

The East African Coast

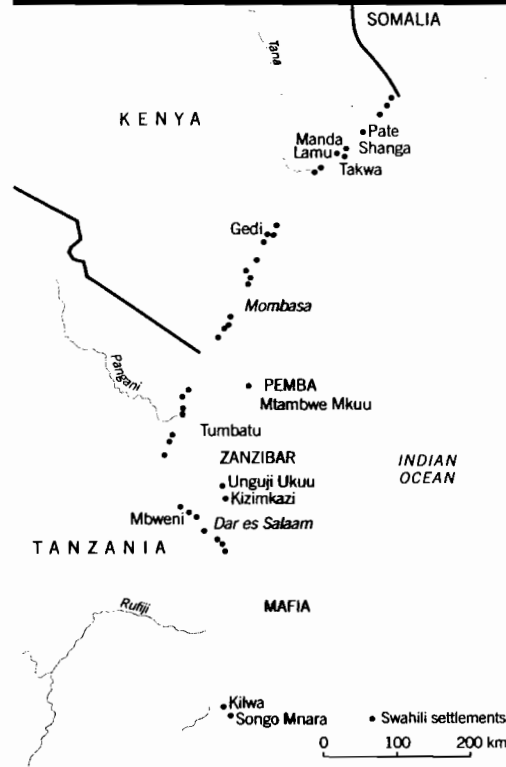
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The outlets for the African interior's riches were ports along the Indian Ocean coast. From the tip of Africa, at the entrance to the Red Sea, as far as Sofala, at the southern entrance to the Madagascar Channel, these ports received resins and incense, ivory from elephant herds hunted from southern Ethiopia as far as the Limpopo valley, gold from the Zimbabwe plateau, food and timber, human slaves and animal hides, and much more. Trade routes connected eastern Africa to the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and ultimately Europe; some ran up the Gulf to Persia; others ventured straight across the Indian Ocean to India; from there both land and sea routes led on to China. The relative importance of the different trade routes and destinations changed over the centuries. For a brief period there were even direct contacts with China through convoys of enormous junks. For centuries the trade was stimulated and stabilized by the common religion and culture of Islam. The system only began to come under strain when the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean at the end of the fifteenth century and, with unrestrained ruthlessness, sought sole dominance.

Settlements stretch 3,000 km south along the coast from Mogadishu. The southern Somali coast is barren and featureless with few inlets but it has the fertile Shebelle valley in its immediate hinterland. The Lamu archipelago, a drowned estuary of the Tana River, has the ancient deserted towns of Shanga, Manda, and Takwa and the more recent traditional towns of Pate and Lamu itself [Map 7]. From here south into Mozambique there are the remains of some 400 ancient settlements, some now marked only by a stone-lined well, a quibla or mihrab¹ of a mosque, or by a cluster of tombs, some marked with the tall stone pillars so distinctive of the coast.

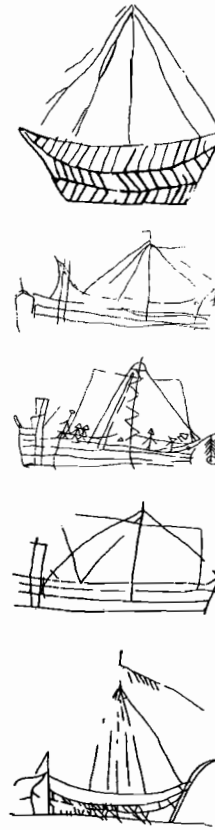
For sailors from Arabia and Persia the southern part of the coast must have seemed an earthly paradise. Areas of fertile soil were watered by reliable rains and nourished rice fields, coconut and banana groves, orchards and gardens, cotton and sugarcane fields, and pastures for sheep. The shores were sheltered from the open sea by a nearly continuous reef and there were many creeks where ships could be safely careened. All that was needed for a settlement to be established was a gap in the reef, a firm bottom to the anchorage, and a freshwater well.

Map 7 The East African coast



The oceanic trade depended on the regular annual cycle of monsoon winds. As one moved south, the periods of reliable winds become shorter and the risk of missing the monsoon greater. Speed in acquiring and loading the return cargo became an imperative. South of Kilwa, the most southerly major trading port, these winds were very unreliable and the oceanic currents difficult. From here south as far as Sofala—and between all major ports—a local year-round coastal traffic took over.

Long familiarity with the coastal waters, reefs, and currents was of primary importance to the development of trade. Exports were brought to the coast by their inland producers and coastal agents ventured only to such major centres as the mutapa's court, where they were firmly established when the Portuguese penetrated the interior. Ships coasted to the main ports where goods were trans-shipped, bulked, and stored to await the annual arrival of the oceanic dhows. The people of the coast were agents, brokers, merchants, provisioners, and chandlers to the foreign merchants and ship-owners, who alone had the capital to build, equip, stock with trade goods, and hire crew for the



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Graffiti of some of the early trading ships of east Africa incised at Kilwa in the wet plaster of Husuni Kubwa (top); the Great Mosque (central three); and a house at Songo Mnara (bottom): an unofficial record by building artisans of the basis of Swahili life and commerce. Some show the square matting sail of the *mtepe*, the archaic vessel of the coast whose hull planking was sewn together not nailed. Amulets hang from two curved prows.

large oceanic vessels. Under this regime, the people of the coast were the middlemen and as such always vulnerable to their partners on either side of the chain.

The Swahili

The attitudes of researchers to the origins of the Swahili ('the people of the coast'—the name 'Swahili' is a comparatively recent construction of convenience, as is the unity it implies) has coloured all research into east African coastal history. Above all, should the Swahili be regarded as fully and genuinely African? There was no doubt that for over a thousand years they had close trading connections with Arabia, Persia, and India, or that for over 400 years the Swahili ruling class and elite, the Waungwana, had claimed that their genealogical origins lay abroad. This is already clear in the *Kilwa Chronicle*, a local dynastic history written before 1552. In particular, the Waungwana claimed that Shiraz, the main port of southern Persia, was the original home of the first migrants. The strength and tenacity of this view lay in the class structure of Swahili society. The Waungwana for long sought to distinguish themselves from the rest of society, to establish their validity through the purity of their religion and blood, and to distance themselves from the stigma of mixed blood. Their claims are accepted and supported by one school of historians who consider the ancient towns of the coast to have been Persian or Arab trading bases or colonies and the Swahili to be essentially 'Afro-Arabs'.

In contrast many now agree that the Swahili and their coastal settlements are essentially indigenous to Africa.² The real problem is that identity and culture are too often perceived in racial terms.³ If one looks at the Swahili more comprehensively, it is apparent that they developed and shared a distinctive common culture for a thousand years at least. The Swahili language is clearly Bantu in its structure and grammar, though the vocabulary incorporates several Arabic (most of these only within the last 300 years), Hindu, and Portuguese words. It is the only Bantu language with a centuries-old written literary tradition. The religion is Islam. Dress and cuisine are distinctive: the former characterized by the men's long skirts, the latter by an emphasis on fish, rice, and spices. Swahili society was hierarchical and based on class as much as tribal divisions. It was also intensely urban, with architecture consciously establishing identity and class. Individuals identified themselves with a particular town and took its name to describe themselves.

History

The coast enters written history in the first century CE in a mariners' guide to markets, ports, and harbours, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. The most southerly emporium on the coast was Rhapta. It has

been long and unsuccessfully sought especially in the area of the Rufiji delta of Tanzania. Many now believe that it lay much further north, in the hinterland of the Tana River and Lamu archipelago in northern Kenya, location of so many later ancient towns.

Throughout the second half of the first millennium CE, there is evidence of a fundamental uniformity in the earliest indigenous ceramics from sites all along the coast and on the islands, including the Comoro Islands. This general cultural unity for the entire coast suggests maritime connections between the settlements. It also demonstrates that the origins of the coastal settlements lay in the interior and that the population had its roots in Africa.⁴

At Shanga in the eighth century there was what is interpreted as an indigenous pre-Swahili village with two different forms of houses grouped in separate quarters and with their occupants adhering to different diets.⁵ Both partly surrounded a single central cattle stockade and a well. It seems that different ethnic groups were already coming together. One can presume they had a common purpose: trade. The ninth century saw the first evidence of Islam, with a sequence of three small rectangular buildings of timber and clay built inside the stockade, which have been interpreted as mosques. The original worshippers are assumed to have been visitors off foreign ships; certainly these tiny buildings were not capable of holding more than a fraction of the total population. Their construction coincides with the first appearance of foreign trade goods—of which sherds of glazed ceramics are now almost the only survivors.⁶ Much of this interpretation is disputed: it is claimed that the area excavated was too small to provide any firm conclusions; that there is no evidence that the stockade was ever used for cattle; and that the rectangular buildings lack mihrabs, are inaccurately oriented so that they do not face Mecca properly, and were probably not mosques.

In the mid-tenth century at Shanga, a large mosque was built over the stockade and the little early mosques. It used squared and coursed coral blocks set in a mud mortar. This building technique was used up and down the coast at much the same time. There is evidence in contemporary deposits at Manda of a sea wall constructed of massive coral blocks and of some use of clay bricks. The latter occur also at a few other sites but the structures they were used for are unknown and they soon ceased to be used. Very little indeed can be said about these early settlements as a whole: they now lie buried beneath deep subsequent deposits and very little of them has been revealed.⁷

By the eleventh century foreign trade was so firmly established as the basis of the coastal economy that many towns were minting their own coins in gold, silver, and copper. Several hoards of coins have been found, apparently hidden by their owners over nine centuries ago. At Mtambwe Mkuu on Pemba Island a hoard included both Fatimid

Egyptian dinars, the latest dating to 1066 CE, and coins of Ali ibn al Hasan, the founder of Kilwa, according to the *Kilwa Chronicle*.⁸

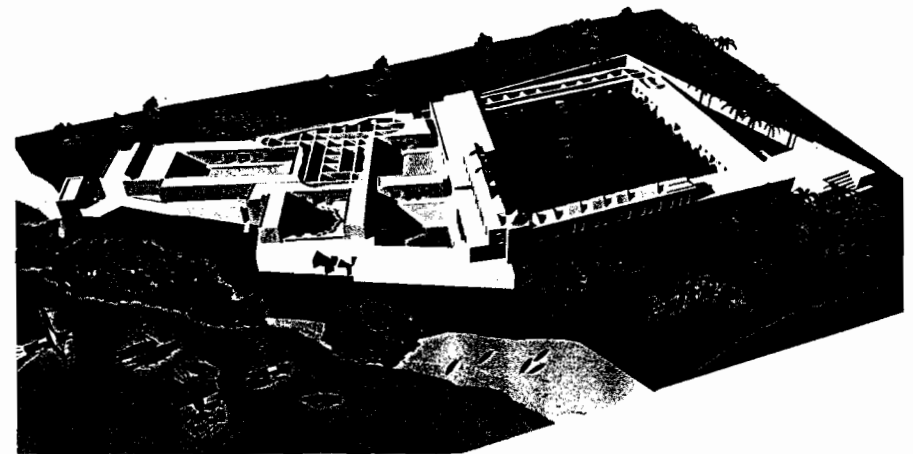
The most fascinating suggestion derived from the investigations of these early settlements is that, from the mid-tenth century, the trade of the coast was so significant and so securely integrated with the economy of the wider world that it fuelled a rebirth of some forms of art in countries across the Mediterranean, from Byzantium, Sicily, and Spain, and into southern Germany and the Holy Roman Empire.⁹ The principal luxury exports were gold from Zimbabwe, ivory from tusks of the African elephant which were much larger than any available before, and rock crystal of a new size and clarity from southern Ethiopia. A new trade route was opened, up the Red Sea to Fatimid Cairo. The new raw materials stimulated new standards of craftsmanship catering for the wealthy of much of Europe. The products of the short-lived, eleventh-century rock crystal craftsmanship of Fatimid Cairo were much sought after. The same is true of the longer-lived production of Fatimid royal ivory carvings: caskets, throne backs (echoes of Aksum), and panels of vivid scenes of court and country life.

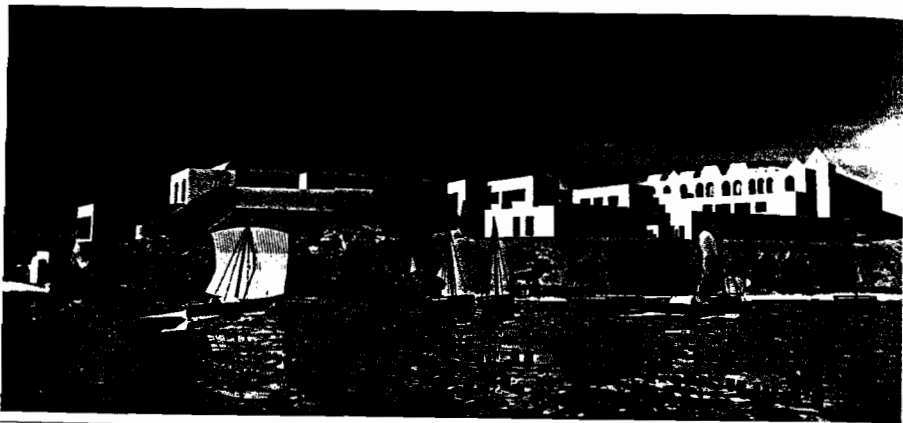
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A reconstruction of the palace at Husuni Kubwa showing the pool, private apartments, audience court, warehouses and pavilions roofed with barrel vaults, trefoil vaults, vaults with multifaceted pyramidal ends, and conical domes. At the intersection of the two ranges was a massive fluted conical dome.

Husuni Kubwa

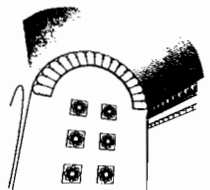
Husuni Kubwa (Swahili for 'large fort') outside the town of Kilwa is not only the earliest surviving major building on the coast south of Somalia but also by far the largest and most sophisticated: a true palace [6].¹⁰ It carried the coastal architecture to greater heights than were ever attained later. It can be precisely dated and its builder and owner named. A carved coral inscription in praise of al Hasan ibn Suleiman was found in the most luxurious part of the building; he figures in the *Kilwa Chronicle* and reigned from about 1320 to 1333; he was visited by





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Husuni Kubwa, as it appeared from the sheltered waters on the east of the cliff-girt sandstone promontory: once one of the most impressive sights of the Indian Ocean.

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Reconstructions of vaulted rooms at Husuni Kubwa.



the inveterate Maghribi traveller, ibn Battuta, in 1331. Four coins of his father's reign were the only ones found at the bottom of the palace well.

As in all coastal buildings, coarse vesicular coral, the bedrock of so much of the coastal lands, was the basic building material. Fine-grained homogeneous porites coral was cut from the living offshore reefs and, while still soft, used for all the finer carved work. Coral was also burnt to produce lime. All stonework was covered with a thin hard skim-coat of lime plaster, a silky smooth and immaculate white finish. Close-set mangrove poles were used to support flat coral concrete roofs. Its quality as roofing timber was such that it has long been a primary export from the coast to western Asia. However it only grows to a limited height and this determines its span. Hence the module on which all coastal architecture is based: 2.4 m is the width of every room. As a result many of them resemble long narrow galleries.

The palace of Husuni Kubwa is built on a prominent headland at the entrance to the harbour of Kilwa [6, 100]. A monumental stairway rises up the cliff from the sea. At its foot is a small building with tanks or foot-baths on either side of its door, uncomfortably oriented to face exactly north, the direction of Mecca. It was probably a mosque, though this cannot be certain, for the sea has destroyed the qibla wall. Certainly there was no other mosque attached to the palace. At the summit of the headland, with fine views directly across the bay, were the private quarters of the sultan. At least two of the long rooms here were vaulted and decorated with panels and friezes of carved coral blocks [102, 104]. Such decoration was nevertheless minimal, used as an accent rather than overall patterning. The luxury of this part of the building is nicely illustrated by the broken pieces of a Chinese Yuan Dynasty flask found on its floor and dated to about 1300.

Inland these apartments faced onto a formal sunken courtyard flanked on both sides by open pavilions. This court is entirely secluded

and would have served as a private area where the sultan's wives and children could spend much of their time. At the shore end of this court were the core domestic rooms: two interlocking apartments in what became the characteristic form of all coastal houses, save that they also had a long range of servants' rooms, of various sizes and quality, and washrooms flanking them on one side. These led to another complete small house, presumably that of the member of the sultan's extended family or clan who acted as chamberlain, and then into the domestic courtyard with its well.

Directly across the main axis—and entrance hall and corridor of the palace—was a deep ornamental pool. The main corridor terminates in a long open pavilion with a raised seat at one end: the *diwan* where the sultan held court [103]. On an upper terrace overlooking this audience court were two ranges of impressive vaulted rooms. Perhaps they were used as formal reception rooms; more probably they were for the pleasure and refreshment of the women of the palace—for they opened onto high, secluded terraces open to all the sea breezes and views. They were the most ambitious of all the rooms in the palace and, indeed, of the entire coast. Perhaps they were over-ambitious, for it may have been the collapse of these complex structures that caused the palace to be abandoned when it was nearing completion or very soon afterwards.

Behind the palace and supporting the vaulted rooms was a quadrangle surrounded by 38 large storerooms. Each side had two units of four to six almost identical storerooms, each opening off a wide corridor

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The audience court at Husuni Kubwa. The *diwan* where the sultan held court was at the head of tiers of seats or steps, where the courtiers probably sat, leading down to the sunken audience court, once again with flanking pavilions. The deep court is reminiscent of a theatre, but then holding court and a theatrical performance are not dissimilar. At night this similarity would have been heightened by the lamps in banks of niches down both sides of the court.



entered from a central hall. They were windowless, extremely secure, easily guarded and controlled, and fitted with storage racks. The volume of goods that could be held here would have been enormous: enough to load fleets of ocean-going dhows or the annual production of the whole town. There was far more storage space than would have been required to store only gold or ivory.

At the corner of the great quadrangle nearest the town, a wide flight of steps led to a large platform that terminates the terrace formed by the roofs of the storerooms: a site the sultan could reach directly from the vaulted structures and where he could be seen by and receive townfolk in a setting as imposing as the audience court. In the rooms under this platform goods could be received, taxed, documented, and taken into storage.

Husuni Ndogo

Across a little valley immediately seaward of Husuni Kubwa is another massive building contemporary with the palace, Husuni Ndogo ('small fort'). It is little more than a single high, windowless curtain-wall enclosing a very large rectangular quadrangle. Polygonal bastions with cut sandstone quoins protrude from the corners and along the sides of the curtain-wall: two on the short sides and three on the longer sides. There is a single unassuming central entrance. The interior is empty, both of structures and deposits, save for a well, a small tank and short stub walls dividing some of the inside of the curtain wall into 4 m wide units.

There is nothing remotely like it anywhere else. It seems indeed to have been the only public secular stone building in any coastal town. Given the lack of local parallels, it is a particular puzzle. In descending order of probability it may have been a caravanserai, market, fort, barracks, or slave barracoon or, much less likely, a mosque. What it does do is confirm the unique power of al Hasan ibn Suleiman.

Assessing the Husunis

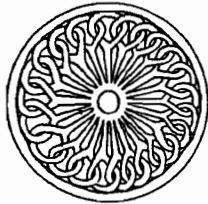
Husuni Kubwa was built as much for comfort as a demonstration of power. It was geometric in its layout, formal and ornamental. It was delightful in its variety of forms as well as in its situation and amenities. It was almost entirely single-storeyed and to this extent it was not monumental or imposing. Nevertheless it asserts authority through its size. Vaults and domes were daring in design and construction but they were not fully exploited to provide varied spaces beneath them. Decoration was restrained and austere. The whole complex was designed and built as a single fully realized entity and never altered or enlarged—indeed it may never have been finished or long occupied. It

was not precise in its planning—some axes had to be shifted and manipulated to fit irregularities of the site; the whole perimeter wall was angled to the palace to suggest a more northerly and 'correct' orientation; and the ranges of store-rooms were asymmetrical. To a visitor from an Asian capital it may have seemed scarcely worthy of attention. Indeed all that ibn Battuta remembered of his visit to Sultan al Hasan ibn Suleiman, presumably at Husuni Kubwa, was his surprise that the sultan and his retinue were very black and African yet they were receiving visitors from the purest lineages of Iraq and Mecca.

The vaulted and domed pavilions and reception rooms, the stepped audience court, the pool, and the ranges of storerooms of Husuni Kubwa are all unprecedented and they were never imitated or repeated. The storerooms point to a single short period when a centralized trading system was imposed on the whole trade of the southern coast, with individual merchants operating under the authority of a single individual. He became qualitatively different in wealth and style of life from his former peers. Husuni Kubwa was more than the residence of a merchant-prince who had established a monopoly of sorts over the entire island's trade. It was a seat of government, a manifestation of political and territorial authority. Perhaps Husuni Ndogo was even a demonstration of the military power that backed this authority. The Husunis are a monument to an interlude, unattested in the written histories, when for a short time, wide-ranging political and economic authority came under the hand of a single individual, a true sultan. The power and wealth that this brought him and Kilwa could be lavished on a monument to their joint success. Husuni Kubwa was the extraordinary result: a unique historical document as much as an architectural masterpiece.

Mosques

The mosques of the coast show an individuality of design and continuity that distinguishes them as a valid regional architectural tradition within Islam. Almost all mosques, even Friday Mosques, were surprisingly small. The main axis of every mosque was at right angles to the qibla—there were no long lateral aisles parallel to the qibla which cater more efficiently for the unified physical actions of Islamic public prayer. Almost all mosques had flat roofs supported on mangrove rafters, which again provide the module and determine the widths of the aisles. Mosques on the Kenya coast tended to have two aisles separated by a row of square piers on the mihrab axis and thus obscuring it. Those further south, on the Tanzanian coast, were more likely to have two rows of octagonal columns and hence three aisles and a free view of the mihrab. These are, however, by no means general rules, nor is the significance of the difference yet apparent.



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Carved coral bosses with intricate interlaced ornament that decorated the Great Mosque and a smaller fifteenth-century domed mosque at Kilwa.

The local or ward mosques of the coastal towns were domestic in scale, with subdued light, low ceilings, and massive piers. They were cool, restful, and full of quiet corners. It was in their local mosque rather than their houses that men would have passed much of their day. The mosque was the meeting place of every ward, a business and social centre almost as much as a place of worship. Like so much of the coastal architecture, even the Friday Mosques were egalitarian. The only mosque on the coast to have a royal enclosure was the Great Mosque at Kilwa, where the Sultan of Husuni Kubwa, al Hasan ibn Suleiman, built himself a domed private chamber, expressing once more his unique status and overriding authority.

Mihrabs were monumental, reaching to the roof and covering about a third of the qibla wall. For over 400 years, starting in the thirteenth century, a slow continual evolution of mihrab design can be traced.¹¹ No mosques, save the thirteenth-century Friday Mosque in Mogadishu, had minarets. Only a few simple masonry minbars¹² survive. Courtyards, if they existed at all, were not designed for prayer or a large congregation of people. They were purely utilitarian places for ritual washing in plain basins rather than ornamental tanks.

Only two or three early inscriptions, carved in local coral in a decorative Kufic script, survive in mosques. The best known bears a date equivalent to 1107 and has been incorporated in a much later mihrab in a mosque at Kizimkazi on Zanzibar Island. They were very seldom used after this. A single inscription in a private room of Husuni Kubwa, is the only panel of decorative calligraphy.

In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the flow of immigrants particularly from Oman began, there was a marked break in mihrab design, characterized by much more elaborate decoration of the mihrab in coarse plasterwork. The mihrab arch became first multilobed and then the projections of the lobes were given heavy foliated cusps. The interior of the mihrab niches was equally heavily decorated with fluting, panelling, and niches. Though the basic mihrab form survived, it was transformed with decoration that seems coarse and over-elaborate to an eye attuned to the reticence of the previous centuries.

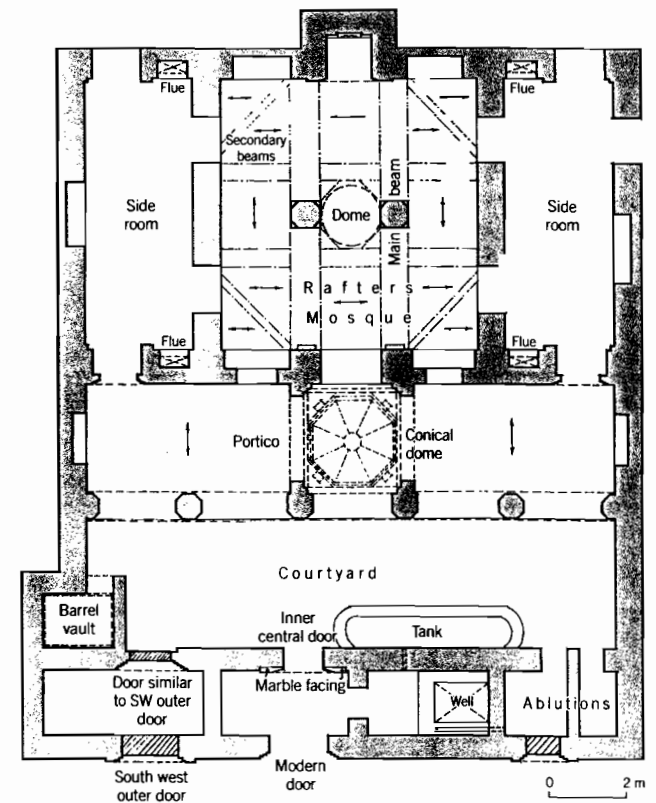
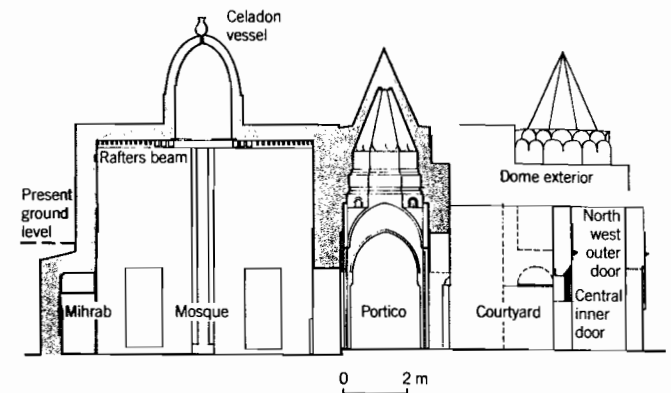
Mosques in Mogadishu

The mosque of Fakhr ad Din, first sultan of Mogadishu, is dated to 1269 by an inscription on a glazed tile in the mihrab. It was built of the early squared, coursed coral blocks, and is a unified, articulated design planned around a single central axis [105]. Though the module remains the span of a mangrove pole, a system of main and subsidiary composite beams reduced the columns to two. This is a sophisticated, calculated plan: something that is not found further south.

All that survived—at least until recently—of the original Friday

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Plan and section of the Mosque of Fakhr ad Din in Mogadishu, probably of the thirteenth century. The main doors lead to a courtyard and a portico with a central dome and then into the mosque with a single central dome. The portico dome is particularly tall, tent-shaped, and octagonal, with straight faces and decorated with cusped plasterwork both inside and out. The mosque dome is a true dome rising from a tall drum and entirely plain. On the exterior it was surmounted by a large Chinese celadon jar.



Mosque in Mogadishu is a massive round tower 13.5 m high and 4.25 m in diameter at its base. It was built in twelve stages, separated by string courses and each inset slightly from the one below. An inscription above the door dated it to 1238.

Kilwa and the Great Mosque

The unusual economic strength and architectural invention of Kilwa are demonstrated once more by the Friday Mosque or, as it is appropriately known, the Great Mosque. The original tenth- or eleventh-century mosque remains as a plain roofless shell of no great size, with the courses of squared coral blocks that were characteristic of the period. The flat roof was supported on nine massive polygonal wooden columns. In the early fourteenth century the builder of Husuni Kubwa, al Hasan ibn Suleiman, erected a cloister or arcade, with monolithic coral columns supporting a continuous barrel vault surrounding a large prayer court, the only example of this characteristic Islamic space on the coast. At the far corner of this court a 4 m square chamber was covered by a very large dome. It had its own entrance and tanks for the ritual washing. It is almost certainly the royal enclosure where Sultan al Hasan attended Friday prayers as ibn Battuta recounted, and whose collapse is remembered in the *Kilwa Chronicle*.

Sultan Suleiman ibn Muhammed, reigning from 1421 to 1442,

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The interior of the fifteenth-century domed and vaulted prayer hall of the Great Mosque at Kilwa. Composite hexagonal columns, with coral blocks on alternate faces and filled with a concrete of coral rubble and with plain square capitals of a single coral block, formed 30 square arched bays. Around the perimeter and down the central aisle these supported concrete domes, resting on squared coral cornices and groined squinches—a new structural development since the building of Husuni Kubwa. The intervening bays bore barrel vaults.



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The mihrab of the early sixteenth-century Great Mosque at Gedi: the culmination of four centuries of indigenous evolution of mihrab design. As mihrab design gradually evolved and became more elaborate, panels were recessed within the outer frame, occasionally framed with a carved cable pattern. An increased number of arches and jambs were added. Rebates were cut into the projecting corners of arches and jambs. The arch shape became stilted and taller in relation to its width. Chinese porcelain bowls, carved coral bosses, or a small panel of glazed tiles, probably bearing an inscription, were recessed into the frame and spandrels.



replaced the cloister and roofed the entire prayer court with plain and fluted domes and barrel vaults to form the largest covered mosque on the coast [106]. The bays retain the same module and dimensions as any roofed in timber. The stability and strength of this structure have enabled it to survive over five centuries, with little attention for much of this time. It is innovative architecture but the bays are so small and high that the congregation could scarcely have been aware of the vaults. Despite the alternating forms, the interior space is read as undifferentiated and unarticulated, even monotonous, with no sense of centrality or direction.

The same system of roofing with alternating domes and vaults was used again in a small mosque in Kilwa contemporary with the Great Mosque, but only three bays wide and three long. Given its different scale, the spaces within it have greater impact. Occasional similar but much less skilled or successful domes and vaults roofed a few other mosques.

Building and houses

From at least the time of the building of Husuni Kubwa at the start of the fourteenth century, the characteristic forms and techniques of

Swahili domestic architecture were firmly established. They flourished until so recently that the ways the spaces were used and what they signified can be readily reconstructed and understood: a continuity that speaks volumes of the strength and self-confidence of the culture.¹³

The cores of houses generally consisted of two long rooms or galleries running the length of the house [108]. The front room, the *msana wa chini*, had wide double doors and large windows opening onto a platform running round three sides of a front courtyard. Most visitors probably never went further than this bench or platform round the courtyard. Doors leading into the further rooms are never aligned with the front doors so that no one could see further into the house than the front room. Two bedrooms, the *ndani*, and a carefully designed and compartmented latrine-washroom, the *choo*, reflecting the universal importance accorded to actual and symbolic purity, opened off the back of the rear long room, the *msana wa juu*.

Both long rooms were multifunctional: used for eating, sleeping, working, entertaining intimate friends and relatives, and storage. It is mistaken to assign specific functions to them. However, the rooms were also clearly graded from public to private in a steep and rigid 'intimacy gradient'. The rear rooms were certainly used only by the family and close female friends and relatives. Today the main bedroom, the *ndani*, belongs particularly to the owner's wife, the site of her marital bed, where as a bride she was displayed on her wedding day. It is where she will give birth, be purified after birth, will die and be laid out: the site of family rituals that punctuate its most significant moments.

From the seventeenth century, an increasing number of niches, *zidaka*, often with intricately arched openings and eventually in banks surrounded by diaper patterns in the plasterwork, were set in the walls of the long rooms, particularly in the *msana wa juu* and around the marital bed in the *ndani*. These niches were carefully designed with their sides and roofs splayed slightly outwards. Thus sides and roof were invisible from the right viewpoint—the entrance door—and the back floated as a dark unattached shadow, creating a sense of mysterious depth. Their main purpose was decorative, to give depth to the long galleries and to display imported glass and glazed ceramic plates and vases. These not only attested to the owners' aesthetic sensibilities and ability to satisfy them but eventually acquired the qualities of charms.

In the wealthier and more elaborate fifteenth-century houses, small private rooms, as ornate as any room, occasionally with vaults inlaid with lines of porcelain bowls and often with a washroom attached, open off one or both sides of the front room: the owner's study or bedroom. More frequently there is an equally decorated guest room, the *sabule*, with its own washroom in the far corner of the front courtyard and quite independent of the house, probably intended especially for visits by business and trading partners and the captains or officers of

overseas ships. The front reception courtyard has an entrance porch in another corner with benches along the side and wide double wooden doors, the only opening onto the outside world.

Behind the houses was a second spacious domestic courtyard, the women's, with a well and doubtless once a vegetable garden and orchard, the place for cooking, laundering, and other domestic tasks. Shared domestic courtyards and wells provided a meeting place for women, their communal social base.

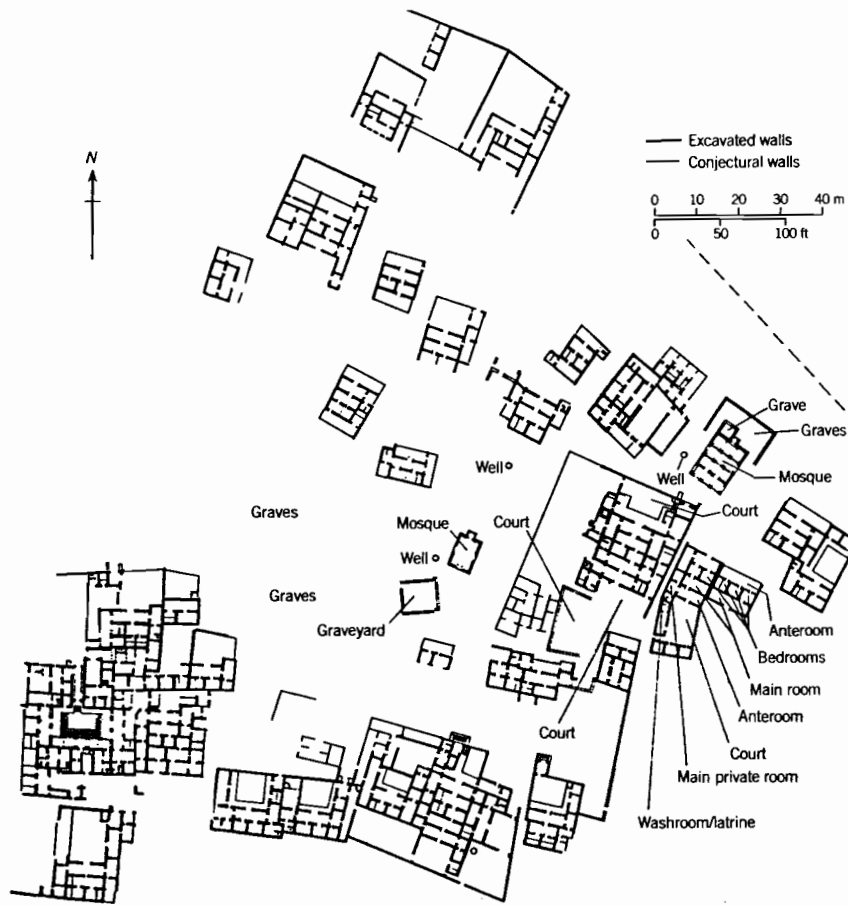
Town planning and Songo Mnara

The largest towns probably never had more than 150 stone houses at most and many settlements had no more than two or three. The town on the island of Songo Mnara, separated from Kilwa by a shallow channel, was a typical prosperous town of the middle rank. It was contemporary with the second great building period at Kilwa in the fifteenth century and a satellite town to it, perhaps a place where the more prosperous citizens of Kilwa preferred to live at certain seasons, perhaps Kilwa's rural and agricultural base. There are several widely spaced clusters of stone houses [108].

The stone houses of Songo Mnara illustrate clearly how they were built in groups, usually with up to six houses, sharing party walls, wells, and domestic courtyards. Some were set back-to-back or even interlocking. In this case, a lobby led directly from one house into the other. This plan goes back in time at least as far as Husuni Kubwa. It is a certain indication that many coastal houses were built together by closely related families, and that houses and businesses were run as partnerships, as cooperative ventures, by members of clans or lineages.

A core of six apartments with another eight peripheral houses interconnecting with the core are called the 'palace' of Songo Mnara, with some justification. The structure of the vaulted cloister around the audience court was identical to that of Kilwa mosque vaults and was probably from the same hands. But this is the only sign of grandeur. Compared with the formality and dignity of Husuni Kubwa, this is not the palace of a sultan but the fourteen homes of the leading lineage. The six individual apartments in the palace are small with only one long room and a single bedroom.

Songo Mnara illustrates how clusters of houses in the early towns were quite widely spaced. Several mosques and cemeteries survive amongst them. Everywhere on the coast, the stone houses were probably partly surrounded by orchards and plantations: several visitors, from ibn Battuta to Vasco da Gama, noticed these with admiration. The stone houses were probably also interspersed with less permanent houses occupied by the poorer classes. There were few formal streets or alleys or sense of an urban environment. Though da Gama wrote of the



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Plan of the stone dwellings and 'palace' at the core of the island town of Songo Mnara, near Kilwa. There are several widely spaced clusters of stone houses. A core of six apartments with another eight peripheral houses interconnecting with the core are called the 'Palace', with some justification (bottom left).

narrow alleys and multistoreyed houses of the town, this is a considerable exaggeration. Only next to the Friday Mosque at Kilwa was there eventually sufficient pressure for house plans to be altered and compressed.

Stone houses are extremely important Swahili signifiers, defining class and wealth, establishing, expressing, and reinforcing the owners as citizens of substance, demonstrating their success, reliability, and creditworthiness. The people of the coastal settlements constituted a 'frontier society' and used their buildings and architecture, like their insignia and myths of origin, to define and maintain an ideology of difference and dominance. The rise of stone building marks the rise and differentiation of a distinct merchant class, politically wholly dominant but more concerned with economic success, rising and falling with

fluctuations in trade and trade routes. Each town or community was autonomous; territorial control was fragile; dynasties of merchants and city-states rose and decayed; there are few accounts in the various town chronicles of aggrandizing wars or heroic war leaders. A study of the stone architecture is the study of a single class within Swahili society, the Waungwana. We know nothing at present of the infrastructure of artisans, farmers or fishermen, domestic or plantation slaves. None of their timber and clay, palm leaf, matting, or grass buildings are visible on the surface and no excavations have focused on them.

Sources

One can find many elements in the architecture with parallels abroad, in many different parts of the Islamic world.¹⁴ Building in coral and the mastery of all the various elements of this versatile material may have derived from towns along the southern Red Sea such as Dahlak Kabir and, in a much later manifestation, Suakin. The bastioned rectangle of Husuni Ndogo can be traced back to Roman *castra* and Umayyad building in Syria (c.650–750), but this form was long used for forts, barracks, caravanserais, and mosques in many parts of Islam. The overall axial planning and some of the carved decoration of Husuni Kubwa can be compared with ninth- and tenth-century Samarra on the Tigris, where there were also a mosque and barracks of similar forms to Husuni Ndogo. Conical domes are found on many Seljuk (c.1050–1250) tombs in Iran, Anatolia, and southern central Asia. The flat-faced or pyramidal false pendentive and the groined squinch [102, 106] are also found in Seljuk structures. The ornamental pool of Husuni Kubwa is a form used in Mamluk Egypt (c.1250–1550).

The plan of the coastal mosques, with small open courtyards for ablutions, longitudinal prayer halls with narrow aisles, and a central row of pillars, has close parallels in southern Arabia. On the other hand, the Swahili house plan has not been matched in Arabia nor India but has similarities with houses in the Gulf and Persia.

A surprising number of details point to Indian influences. As in Muslim India, all arches are actually corbelled structures, without vousoirs and with a nick at the apex and not a keystone. This 'ogee' arch is found in India, from the Great Mosque in Delhi, built in the twelfth century, to fifteenth-century Gujarat. The rectangular mihrab frame, rebated mihrab mouldings, and panelled mihrab lintels have been taken as features of the architecture of fifteenth-century Delhi.¹⁵ The lamp niche and the banks of niches in domestic contexts, especially those intended to hold decorative ceramics, are found widely in houses and palaces of Muslim India. The vaulting of the Great Mosque and other Kilwa mosques has been compared with a mosque at Gulbarga (c.1367), a major monument of Bahmanid India, though

the similarities are only general and attract attention mainly because Gulbarga is one of the few other mosques that are entirely covered and vaulted.

Some of these similarities with works from around the Islamic world may be significant but no systematic comparative studies have been made. The architectural connections may be direct or indirect. None of them should seem surprising. After all, there is a very long and well-attested history of contact between the coast and almost every part of the Islamic world, a certain vehicle of architectural influence and even one that made easy the passage of craftsmen.

To visitors from the centres of Islam the coastal towns may have seemed provincial. There was no formal urban planning. There were no bazaars or public baths. Indeed only two public secular buildings of any consequence survive: the Husunis. There were no formal gardens, private or public. Some towns had defensive walls around them; but these were flimsy and unadorned and their gateways were without any pretensions. A sense of monumentality was only apparent in the mihrabs of mosques and some doorways in houses. Although most buildings were severely geometric, there was no overall system of proportions beyond the functional one of the mangrove module. Most of the buildings were almost monotonous in their simplicity and similarity. Most of the architecture was functional with very little sense of grandeur. This set the coast apart from the many dramatic expressions of civic pride, religious piety, or public duty manifest in the architecture of Islam elsewhere.

Few would claim that the coastal architecture made any important contribution to the development of Islamic architecture outside eastern Africa. The initial impetuses that stimulated the coastal architecture became incorporated in a single coherent, living and evolving, secure and established local architectural tradition. It is a close reflection and embodiment of coastal culture and its most enduring monument.

Swahili architecture and Great Zimbabwe

Finally, it is particularly noteworthy that there was an entire absence of any architectural influences from the coast passing to the other great centre of building at the time: the far interior, Great Zimbabwe and the scores of minor zimbabwes. Husuni Kubwa is the exact contemporary of the first major phase of building at Great Zimbabwe. Indeed a copper coin of al Hasan ibn Suleiman is the only coin found at Great Zimbabwe, though unfortunately it does not date a specific deposit there. Kilwa and Zimbabwe were in close contact throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with Swahili traders resident and influential at the courts of Zimbabwe rulers in the sixteenth century.

Trade between the two centres played an important part in generating the wealth that stimulated and fuelled building in both regions. Perhaps Swahili carvers were commissioned to sculpt the soapstone of Great Zimbabwe; yet not a single architectural concept passed between them or was adopted by either partner.

This scarcely requires explanation. Both had strong, locally developed, indigenous architectural systems. These fully and accurately met the needs and reflected very different systems of belief, perception, custom, ritual, and the symbolic representation of these. Both are the products of sophisticated modes of representation operating at the deepest levels. They had nothing in common and saw nothing in the other to appeal to very different sensibilities.

Tombs

It is the stone-built tombs, isolated or in small cemeteries, that are the most innovative and individual feature of the coastal architecture. Their designs are unknown elsewhere in the Islamic world. From the fourteenth century, important tombs were surrounded by coral walls, their façades usually divided into panels, to form rectangular enclosures. At the head or qibla end of the enclosure, a tall masonry pillar was often erected: square, round, fluted, or polygonal in cross-section. Its shaft was frequently also inlaid with one or more decorative ceramic bowls—usually of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain. Very few if any inscriptions survive on the tombs to give us any idea of who was buried beneath them or precisely when [109].

The derivation of the pillar tombs remains a mystery. Because such tombs have no place in orthodox Islam, their derivation was probably African rather than external: suggested models range from the grave markers of southern Ethiopia, the stelae of Aksum, and the standing

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Two monumental tombs at Ishikani on the northern Kenya coast. A fourteenth- to fifteenth-century celadon bowl was originally inset in the tall pillar. The wall panels have different bold and asymmetric patterns: decoration that seems more African than Islamic.



stones of the west African sahel. The stone tombs may reflect a widespread and non-Islamic African respect for and veneration of ancestors. This may still survive in Swahili traditions of visiting, praying, and sacrificing at such tombs. The pillar tomb, like so many other monuments of the coast, was a symbol of residence, a validation of citizenship, a commemoration of civic rectitude and piety, and a ratification of ancestry and of the principle of hereditary succession.

The decorative arts

Almost nothing of the decorative arts of the coast survives. Doors, door jambs, window surrounds, grilles in the windows, rafters, cornices, hanging rails, beds, and furniture were all made of wood and almost certainly carved and painted. Not a single fragment survives. Only lines of fixing holes attest to the hangings that once adorned the walls of Husuni Kubwa apartments. All we have to give us a taste of what has vanished are some carved coral discs with intricate interlaced patterns inset in a few mosque walls [104].

The only other intimation of the early decorative arts are descriptions of the 'thrones' of some 'sultans'—*kita cha exi* or 'chairs of power'—made of ebony inlaid with silver. Some former royal wooden drums, with typical African forms and diapered and interlaced Islamic carving, survive but they are rare and little is known of them. More significant are the side-blown trumpets or *siwa*. Two magnificent examples survive, important even if they are slightly later than most of the monuments we have described.¹⁶

The *siwa* of Lamu, 1.80 m long and probably dating from about 1720, is a lost-wax casting in brass [110]. It is in three parts: the horn, a long, perforated, decorative cylinder, and a heavy, ornate finial. The two latter are hinged and were hung over the shoulder of the trumpeter, to act as a counterweight to the horn.

The *siwa* of Pate, even longer than the Lamu example at 2.15 m and dated to 1695 in the *Pate Chronicle*, is also in three parts and made of two or three elephant tusks. The horn is a single large tusk. The elaborate and delicate interlaced guilloche patterns carved along it are typical of fourteenth- to sixteenth-century carved stone decoration on the coast, so this *siwa* may be earlier than supposed or a copy of an earlier example. The inscriptions are in an Arabic so corrupt they cannot be read.

A few equally large but much simpler wooden *siwa* survive, like that of the small fishing village of Mbweni on the central Tanzanian coast. Once the *siwa* was one of the insignia of royalty, an embodiment of authority. This is true not only of the coast but of much of the rest of Africa in the seventeenth century. On the coast they became the symbols of a town's and people's identity, status, and citizenship. They

A clan elder holds the brass *siwa* of Lamu. The inscription on the cylinder is in a corrupt Mamluk script copied for its pattern rather than its sense. The finial is decorated with interlaced 'Solomon' or 'Yoruba' knots.



were brought out and blown only on special occasions like enthronements or weddings. The right to have the *siwa* blown was a jealously guarded privilege of senior Waungwana clans, an honour as well as often a source of rivalry and ill-feeling.