which remain within the later Gezira Fort. The Portuguese abandoned Kilwa in 1513 and it seems that the fortunes of the town declined as control of the gold and ivory trade passed to other towns favoured by the Portuguese. The town did not completely expire though, as it is possible to reconstruct a succession of sultans, who in effect ruled over what was now a village, nominally under Omani control from the 18th century. There was a revival in the 1770s corresponding to the French interest in expanding a slave trade to supply colonies in the Indian Ocean. This last period of prosperity and genuine independence resulted in the construction of an impressive royal palace at Mukutani within a large enclosure. The Omanis from Zanzibar regained control of Kilwa in 1784 and built the Gezira Fort c.1800. The establishment of Kilwa Kivinji c. 1820 on the mainland led to a diversion of trade that was now largely in Indian hands. The last sultan of Kilwa was deported to Muscat in 1843.

Resources of Interest


Chami, F. 2006. The Unity of African Ancient History 3000 BC to AD 500. Dar es Salaam: E and D


