

## A Brief History of the East African Coast

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We know very little about the early history of East Africa. However, the earliest remains of hominoids, dating from about one and three-quarters million years ago, have been found in the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. It therefore seems most probable that it was from East Africa that early man, as a hunting mammal having developed the use of tools, moved to Asia and Europe during the long period of the Stone Age.

Towards the end of the Stone Age, new immigrants coming from the north and north-east began to push southwards the original Bushmanoid hunters and gatherers who had lived for millennia in the Kenyan and Tanzanian Highlands, the Rift Valley and along the shores of Lake Victoria. These newcomers, probably southern Kushites from modern Ethiopia, were most likely the first people to bring the knowledge of iron tools to this area; they were hunters and herders. From about 200 BC, other immigrant people, the Bantu, arrived and introduced their own ways of life — they were cultivators and farmers. Thus began the settled, farming communities of East Africa. Better agricultural lands were slowly taken over from the hunters and gatherers, who were forced to retreat into the interior but who nevertheless maintained, through the centuries, a symbiotic relationship with the farmers. Between 500-1000 AD, more Bantu peoples came into East Africa from the west and the centre, organising themselves into kingdoms with traditional religions and cultures, and trading with their neighbours and across the Indian Ocean.

The coastal region had been in trading contact with the outside world from at least the middle of the first millennium BC, with the Kingdoms of Southern Arabia, Saba, Ausan, and later, Himyar, as well as with the Greek and Roman Empires. These trade routes were already well-established by the time an anonymous Greek wrote the "Periplus of the Erythrean Sea" (a contemporary name for the Indian Ocean) sometime around 110 AD, for therein is given a detailed description of the islands and ports as well as the people of "Azania". The "Geografia" of Ptolemy, written in the second century AD, also describes trading routes and posts along the Somali and Kenyan coastlines.

By the 5th-6th century AD, trade with East Africa was almost totally monopolised by traders from the Red Sea area and the Persian Gulf. Between 620-1000 AD, Arabs and Persians (especially Shirazis), fleeing from religious conflicts in their countries of origin, settled in East Africa which they called *Zanjabar* — the Land of the Black People. Most of them belonged to the Sunni Shafe'i sect and when the Shirazis, who were Shi'a came and settled alongside, they put aside their conflicts, learned the local language, and married local Bantu women and converted them. This merger of the customs, religion and languages of these diverse people became the Swahili culture (the word Swahili itself coming from the Arabic *sabil* meaning coast).

The *raison d'être* for the success of this civilisation on the East African coast, stretching from Mogadishu in the north to Madagascar and Sofala in the south, was mercantile. It depended on the import of goods from overseas, which were exchanged for those from the mainland, and which in turn were exported to home markets or elsewhere. On the profits of this trade, a solid and comfortable bourgeois society grew and flourished. There were 37 medieval towns along the East African coast built on islands or on the mainland itself. They were never united into one kingdom, as rivalries and differences were frequent occurrences between the settlements. However, the most important towns — Mogadishu, Zanzibar, Kilwa and Sofala — remained the capitals of their respective kingdoms until the advent of the Portuguese in 1488, which drastically altered the balance of power in East Africa.

The goods that were traded in East Africa were:

Imports:

From China — porcelain and silks;

From India — textiles, beads, metal objects, spices;

From Iraq, Iran and Arabia — glass, daggers, tools, iron pots and pans.

Staples such as wheat rice, ghee, oil and dyes were also imported from abroad.

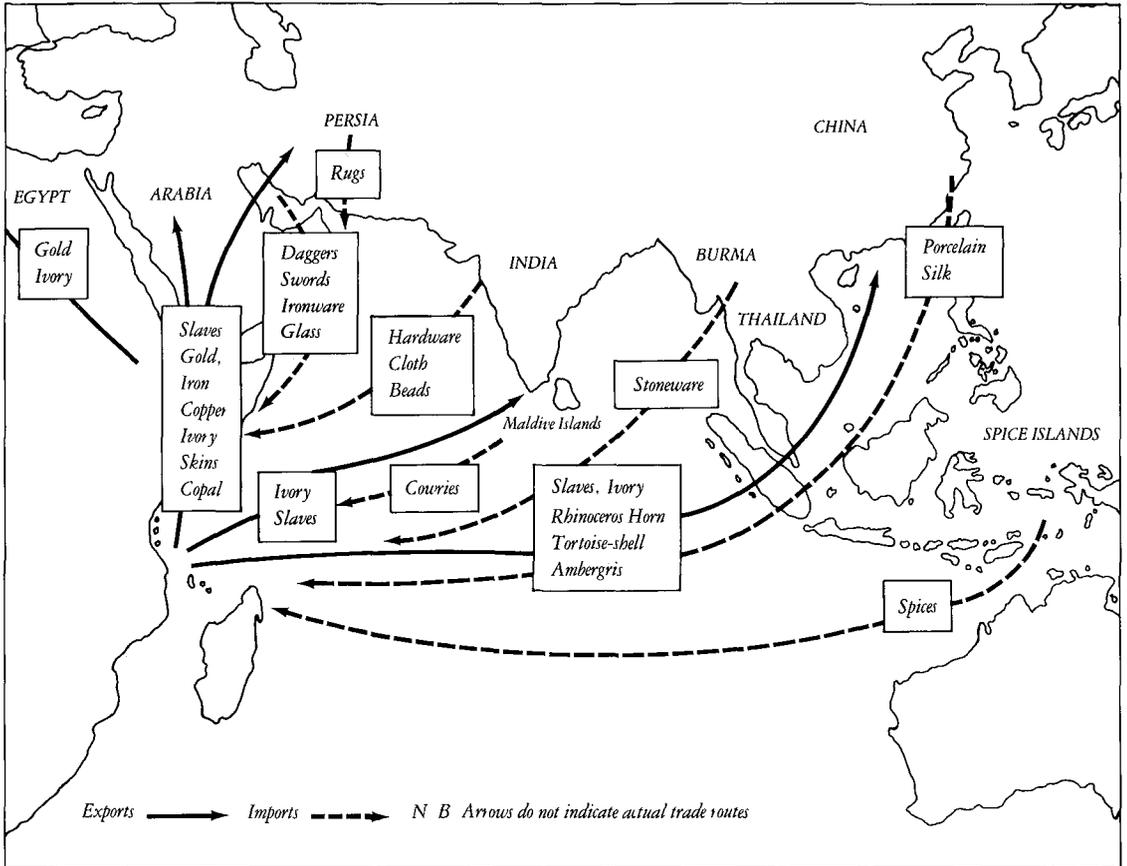


Figure 1: East Africa's trade with other lands. (Taken from: Were and Wilson, *East Africa Through The Ages*, p3).

## Exports:

From Zimbabwe — gold, shipped via Sofala to Kilwa;

From the mainland — Ivory, rhinoceros horn, animal skins, tortoise shell and copper (Zambia);

From the mainland — slaves, shipped out from Kilwa, Zanzibar and Mogadishu.

The Arabs did not penetrate into the interior of Africa; goods were exchanged through intermediaries and traders at Kilwa, at Sofala or at Mogadishu. As a result, these cities became wealthy from the taxes imposed on all goods leaving their shores. From these major entrepôts, goods were shipped out to Aden and Muscat, and from there to India, Iran or further afield in the Indian Ocean.

This state of affairs would have continued indefinitely had it not been rudely interrupted by the entry of the Portuguese into the Indian Ocean in 1498. The three *caravels* under the command of Vasco de Gama changed the history of Europe and the East. The Sultan of Mozambique, not having the slightest idea who these foreigners were, greeted them with warm hospitality; further up the coast at Malindi, the Portuguese were even able to find an Arab pilot, Ahmed bin Majid, who agreed to show them the route to India — and thus began the trading voyages of the Portuguese in the East. Almost at once these voyages turned into colonial expansion, as the Portuguese learned that to secure their goods and supplies they had to control the trade routes and the major ports.

Between 1500-1510, the Portuguese subjugated the coastal towns of the Indian Ocean with great cruelty. Most of them gave in quietly and agreed to pay tribute; those that resisted, like Kilwa and Mombasa, were destroyed. By 1509, Pemba, Zanzibar and Mafia were captured, too, and for the next hundred years the Portuguese virtually ruled the Indian Ocean. Their troubles began in the 17th century, first with Turkish pirates and the Ottoman navy, and then with the Dutch and the British who sought a share in the lucrative trade. Portugal began to lose some of its captured territories: Persida regained Hormuz in 1622, the Omanis won back Muscat in 1650, and

by 1660, they were attacking the Portuguese fortresses along the East African coast. Fort Jesus in Mombasa fell in 1698, exactly 200 years after the entry of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean. The Omanis freed the East African coastal states, only to add them to the Sultan's Empire; they ruled for the next 200 years and were almost as unpopular as the Portuguese.

Added to and superimposed on local rivalries was the factionalism of the two leading groups of the Omani ruling families, the Mazrui or Mazarria (based in Mombasa) and the Busaidi rulers in Muscat and Zanzibar. The infighting continued until 1840, when Sultan Sayid bin Said finally tricked the Mazrui in Mombasa, claimed the whole territory as his, and made Zanzibar the capital city. Meanwhile, trade continued. The ivory and slave trade grew and grew; Kilwa and Zanzibar were the main market towns for both Arab and Indian slave traders, while the French bought from Kilwa only. The British, who were the leading slave traders in West Africa, changed tack in 1807, making slavery illegal for all British subjects in that year. Portugal followed suit in 1815, France in 1818, and Spain in 1820. The last official slave market, that of Zanzibar, was closed on the 5th of March 1873, when Sultan Bargash, under British pressure, signed a treaty to stop the shipment of all slaves from the East African Coast. A fierce hurricane had swept across Zanzibar and completely destroyed the island in 1872, and the Sultan had no choice but to acquiesce to British demands in order to obtain their aid in rebuilding his economy. Nonetheless, illicit trading in slaves was carried out by Arab and Indian traders in the Indian Ocean until well into the 20th century. By the 1890's, most of East Africa was under British protection (symbolic "puppet" Sultans were kept in place) while most of Tanzania (Tanganyika) was under the Germans. By the end of the Second World War, Britain reigned supreme, and remained so until the 1960's, when the East African states finally gained independence and became free states under the leadership of their own people.

## Major Towns

**Kilwa (Kisiwani)** The town was probably founded in the 10th-11th century AD, and by the 13th century was the most important trading town on the East African Coast under “Shirazi” rulers. It retained the control of the gold trade until the 16th century when Mombasa became its strong rival. Strongly Muslim throughout it made major efforts to convert the mainland to Islam.

**Zanzibar** The first island to be settled by the Arabs, it was independent of Kilwa and governed by its own Sultans until the Portuguese occupation in 1509. Freed by the Omanis in 1699, it remained part of the Sultanate to the end of World War I, when it was swallowed by the British Empire. It was the major trading port for gold and slaves, and after 1818, for cloves. Most of the old Stone Town of Zanzibar was built during the 18th-19th centuries under the Omanis and shows wonderful examples of Indian Ocean architectural styles.

**Mombasa** Probably founded in the 12th century AD, as an exporting centre for slaves and ivory, it remained a small settlement until the second half of the 15th century. By 1490, it was a fortified town and began to challenge Kilwa. Its rulers were Swahili with strong African ties. The Portuguese took it in 1502, but could not keep it; they finally destroyed the old town in 1589 when they were aided unintentionally by members of the Zimba tribe who ate up all the survivors. Construction of Fort Jesus was begun in 1593, and the Portuguese continued to rule Mombasa until the Omanis took it in 1698. The Mazrui faction controlled the town and trade until 1884, when it was officially ceded to the Busaidi of Zanzibar by the Anglo-German Treaty, from whence it became part of the British Empire.

**Lamu** The site was settled probably by the 9th century AD, although the present town was probably founded in the 13th-14th century. By the 15th century, it was a thriving

trading town mainly dealing in ivory, mangrove poles and timber. In 1505, it came under the Portuguese who, in turn, were expelled by the Omanis in 1698. Then began a period of great commercial revival and expansion — most of the traditional stone houses and mosques were built during this time. The abolition of the slave trade and the loss of slaves to work the mainland plantations at the end of the 19th century resulted in an economic decline from which it never recovered.

**Mogadishu** The earliest and most important Muslim town in East Africa, already a major trading town by 1000 AD. It was always pre-occupied with its contacts to the Arab world and never interfered in events on the coast further south.