The Economic and Cultural Life of Kilwa (Overview)

Three miles off the coast of Tanzania lies an island with an extraordinary set of stone ruins. Among the decaying monuments of stone and coral on the mostly deserted island, visitors can find the oldest standing mosque in East Africa and a sprawling palace complex that was the largest stone structure in sub-Saharan Africa for more than four centuries. The island is called Kilwa, and it was the center of the wealthiest and most powerful trading empire on the East African coast from the 13th century until the arrival of Europeans in the early 16th century. The site of ancient Kilwa is now known as Kilwa Kisiwani (Swahili for "Kilwa on the island"), in order to distinguish it from later settlements on the mainland called Kilwa Kivinje and Kilwa Masoko.

Trade on the Swahili Coast

The first evidence of permanent settlement on Kilwa appears from around 800 CE, although there are iron tools and pottery shards on the island that suggest that it was inhabited seasonally by Bantu people from the African mainland in earlier centuries. The permanent settlement in the ninth century probably came about because the island presented an excellent base to conduct trade between the mainland and the expanding Islamic mercantile world to the north. During that period, the economy of the pan-Islamic world, which stretched from North Africa to India, was growing dramatically due to conquest and trade. Demand grew in the wealthy Muslim cities for such African products as ivory, rhino horn, animal skins, copper, and most of all gold. African markets, in turn, desired the fine textiles, spices, glassware, and jewelry produced in the Near East and Asia. Trading communities grew up at such East African locations as Kilwa, Mogadishu, Zanzibar, and Pemba Island to foster trade between those markets. The stretch of African coastline from Somalia to Mozambique later became known as the Swahili Coast after the Swahili (or Kiswahili) language, a mix of Bantu dialect and Arabic vocabulary that developed as a trading language in the region.

According to local tradition, the city-state of Kilwa was founded in the 10th century by a Persian nobleman named Ali bin al-Hasan, who bought the island from a local Bantu chieftain for a large quantity of textiles. Archaeological records suggest that the reign of Ali bin al-Hasan in Kilwa did not actually begin until the 11th century, however. Silver and copper coins bearing his name start appearing in archaeological records of Kilwa and nearby regions in the late 11th century, suggesting that his reign probably marked the beginning of an era of prosperity on the island. Sultan al-Hasan established Islam as the official religion of the city-state. The blend of Islam and local African spiritual beliefs that developed on the island was known as Shirazi Islam, after the Shiraz region of Persia where al-Hasan supposedly was born.

The Gold Trade

An apparent scarcity of coins and building activity in the mid-12th century suggests that the island went through a
period of economic depression for some decades during that time. It is probable that Kilwa's relative decline was due to competition from the trading states of Mogadishu and Zanzibar, which were farther north on the African coast and, therefore, closer to the principal trading partners on the Arabian Peninsula. In the 13th century, however, Kilwa appears to have secured control of the gold supply from the port of Sofala in what is now Mozambique. That port provided the major outlet to the world markets in gold from medieval Zimbabwe, a powerful kingdom in the African interior that was building the imposing stone city of Great Zimbabwe at about that time. Through a combination of aggressive trade and a willingness to attack rival cities for control of their markets, Kilwa soon became the wealthiest city-state on the East African coast.

Kilwa reached the height of its wealth and power during the reign of Sultan al-Hasan bin Sulaiman. The gold trade expanded dramatically in the early 14th century to meet the increased demand from Europe, which required gold both to finance its many wars and to support the emergence of a banking system. Sulaiman's contemporary in West Africa, Mansa Musa of Mali, enjoyed a similar explosion of wealth. The wealth of Sulaiman's court was recorded at its peak by the Muslim traveler and writer Ibn Battuta, who traveled to Kilwa in 1331 because he had heard that Sulaiman was a generous supporter of Islamic scholars. Sulaiman offered patronage to traveling scholars as a way to establish that his city-state, although on the outskirts of the Islamic world, could be the equal in prestige and scholarship to the older Islamic states in the Near East and North Africa.

**Buildings of Stone and Coral**

Travelers to Kilwa often remarked on how prosperous and well built the city appeared. In Ibn Battuta's time, the homes were made primarily of wood, but as trade revenues flowed in over the following century, more houses were made out of a sturdy combination of stone and coral. Local coral could be made into a kind of concrete mortar to hold the stones in place. Some of the homes were two or three stories, which was remarkable in the 14th century. The wealthy merchants of Kilwa used the textiles, spices, and glassware, for which they had traded in eastern markets. The wealthiest families ate on porcelain plates from China.

The most lasting reminders of the wealth of Kilwa are the large stone buildings constructed during the island's glory days. The Great Mosque of Kilwa, which was first built around the time of Ali bin al-Hasan or perhaps somewhat earlier, was expanded during Sulaiman's reign to include vaulted ceilings and a great dome. That dome is thought to have been the first true dome constructed on the East African coast. Sulaiman also oversaw the construction of the Husuni Kubwa palace, a vast complex that included more than 100 rooms and terraces. Its highlights included a swimming pool and decorative wall and door carvings.

**The Decline of Kilwa**

Kilwa experienced another economic decline during the reign of Sulaiman's successor, his brother Daud bin Sulaiman. The devastation of the Black Death in Europe and Asia depressed the world economy for decades, leading to a substantial drop in the demand for gold. During that period, the Husuni Kubwa palace was deserted, probably because the sultan could not afford to maintain such a large residence with his reduced resources.
The gold market rebounded substantially in the early 14th century, leading to another period of prosperity in Kilwa. Many of the stone houses and other buildings on Kilwa date from 1410 to 1440. The Small Domed Mosque, one of the island's most interesting architectural remnants, was constructed during that period. Kilwa remained prosperous throughout the end of the 15th century. In 1498, however, the people of Kilwa saw a development that would have dire consequences for the control of trade on the Swahili Coast—the arrival of Europeans in the Indian Ocean.

Using new navigational methods and advanced ships, the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and stopped briefly at Kilwa on the way to India. In 1502, da Gama led a Portuguese fleet that attacked Kilwa and extracted tribute payments from the sultan. In 1505, a fleet led by Francisco d'Almeida attacked and occupied Kilwa in order to gain control of its trade routes. The Portuguese occupied Kilwa from 1505 to 1512, during which time they built the Gereza fortress that still stands on the island. Kilwa was taken by an Arab mercenary in 1512 after Portuguese troops had decided to consolidate their power at mainland locations, but the damage to Kilwa's status was already done. The Portuguese were to remain the dominant trading power on the East African coast for the next two centuries, and Kilwa would never regain its status as a major trading power.

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