

# **The southern Swahili harbour and town on Kilwa island, 800-1800 AD: a chronology of booms and slumps**

by

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## **Founding a city: or inventing a tradition?**

Cities, like kingdoms and empires (and their ruling houses), need a history, which requires an explanation of their origin, however hazy much of the intermediate period may be. Which means in effect that they have first to exist - and to enjoy a sense of identity, pride and achievement - in order to discover, or invent, their foundation. Romulus, for instance, had no reason to found Rome in 753 BC or in any other year, but centuries later the eternal city had every reason to devise a good legend and an arguably credible name for its founder. There are nevertheless examples of conscious foundations, notably the Greek cities of Alexander and those of the earlier and later Roman empire, again especially in the Hellenic east. But these were built within broader political systems and relatively cosmopolitan (or cosmopolitanising) environments and as often as not, even in the case of Constantinople on the site of Byzantium, saw the revival and rapid replanning of older minor settlements, be they harbours, provincial markets or military *coloniae* or winter quarters. Comparable in a way on the Swahili coast in the nineteenth century, as the Zanzibar state expanded, would be Sultan Majid's initiatives at (New) Malindi from 1861 and at Dar es Salaam (Majid's 'House of Peace') between 1866 and 1870, rather unsuccessful though that latter venture proved till the German intervention twenty years later (Martin 1973, pp. 53f; 1970, pp. 1f.) Indeed, Dar es Salaam as described in the 1870s, with its palace and other new structures falling quickly into decay (and becoming the abodes of lizards and rats, of owls and bats) would have echoed Kilwa - the subject of this paper - in the 1350s, then suffering a severe slump and neglect following the unprecedented boom and building spree of the preceding decades. I use the experience of Kilwa, an island in a sunken estuary which punctuates the southern Swahili coast, not in the first place to establish or elaborate any 'model' or to demonstrate any theory of urbanism, its 'origins' or its development, but essentially to chart the history of that town and harbour in both its local and its international contexts as effectively as the sources - oral, literary and archaeological - allow me. I rely heavily of course on the work of Neville Chittick who excavated at Kilwa in the early 1960s (Chittick 1974; 1966, pp. 1-36; 1965, pp. 275-94; 1962; Matteru 1991; Sinclair 1991); and with the advantage of reflection and more recent work on Swahili archaeology, including that of Mark Horton, I make bold to revise and reinterpret in certain places. I cannot claim complete confidence in all aspects of interpretation and every detail of the chronology, but I hope that by setting the story out in this way some stimulus will be provided both to the broader issues of towns, markets and harbours in African history and to a new round of effective archaeological research at Kilwa itself and on the Swahili coast and islands generally. My approach may appear a starkly and unrepentantly economic one, concerned principally to fit Kilwa and the Swahili system at large into the history of the Old World and particularly into the chronology of the mediaeval gold trade. But on reflection this raises the further question -

which I offer for consideration - of what Kilwa over a one-thousand-year span thought of itself (and indeed how the sister Swahili towns regarded Kilwa), so that, however severe a particular slump and however extended any period of decay, new commercial opportunities led to revival of the same town on the same site under a ruling house which claimed legitimacy through history. Even to this day Kilwa Kisiwani (the old site, 'on the island') - though reduced to village status since the eventual removal of the town to the new mainland site of Kivinje early in the nineteenth century - has cherished a sense of continuity: the archaeology of the place has exercised a role in this, stone architecture, even in ruins, being a sign of history and greatness. It is this architectural grandeur in particular which the rulers and townspeople have in each period of prosperity during the last seven centuries tried to emulate by building anew mosques and tombs, houses and palaces in coral-rag and mortar. Moreover, the site of the ancient Friday mosque, especially from about 1320 when its vaulted and domed extension was constructed, seems to have exercised a powerful symbolic appeal and to have ensured for Kilwa a primacy or sense of cultural pre-eminence on the Swahili coast at large.

### **The 'founding' of Kilwa and the date of Ali bin al-Hasan**

#### ***THE KILWA CHRONICLE* chapter I**

#### **The first man to come to Kilwa and found it, and his descent from the Persian kings of the land of Shiraz.**

Historians have said, amongst their assertions, that the first man to come to Kilwa came in the following way. There arrived a ship in which there were people who claimed to have come from Shiraz in the land of the Persians. It is said there were seven ships: the first stopped at Mandakha (Manda kuu?); the second at Shaugu (Shanga?); the third at a town called Yanbu; the fourth at Mombasa; the fifth at the Green Island (Pemba); the sixth at Kilwa; and the seventh at Hanzuan (Nzwani in the Comores). They say that the masters of these first six ships were brothers, and that the one who went to the town of Hanzuan was their father. God alone knows all truth (Freeman-Grenville 1962, pp. 34f).

This story, invented or elaborated at some later date in Kilwa's history, is grist to the mill for students of myth and foundation charters. But it contains an interesting added element in recognising Kilwa's position as one of several city-states or harbour-towns in the Swahili complex, notionally numbered here as seven. The other six are naturally quickly forgotten in the Kilwa story, which goes on to record the feats of him who commanded the ship which sailed from Shiraz in Persia as far as Kilwa. This culture-hero is named Ali bin al-Hasan; and, however suspicious we may feel about his sudden arrival by sea and his supposed descent from a Persian royal line, it turns out, perhaps surprisingly, that he was more than a Romulus-type figure. He was a real person. The existence of a ruler calling himself Ali b. al-Hasan was enshrined in Kilwan memory from the eleventh century AD because of the thousands, perhaps millions, of small copper coins which were minted bearing that name, and which are to this day

so frequently picked up in the soil and beach-sand of Kilwa. This Ali established his power on the southern Swahili coast and islands - Mafia as well as Kilwa - neither as early as the tenth century (as Freeman-Grenville, calculating too literally from the Kilwa Chronicle, supposed) nor as late as the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (which was Chittick's considered reassessment from the literary and archaeological evidence), but halfway between those two dates, that is in the eleventh century. That at least is the dating of these Ali b. al-Hasan coins, as demonstrated in particular by the silver hoard discovered at Mtambwe Mkuu on Pemba (Horton, Brown & Oddy 1986, pp. 115-23); and in view of cultural and especially calligraphic connections between the Swahili region at that period and Siraf and Shiraz on the Persian side of the Gulf (Sutton 1990, pp. 78-80) <sup>1</sup>, it seems reasonable to equate this Ali b. al-Hasan with the Shirazi Ali of the same patronymic (or on occasion 'al-Husain') mentioned in versions of the Kilwa Chronicle. This is a working correlation, not necessarily secure yet beyond all reasonable objection. A related question is whether the ruling line and people of Kilwa began regarding themselves as 'Shirazi' and using that *nisba* from this very period, or did so later as they felt a need for a historical pedigree.

Now, with the advantage of recent archaeological work - not only that of Chittick at Kilwa but also by himself, Horton and others afterwards elsewhere on the coast and islands - we can see that the Kilwa historians did not exaggerate the history of their town and polity. In fact they shortened it by two or three centuries. The literary accounts allude to a previous settlement and its leader with whom Ali had to deal, but in a form which looks pretty mythological and useless for chronology. More valuable is the evidence from Chittick's excavations, below the Great Mosque and elsewhere, of occupation of the harbour front of Kilwa from the ninth century. (This is Chittick's Period I. We must note that whereas Chittick was inclined to date its beginning towards the middle or later part of the ninth century, the broader perceptions now available would take it back to the early part.) We can suggest, though we certainly cannot 'prove', continuity of settlement at Kilwa from that time (Sinclair 1993, p. 427; Wright 1993 pp. 658ff) <sup>2</sup>. In the light of the Shanga results (Horton forthcoming), with a series of superimposed mosque structures stretching back to the first settlement of the site some time about 800 AD, one wonders whether there is not a comparable sequence hidden under Kilwa's great mosque - but to answer that question might entail unacceptable destruction of the existing monument! From the beginning this settlement was in contact with the northern Swahili coast and, beyond that, with Oman, the Gulf and the Islamic heartlands. While there is no evidence that it was simply a foreign colony - and the local manufactures, notably the pottery styles, suggest the opposite - the beginning of its development there and then - as of several other Swahili harbours and island settlements as far north as Manda and Shanga - was surely not without point or purpose. It has to be seen in the commercial expansion and cosmopolitanising context of the Abbasid period when many lands around the Indian Ocean were drawn into a closer economic and intellectual orbit.

### **Ali bin al-Hasan and his time**

The revival of the world economy in this Abbasid-Carolingian period is sometimes characterised, in typical historians' hindsight, as premature, a false start. The more sustained expansion of the 'mediaeval' economy (following the common European usage) dates some two centuries later, and is identified in the Mediterranean and Red Seas with the Fatimid rulers who from 969 AD made Cairo their capital and developed it as the hub of commerce between 'the East' (including East Africa) and 'the West' (extending northward to Europe). This combination of expanding world markets and the development of appropriate sea-routes -

notably the effective reopening of the Red Sea from the late tenth century - is reflected on the Swahili coast in more than one way. It saw the relative decline of Oman and the Persian Gulf as the focus for Swahili commerce; but also, in the eleventh century, increased demands for gold especially in the Islamic world. The development at this period of the more southerly Swahili harbours, from Pemba as far as Kilwa - and the relative eclipse of Manda and Shanga to the north - seem to reflect these international factors. At the least Kilwa with Mafia witnessed a definite boom in the late eleventh century, the period of the 'founding' of the Kilwa sultanate by Ali bin al-Hasan, the one 'from Shiraz'. (This is the beginning of Chittick's Period II at Kilwa, its date as argued above taken back a full century. This adjustment should be noted by those discussing the dating of 'Tana Tradition' pottery and its parallels in Kilwa Period I).

The argument for associating this heightened activity at Kilwa with increased world demands for gold is largely circumstantial: why else such development at the southern end of the Swahili coast? One likely connection between Kilwa specifically and the Zimbabwe region's metal resources is obvious however in the numerous copper coins of Ali b. al-Hasan. These could doubtless merit a closer metallurgical study; but, assuming that they are made, as they appear to be, of unalloyed copper, the source of the metal was most probably Zimbabwe, as was that of the gold for transshipment further north. One might imagine the two metals being carried to the Sofala coast and shipped hence to Kilwa together. It was doubtless the availability and cheapness of such copper which led Ali b. al-Hasan to abandon a silver coinage, for which a fashion had been established in the Swahili harbours earlier in the eleventh century as demonstrated by the Mtambwe hoard on Pemba in particular, and to substitute this prolific copper one.

By placing Ali b. al-Hasan and his Shirazi connection - to repeat, the Persian Gulf links were reduced relatively not absolutely - a century earlier than Chittick wanted to admit, the chronology of Kilwa becomes less strained. So probably does that of the ceramics, locally manufactured as well as imported, both here and at Kisimani Mafia. Important among the pieces of Gulf provenance is the 'sgraffiato' vase (Chittick 1983, fig. 38b; Sutton 1990, p. 79) which contained the hoard of nearly six-hundred of the earliest Ali b. al-Hasan coins. Stratigraphically, individual coins may turn up in later contexts simply through the reworking of older deposits as well as longevity of use as coins or reuse as ornaments (and others may have slipped down holes into earlier levels to confuse the excavators!). Nevertheless, in the light of Horton's recent excavations at Shanga, Pemba, Tumbatu and Unguja islands (Horton, forthcoming), a thorough re-examination of the Kilwa stratigraphy and finds especially in the Great Mosque area, is now required.

Chittick regarded Kilwa's original flat-roofed stone mosque (with wooden pillars) that of the Shirazi dynasty, and by implication that of Ali b. al-Hasan. It is difficult to demonstrate that correspondence more precisely, but the supposition looks very reasonable indeed - with the difference noted that this Ali and all his works date not to about 1200 AD, but to a period more than a century earlier. This permanent mosque structure with its personal attribution served, probably more than tales of coming from Shiraz, as the visible symbol and the foundation charter of the town. It was one of the few early stone buildings of the Swahili coast.

**The Mahdali dynasty, c.1300- and the reign of al-Hasan b. Sulaiman, 'the Father of Gifts' c.1315-1335**

It seems that the sudden surge of wealth in the time of Ali b. al-Hasan was not maintained through the twelfth century or into the thirteenth. At least the signs of new activity and building at Kilwa become scant; and the Kilwa Chronicle, intent though it is to trace the dynasty back to Ali, has little of substance to tell. For this period the Chronicle seems distinctly anecdotal and dubiously diachronic, concentrating on struggles between certain families and with people from neighbouring islands and on usurpations, although it implies that the 'legitimate' Shirazi line eventually prevailed. The minting of coins seems to have ceased early in this period; it is likely that those produced in the reigns of Ali and his immediate successors sufficed for the next two centuries. By implication this might suggest a decline in the Sofala link and the Zimbabwe trade. Whether that should be due to a shrinking of world demands for gold or, equally likely, to a more local factor, such as Kilwa's control being wrested by a Swahili rival or even by Mogadishu, is a question left open at this point. In fact it seems that Kilwa's history was characterised by sudden bursts of activity and wealth, which were equally suddenly punctured. Most spectacularly, late in the thirteenth century and into the early decades of the fourteenth there was a rapid growth in the world's gold requirements which has left its mark in West Africa as well as in Zimbabwe and on the Swahili coast. This enhanced demand occurred not simply in the Islamic lands with which both the Western and the Eastern African gold-producing regions connected - one by camel-caravans crossing the Sahara, the other by *dhow*s working the Swahili routes and using the monsoon regimes of the Indian Ocean and its Red Sea extension. The unprecedented increase at that time was generated more from Europe where, with the growth of population alongside the rise of industry and commerce, both Mediterranean and continental, together with the expanding demands for spices and other oriental products and the corresponding development of banking and credit systems, the trend towards a gold standard proved irreversible. This is commonly traced, doubtless much too simplistically, to 1252, the year when the city-state of Florence issued its first gold coins; the trend reached its crest in the early years of the 'Hundred Years War' between France and England, when the latter's Edward III found it necessary, for financing his court and military ventures, to issue gold 'florins' in his own name in 1342. Though the evidence is not sufficiently precise for estimating the quantities of gold entering the European circuit at this period, it is clear that they far surpassed those of preceding centuries and that the African goldfields were being exploited more intensively than ever before. I would suggest that it was not so much the actual volume which mattered (and which may have been exceeded a century later) so much as the suddenness and the scale of the surge in demand. With its peak about 1320 or 1330, this surge left its spectacular mark on the western side of Africa in Mali, at Begho on the border of Akanland, at the connecting markets of Jenne, Timbuktu and Gao, at Ife very plausibly, and at the same time on the eastern side of the continent at Great Zimbabwe and at Kilwa in particular.

It is worth dwelling briefly on this pan-African early fourteenth-century scene. There is a striking parallel between Mali and Kilwa and between the most celebrated ruler of each - Mansa Musa who ruled the Mali empire from 1312 to 1337 and al-Hasan bin Sulaiman, the sultan of Kilwa at almost exactly the same dates (Sutton 1992; Levtzion 1973). Both made themselves known internationally as lords of the gold trade - the oil sheikhs of their day one might suggest - and, in the case of Mansa Musa and the gold which Mali controlled, this fame reached Europe where he was depicted on the fourteenth-century 'world' maps. Equally well known is the anecdote about himself and his entourage on reaching Cairo in 1324 while en route for Mecca, dispensing gold so liberally that its value in Egypt plummeted, it was said. His contemporary, al-Hasan b. Sulaiman of Kilwa, also made the *haji*, apparently a few years before Mansa Musa's, but by the opposite route. He travelled by sea, perhaps more than once, via Yemen where this Mahdali house of Kilwa had family connections and where in his youth

the sultan had studied. Back home, each of these rulers followed up with grand, perhaps pretentious, architectural feats. Of Mansa Musa the story is told that on his return journey he conscripted in North Africa one al-Sahili, by birth an Andalusian, who is said to have been both a poet and an architect. Al-Sahili stayed in Mali some twenty years till he died at Timbuktu (where his grave was seen and remarked upon by the traveller, Ibn Battuta, in 1352). Possibly the role of this expatriate technical-cum-cultural expert has been exaggerated and his name may be remembered for a purpose more symbolic than real. But he is credited with the building or rebuilding of mosques - all part of an attempt by the marginally Islamic country of Mali to promote a respectable and orthodox image upon the world - and of a magnificent palace at Mansa Musa's capital on the upper Niger.

There are parallels for grandiose building and elaborate artwork at this very period at the sprawling capitals of Ife and Zimbabwe, although neither of these betrays any obvious trace of Islam or of foreign architects. The royal statuary of Ife in terracotta and brass is specifically unislamic; as are Great Zimbabwe's soapstone birds. The architecture and stone enclosures of that place similarly appear to be *sui generis*. Rich though both Great Zimbabwe and Ife and their rulers doubtless were then, their links with the wider world were essentially indirect and at a cultural remove. In Ife's case the main connection was through Nupe and Gao, the latter incorporated in the 1320s into the Mali zone of control; conversely Great Zimbabwe's links were through the port of Sofala which lay in Kilwa's commercial zone.

It is at the last place, Kilwa island itself, where the parallel with Mali in these very years can be illustrated more pointedly, notably in ostentatious building, here in stone employing the local coral, on a scale never seen before. Till about 1300 stone architecture on the Swahili coast had been virtually confined to small flat-roofed mosques, like that of Ali b. al-Hasan at Kilwa, and the occasional official building, as at early Shanga. Now at Kilwa in the early fourteenth century - Chittick's Period IIIa - the mosque for Friday prayers was expanded to more than four times its original capacity by means of an arched, domed and barrel-vaulted extension. The masonry techniques were not new here, but the scale and several of the architectural motifs were, being inspired by examples, both contemporary and archaic, in Arab lands. It was not a case of simple imitation but rather, I would surmise, an attempt to introduce a more sophisticated and internationally recognisable Shafi Islamic image. This poses then the question of whether the architect was a local mason who had travelled overseas for instruction and training or was contrarily an expatriate recruited by the Kilwa government from Yemen or Hejaz. Further clues to the architect's overseas experience are obvious in the Husunis, built a mile east of Kilwa town on a breezy cliff overlooking the harbour and the ocean approach. This complex - the grand palace of Husuni Kubwa together with what appear to be warehouses, a factor's house and a maritime caravanserai - appears to have been built in al-Hasan b. Sulaiman's reign, probably under the same architectural direction as that for the mosque extension; and in several obvious ways the magnificent and spacious palace, surpassing anything else in this quarter of the world, combines architectural motifs inspired by examples in the Islamic heartlands yet long outmoded there. There is an obvious touch of latter-day provincial emulation here at the southern limit of Islam; and evidence that the architect had visited Iraq among other places, had seen some of the classic monuments of the Abbasid period and had been apprenticed along formal Islamic lines.

There was substance behind the ostentation, if only for a short while. Beside merchants, scholars of international repute were sailing to Kilwa (just as others were crossing the Sahara

to Mali at this time) to take advantage of the hospitality dispensed by the sultan. On this we have the testimony of Ibn Battuta who took a ship from the Gulf of Aden to visit Kilwa in 1331, having heard (rather like the modern backpacker) that students were welcome there. It was being advertised as a distant place in the 'land of the Zanj' (or Black Africa), but one which, thanks to the international commercial factor and the local ruler's efforts and tastes, would not seem too foreign to the determined Muslim traveller. Ibn Battuta's ship stopped on the way at Mogadishu and more briefly at Mombasa. But Kilwa at the southern end of this Swahili region - and the most southerly sultanate in the Islamic world - was the object of the journey and the entrepot for the southern trade. For an explanation Ibn Battuta recorded laconically: "A merchant told me that a fortnight's sail beyond Kilwa lies Sofala, where gold dust is brought from a place a month's journey inland called Yufi" (Defremery (ed.) 19XX; Sanguinetti (ed.) 19XX; Gibb (ed.) 19XX). In writing, or dictating, his memoirs many years later, Ibn Battuta's memory was patently confused. It is also clear that, accomplished traveller that he was, he had a lamentable grasp of latitude and longitude. Yufi was in West Africa, being probably Ufe (alternatively nowadays spelled Ife). But in the Kilwa context Ibn Battuta was clearly referring to Zimbabwe and its gold. The Mahdali dynasty at Kilwa, which had seized power about or shortly before 1300, under al-Hasan b. Talut, the grandfather of al-Hasan b. Sulaiman, had appreciated the potential of the gold market and seems to have exerted a monopoly over the trade south of the Swahili coast for the next half-century. This ruling family had, as noted, a Yemeni connection, although it appears not to have acknowledged any formal suzerainty by the latter country. It seems that Yemeni interests, with their Red Sea connection, had established themselves at Tumbatu late in the thirteenth century; and that al-Hasan b. Talut's successful coup at Kilwa was a southward extension of that interest. Some of the architectural feats of Kilwa in al-Hasan b. Sulaiman's reign seem to be foreshadowed at Tumbatu, where the Yemeni link may be more direct (Horton forthcoming; pers.comm.).

That al-Hasan bin Talut's initiative paid off handsomely over the following decades, up till this visit of Ibn Battuta in 1331, is shown by the building and artistic feats which he and more particularly his grandson and successor al-Hasan b. Sulaiman commissioned, as well as by the hospitality which the latter was able to afford. This prosperity was dependent on the favourable circumstances of the world economy, and in particular the vastly expanded thirst for gold - a classic Third World boom situation - but also on this Mahdali house's manipulation of the local scene and monopoly of the south-eastern African gold supplies for a period. Among other things this new dynasty revived the minting of copper coins at Kilwa, those of al-Hasan b. Sulaiman being particularly numerous. Economically, the revival of this cheap local coinage, essentially small change in quantity, may have been necessary for the exceptionally vigorous local market (alongside doubtless a swollen town population) stimulated by the boom at Kilwa itself and its dependencies. But it would also have served as a symbol of the Mahdali rulers' authority, sovereignty and legitimacy, the latter underlined by imitating, in fair if not perfect measure, the old Kilwa style of minting, that of Ali b. al-Hasan more than two-hundred years previously. This reopening of the Kilwa mint further illustrates Kilwa's access to the metal resources of the Zimbabwe region; while a single specimen of these al-Hasan b. Sulaiman copper pieces has been found at Great Zimbabwe itself and provides nice corroboration of the connection of which Ibn Battuta gained intelligence. So surely does the recent discovery (on north Unguja or Tumbatu) of gold dinars of the same sultan (Brown 1991, pp. 1-3; Horton forthcoming) - apparently the first gold coins to be struck south of the Sahara since the decline of Aksum in the early seventh century. These few gold dinars, which seem to bear a date in the 1320s, conform to contemporary Islamic style, and were presumably intended, unlike the local copper coinage, to be acceptable internationally. (They may have helped pay for both imports and technical expertise.) They record al-Hasan bin Sulaiman by the sobriquet

Abu al-Mawahib, 'the Father of Gifts'. Ibn Battuta noted this among his names, and the Kilwa Chronicle, in the version committed to writing two centuries later, also remembers him by this, with the further implication that it became a dynastic title of the Mahdali line. The same ruler also conferred on himself praises and titles of caliphal venerability - the Commander of the Faithful and al-Malik al-Mansur, 'the victorious king'. These are read on the gold coins and also on the celebrated inscription above a door in his palace of Husuni Kubwa (Chittick 1974, pl. 103a). It would be interesting to know how he qualified, whether nominally or actively, for such grandiloquent praise names (did he really conquer a large stretch of the coast and its hinterland as the written sources hint, or was his empire essentially a commercial one?). However, there seems to have been a fashion at that period, in Rasulid Yemen in particular, for the assumption of titles of this sort by rulers who wanted to be taken seriously, internationally as well as locally.

### **Collapse in the mid-fourteenth century and the 'new' rain of the early fifteenth**

The fame of Kilwa under Abu al-Mawahib al-Hasan b. Sulaiman circulated widely. As seen, it had attracted Ibn Battuta there in 1331, and he took the liberty of dropping the names of Sharifian and Iraqi scholars whom he met at that court. But the reports did not continue for long to be so complimentary. A few years later Ibn Battuta learned that :

'When this virtuous and liberal sultan died - may God's mercy be upon him - his brother Daud became ruler and conducted himself in the opposite manner. If a petitioner approached him he would say 'The giver of gifts is dead, and has left nothing to be given.' Visitors would stay by his court a good many months and only then would he make them some small present, so that finally they gave up coming to his gate'.

Probably Daud was not so much mean by inclination as having to adjust to economic realities. Either Kilwa's control of Sofala and its monopoly of the Zimbabwean gold was being challenged on the Swahili coast or, equally likely, the world price of gold, after years of relentless rise, began to fall so that the demand on the Zimbabwean sources was suddenly relaxed. Such a recession would have hit especially severely the primary producers and the middlemen closest to them, notably the merchants plying the Kilwa-Sofala route. It is sometimes suggested that this slump was a result of the international plague called the Black Death which ravaged much of the Old World in the late 1340s and did much to disrupt its trade - and, equally important, to reduce its population and market demands. The functioning of harbours and of shipping - which helped incidentally to carry the rats and fleas and infected humans which spread the plague itself - was badly upset on certain sea-lanes. This may have been a contributory factor hindering recovery in the south-eastern African gold-mining industry and trade, but it was probably not the principal or the only one. For the fall in gold prices seems to have begun a few years before the Black Death (as Edward III of England discovered in the early 1340s on issuing his gold florins, which had to be promptly devalued against silver). Moreover, the reports of the parsimony of Daud b. Sulaiman at Kilwa almost certainly caught up with Ibn Battuta through the travellers' grapevine before the outbreak of the plague. (In Mali, for comparison, which Ibn Battuta visited in 1352, in the reign of Mansa Sulaiman, there seems to have been a similar, if less extreme, move towards frugality and parsimony following Mansa Musa's death in 1337. But there was certainly no collapse of Mali's power

and commercial sphere - and no suggestion that the plague crossed the Sahara with the camel-caravans.)

Whatever the true balance of factors, the change of fortune at Kilwa was sudden and severe. Either during Daud's reign or soon after, Husuni Kubwa palace, which was never properly finished, was left abandoned, its maintenance presumably being beyond the regular means of the state and the town community. But future generations of Kilwans, seeing the vast ruin and architectural opulence of Husuni Kubwa and Husuni Ndogo, could only recall with awe the golden days of Abu al-Mawahib. Yet the Husunis lay outside the town, and the disaster which was specifically remembered, and which exercised later generations of chroniclers, was the collapse of the domed extension to the central Friday mosque, so that 'the people had to pray under shelters and tents' - 'for the original pillars (to support the roof) were of solid cut stone, and there were no longer masons who could fashion and erect them as they had been.'

One suspects a touch of exaggeration here, the purpose of the story being not to explain what went wrong (whether in al-Hasan b. Sulaiman's own time, as the chronicler states, or more probably some decades later) so much as to bestow *baraka* upon those who later put the matter right. It seems moreover that the chronicler, writing in the sixteenth century and anxious to make a partisan case in favour of one faction of the royal house, has compressed the chronology and may have confused two occasions on which the mosque needed repair at some expense - with the memory of al-Hasan b. Sulaiman Abu al-Mawahib being thus further enshrined. If the mosque had collapsed completely during or soon after his reign, in the mid-fourteenth century say, and lay derelict for a while, one has to suppose not only a severe loss of wealth but also depopulation of the town after the boom years and consequent demographic pressure during the reigns of the two al-Hasans in the first third of that century. Again one can speculate about the effect of the Black Death, even on its direct impact on a seaport in the international network (Horton forthcoming).

In a confused passage (Freeman-Grenville 1962, p. 40) - in which the chronicler reveals his untechnical mind and poor grasp of architectural principles - he does at least appreciate that the whole edifice of the mosque depended on the pillars, both those of wood to hold the flat concrete roof of the old mosque of Ali b. al-Hasan, and those of stone to support the arches, vaults and domes of the great extension of Abu al-Mawahib. The latter forms were new at Kilwa in the fourteenth century, and it is obvious that the architect's vision was too ambitious for the techniques known to the Swahili masons at that time. They fell back on methods, used since the tenth century, of cutting porites coral from the reef and carving it while wet. In this manner they fashioned solid octagonal pillars. But this type of coral proved too soft and weak for the purpose of supporting a roof of such span, weight and complexity, and the inflexibility of such pillars, should one of the bases have subsided slightly or the walls felt the thrust of the roof, must have presented a serious technical problem from the start. The chronicler, like every visitor to Kilwa to this day, must have noticed these redundant carved pillars, some whole, others broken, lying abandoned outside the mosque.

The eventual solution was to devise a more sound design of pillars, by constructing them of composite coral blocks, and thus to rebuild the mosque extension with its domed and barrel-vaulted roof to the original plan of Abu al-Mawahib. The essential reconstruction is to be dated early in the fifteenth century, a period of marked revival of wealth, perhaps soon after 'al-

Malik al-Mansur, the *sahib Kilwa*' - as recorded in the Mecca archives for the year 1410/11 - made the *hajj*, dispensing of some wealth and delaying a while in the Hejaz, Aden and Yemen (Martin 1974 p. 374). This demonstrates that Kilwa's link with the last region had survived the depressed half-century and may indeed have been a factor in the revival and rebuilding.

It is to this period, approximately 1410 to 1440 (the essence of Chittick's IIIb), that so much of the stone architecture of Kilwa town belongs. Several smaller mosques were built, some apparently for particular rich families if not non-Shafi sects. One, the exquisite small domed mosque with Chinese bowls inset (which help date it), is essentially a miniature of the great mosque extension and conceivably the work of the architect or mason who directed the latter's restoration. One might wonder whether this was intended for the ruling family's daily devotion, as opposed to the public Friday prayers at the nearby Great Mosque. At the same time there was a developing fashion - and sufficient wealth being generated - for building stone houses in the town, employing coral-rag and mortar in the main. On the adjacent island of Songo Mnara too it is to this century, perhaps the same decades, that most of the stone architecture belongs or at least that the trend began. Garlake's view was that all this lesser stone architecture, for rich townsmen and merchants, was influenced eventually by Husuni Kubwa; he saw the latter as the 'fountainhead', and in a sense he may have been basically right, Husuni Kubwa being the inspiration for both the fashion of building in stone and so much of the architectural detail (Garlake 1966). But it is necessary to appreciate that the challenge and example were taken up for the most part a century after the building of Husuni Kubwa, and a good half-century after its abandonment. So, when Ibn Battuta visited Kilwa in 1331, in the Husuni period and Abu al-Mawahib's own time, and reported that the town was built of wood, he was not, on this occasion at least, being his commonly vague or inaccurate self. There were very few stone buildings then, save of course the Great Mosque - and, outside the town, the new Husunis.

We see then that the fifteenth-century people and rulers of Kilwa had a consciousness of history and that this was a factor leading them to restore the mosque extension, albeit with its odd proportions (which irk some architectural historians and critics). But there was no vain attempt to impress the whole world in the manner of Abu al-Mawahib al-Hasan b. Sulaiman a century before; no repetition of the Husuni Kubwa fiasco. It appears that a more modest palace, barely distinguishable from the richest houses, was built for the sultans on the edge of the town. Moreover, these early fifteenth-century rulers do not seem to have minted new coins in their names - although it is possible that the anonymous Kilwa copper pieces inscribed 'Nasir al-Dunya' belong to this period. Nevertheless, viewed economically the new activity must represent a considerable restoration of Kilwa's fortune. One has to imagine this port resuming, if not an actual monopoly of the middleman role in the handling of Zimbabwean gold, at least a substantial slice of it as world demands revived. However, as the fifteenth century progressed, Kilwa seems to have lost its economic preeminence on the Swahili coast to Mombasa and Malindi, these more northerly harbours being better placed as entrepôts for international trade to both east and west as the directions and the staples of commerce diversified. (Interestingly, in the gold-producing regions some time in the same century, Great Zimbabwe yielded its position as an economic and political centre to new markets and polities.) Yet, the port of Sofala seems to have remained under Kilwa's governorship until the Portuguese took control of the Mozambique channel at the beginning of the next century. More substantially, Kilwa had an historical reputation and prestige which was established by Abu al-Mawahib and which, despite disastrous immediate consequences, was reaffirmed in the early fifteenth century, the era of the 'new rain' as the Chronicle records. It was this reputation which impressed itself on the early Portuguese visitors to this coast, despite the changing economic realities by that time. We might suggest that the Great Mosque - the most splendid,

if also most odd, structure of the Swahili coast - had a symbolic role in this. And for those who appreciated monumental ruins, Husuni Kubwa and Ndogo may have served a purpose in succeeding centuries. This is illustrated by the mid-sixteenth-century Portuguese historian Jo~ao de Barros who abridged or reworked a version (now lost) of the Kilwa Chronicle in the Lisbon archives. Telling of the sultan 'Soleiman Hacen' - a garbled and exaggerated allusion, I take it, to Abu al-Mawahib al-Hasan b. Sulaiman - he records how:

He conquered a great part of the coast, and having his father's inheritance he made himself lord of the commerce of Sofala and of the islands of Pemba, Monfia (Mafia), Zanzibar, and of a great part of the shore of the mainland. Besides being a conqueror, he beautified the town of Kilwa, building a stone fortress there, and walls, towers, and noble houses, for until his time the town was constructed of wood, and all these matters he accomplished in a reign of eighteen years. (Freeman-Grenville 1962, p. 92) <sup>3</sup>.

What is called now Husuni Kubwa was not built as a fortress - or *husn* - but this splendid ruin became that in the imagination of succeeding generations.

### **Indian Ocean trade and Kilwa after 1500**

It is generally held that the Portuguese ascendancy in the Indian Ocean relegated the Swahili coast to a backwater, the new Mozambique-Goa axis cutting that of Sofala and the Zambezi from Kilwa and the Swahili coast, while the rounding of the Cape reduced the importance of the Red Sea connection between the East and the West. Indeed, these broad factors were doubtless more important than the various specific naval and military attempts by Portuguese commanders to suppress Swahili and other Muslim shipping, to attack harbours and even to sack several of the Swahili towns. They set up a fort at Kilwa town, on the Gereza site, in 1505, but only eight years later found it not worth maintaining, since their alliance with Malindi to the north and more particularly their position at Mozambique Island and Sofala to the south proved more effective and less expensive. Though Kilwa continued to exist as a Swahili settlement throughout the two centuries of Portuguese control of this coast (Chittick's Period IV), its importance and probably its size too declined.

Stone building seems to have ceased soon after 1500; and although it is difficult to place precise dates on individual houses, it is likely that the Portuguese fort was the last substantial structure till late in the eighteenth century. Doubtless however some buildings were maintained and repaired for a while, notably certain of the mosques; and it is likely that the Friday Mosque or parts of the extension continued to fulfill that function till the nineteenth century.

This general picture of decline is evident along the whole Swahili coast, but on the northern part it was probably less sudden or extreme. The economy and commerce of Mombasa and of the more northerly Swahili towns was, one imagines, rather more diverse and less specifically dependent on gold and other merchandise from the Zambezi and Sofala. There may have been sufficient continuation of prosperity here to maintain the urban spirit and the fashion for stone-

building through much of the sixteenth century. At Gedi by Malindi for instance much of the activity may belong to this time - unless Kirkman has dated both the Chinese ceramics and the buildings up to a century too late. Takwa on Manda island, similarly, is regarded as dating to the sixteenth if not the seventeenth century. But, whatever the precise chronology, most of these old Swahili settlements were either abandoned in or about the sixteenth century, or reduced from veritable towns to villages which could at best only recall their glorious stone-built 'urban' past. And for those on the northern mainland, the stories of Galla or Zimba devastation have embedded themselves as convenient explanations; while the site which did enjoy real urban continuity from pre- to post-Portuguese times, notably Mombasa, preserves for the same reason least archaeological trace above ground. Fort Jesus and the new 'old town', wonderful examples of Swahili masonry and later coastal architectural styles though they are, distract attention from the older town history and its archaeology (cf. Kirkman 1964).

Late in the eighteenth century, however, the quickening pulse of Indian Ocean trade during the Industrial Revolution, with renewed demands for ivory in particular and the need for slaves to work island plantations, on the Mascarenes for sugar in the first place, led to an obvious growth of activity on the Swahili coast. This is commonly associated with Omani involvement and especially the expansion of Zanzibar's political and economic role from the 1770s (Freeman-Grenville 1965; Sheroff 1987; Nicholls 1971; Alpers 1975; 1967, pp. 145-63). However, for some time, until well into the 19th century, several of the Swahili polities remained effectively independent and undertook foreign trade on their own account. Thus Kilwa, with its rich hinterland for ivory and slaves, enjoyed a marked revival under sultans claiming descent from the ancient 'Shirazi' line. This period (Chittick's V) is marked archaeologically by new stone building in somewhat different style, notably the fortified complex with a palatial structure called Makutani close to the shore on the west side of the town (conceivably this was a crude attempt to recreate the image of Husuni Kubwa: its construction doubtless accounts for the extensive robbing to ground level of most of the stone domestic buildings of fifteenth-century Kilwa). At the same period, but perhaps in a second phase of it, that is after the turn of the nineteenth century as the Omani-Zanzibari rulers came to insist on more direct control, the fort called Gereza was reconstructed on the remains of the Portuguese one. However, before 1840 the effective port of Kilwa was transferred from this old island site to a new one - Kilwa Kivinje -33 on the mainland some twenty kilometres northward. For the increasing caravan traffic from the interior, the region of Lake Nyasa and beyond, Kivinje may have been marginally more suitable than Kilwa Kisiwani which had been ideal for the coasting and island traffic. But perhaps a more important factor, in Zanzibari eyes, was the symbolic one of removing the port and mart from an ancient site with its traditional allegiance to its own house which could claim a history many times longer than that of Zanzibar and its sultanate. (Freeman-Grenville 1962, pp. 203-8; Alpers 1967, p. 148). In fact there are suggestions that the Busaidi rulers of Zanzibar tried to arrogate to themselves the mantle of ancient Kilwa and especially the reputation, exaggerated for good measure, of Abu al-Mawahib al-Hasan b. Sulaiman. In this way Zanzibar *sensu stricto*, namely the town and the island of Unguja, could lay claim to the whole Swahili coast and its hinterland, that is Zanzibar *sensu lato* as understood in earlier times. Perhaps significantly, the only extant copy of the Kilwa Chronicle, that in the British Museum, was in the possession of Seyyid Bargash, sultan of Zanzibar, who presented it to Sir John Kirk in 1872. If this was the purpose of transferring the settlement and port of Kilwa from the island to Kivinje, it was definitely successful (Alpers 1967, pp. 152-3), Zanzibar's hegemony south to Cape Delgado and the border of the remnant Portuguese zone remaining pretty secure till the German take-over of the mainland in the late 1880s. (It was on the northern Swahili coast that Zanzibar and its Busaidi rulers found their challenge resisted more.) Kilwa Kisiwani seems to have been left as a minor harbour, its

population of a few hundred involved in cultivation, fishing and lesser, mostly local, trade, or going to Kivinje and other places for work. And at some time, probably in the same century, the Great Mosque was abandoned as the place of usual prayer on Fridays or any other time. This mosque - or the domed extension - had almost certainly been in use during the period of revival in the late eighteenth century, that being the time presumably when a new mihrab for the extension was created by crudely knocking through the southern wall of the original mosque, the implication being that the latter's flat roof, supported by rafters, had fallen earlier and was being left in ruin. Still, this partial renovation and maintenance of the ancient stone mosque was a means by which Kilwa in this period of revival could consider itself a town and a sultanate, both with a history. But now, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the place has been downgraded to village status, and the Friday prayers are conducted in a separate village mosque. The ancient mosque is simply an historic site - one recognised in books and guides and by UNESCO on its World Heritage list.

## Notes

1. The cultural connection with Shiraz and its port of Siraf on the Persian side of the inner Gulf in the late eleventh century is not confined to Kilwa, but is apparent on Unguja and Tumbatu too.
2. Sinclair alludes to Early Iron Age pottery of Kwale type on Kilwa island. This should probably date a couple of centuries or so before 800 AD. But whether there was continuity from such earlier activity on the island to the harbour and town discussed here is uncertain. The lowest levels of the harbour-town contain a distinct type of East African pottery frequently called 'Tana Tradition' ware (Chittick's 'Early Kitchen' ware). This appears neither earlier nor later than the first imported sherds and demonstrates an African maritime element in the original settlement of the Kilwa town site. A comparable pattern is emerging from examination of other Swahili sites dating back to around 800 AD: see below.
3. Being more respectful to the literary authorities, Freeman-Grenville does not make this correlation. He regards this 'Soleiman Hacen' as a different sultan reigning more than a century earlier. If so, the achievements claimed look highly implausible. Such strict construction from a confused historical source with poor chronological control seems unwarranted. True, neither is it an entirely accurate account of Abu al-Mawahib al-Hasan b. Sulaiman, but it is arguably a fair digest of his reputation two centuries after his death.

## Maps

1. Kilwa, eastern Africa and the wider world before 1500
2. The Swahili coast: principal sites of 9<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries AD

### 3. The Kilwa archipelago

#### Chart

Kilwa Kisiwani, 800-1800 AD: summary chronology. (The undulating line is impressionistic, being merely an attempt to echo the varying volume of evidential 'noise' - archaeological, architectural, numismatic, oral-traditional, literary and archival - generated by Kilwa century by century.)

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