The wealth of Africa
The Swahili Coast
Students’ worksheets
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Front cover image: Coin with rhyming inscription from Kilwa, British Museum
SHEET 1: WAS KILWA FOUND BY AFRICANS OR OUTSIDERS?

There is some debate as to whether Muslim traders were the first to create the Swahili city states, or whether Africans had already started the process before them. Also unclear is whether the process of coming together was peaceful. See what you think.

Source 1
Though the islanders became Muslims and their kings borrowed elements from Islamic court ritual, the Swahili are a distinct African people who came about as a result of the intermarriage between the local coastal communities and their visitors from Southern Arabia, Persia and India.
Moon 2005: 6

Source 3
Then came Sultan Ali bin Selimani the Persian. He came with his ships, and brought his goods and his children. One child was called Fatima. We do not know the names of the other children. They disembarked at Kilwa, that is to say, they went to the headman of the country, the Elder Mrimba, and asked for a place in which to trade goods and beads. Sultan Ali married Mrimba’s daughter. He lived on good terms with the people.
Freeman-Grenville 1962: 221

Source 4
Until quite recently, the history of the East Coast of Africa has been portrayed – by Europeans and Arabs alike – as one of Muslim-Arab domination, with the African people and rulers playing a passive role in the process. But oral and archaeological evidence suggests that the relationship was in fact, one of mutual dependence and benefit. Therefore it does not make sense to talk of the Arabs ‘appearing’ on the East African coast and ‘taking over’ African societies.
BBC World Service

Source 5
The rulers and wealthy merchants of the larger ports made a point of tracing their descent from Muslim ‘pioneers’... However the towns were fundamentally African; they were not Middle Eastern settler colonies... Swahili, the most widely spoken language in East Africa today is fundamentally a Bantu African language.
R Dunn in Hamdun & King 1998: xx

Questions

1. Were Africans or Muslim traders on the Swahili Coast first?
2. How did the two cultures come together?
3. Why does it matter who was first?
Ibn Battuta seemed to be impressed by Kilwa. See if you agree with him, based on the evidence here from the town and palace.

**Source 1**
Kilwa is one of the most beautiful and well-constructed towns in the world. The whole of it is elegantly built.
Ibn Battuta (c. 1330), quoted in Hamdun & King 1998: 22

**Source 2**
The city is large and has good buildings of stone and mortar with terraces, and the houses have much wood works. The city comes down to the shore and is entirely surrounded by a wall and towers, within which there may be 12,000 inhabitants.
Gaspar Correa, Portuguese traveller, quoted in Elkiss 1973: 126

**Source 3**
Kilwa was located at the northern end of an island which was separated from the mainland of present-day Tanzania by only a mile. The peculiar location of the island within an inlet not only allowed easy access to the mainland, but also provided the inhabitants with a site which could be defended against attacks from the Indian Ocean.
Elkiss 1973: 121

**Source 4**
At the back of the houses there are orchards planted with fruit trees and palms to give shade and to please the sight as well as for their fruit. Here the streets are so narrow that one can jump from one roof to the other on the opposite side... From our ships the fine houses, terraces, and minarets, with the palms and trees in the orchards, made the city look so beautiful that our men were eager to land...
Francisco d’Almeida, chief of Portuguese expedition against Kilwa (1505), quoted in Freeman-Grenville 1962: 85–86

**Source 5**
There are sweet oranges, lemons, vegetables, small onions and aromatic herbs...there are many fat beasts, oxen, cows sheep, and goats and also plenty of fish.
Francisco d’Almeida, chief of Portuguese expedition against Kilwa (1505), quoted in Moon 2005: 8

**Task**
Use information from this page to design a tourist brochure for Kilwa at the time these sources describe.
The Swahili city states apparently produced little themselves. They seemed to rely mostly on exchanging other people’s goods. See if you can work out from these sources what they traded, and how successful they were.

**Source 1**
Kilwa’s wealth came from trade, not production. Merchants were the middlemen in a network of trade. In Kilwa, grains were grown, as well as coconuts, pineapples and other fruit. Meat was bought from inland herdsmen and fish from neighbouring villages. Kilwa made money from trade and taxes. Merchants using the port of Sofala had to pay import and export taxes, and these were notoriously high. One ivory tusk in seven had to be paid to the sultan of Kilwa.

Davidson 1968: 112

**Source 3**
Ancient navigators realised that the monsoon winds regularly blew from India towards East Africa from October to April and in the opposite direction from June to September. Taking advantage of the winds traders reached the [Swahili] coast and discovered a number of potentially valuable raw materials.

Elkiss 1973: 120

**Source 5**
There was a lucrative trade between the Swahili coast on one hand and India and China on the other. Kilwa, Malindi and Mombasa were great trading centres. Ships from India and China brought cotton cloths, silk cloths, wheat, grey, red and yellow beads, spears, axes, knives and porcelain to the Swahili ports. At the port cities... goods were transported in small vessels to the Sofala coast where they were bartered for wax, gold, and especially ‘soft’ ivory for the manufacture of furniture and handles in China.

Gadzekpo 1999: 112

**Source 6**
Of the many cities that rose to fame and wealth after 1200, none was more successful than Kilwa.

Davidson 1968: 106

**Questions**
1. Which goods did Kilwa produce itself?
2. Which goods came from East Asia?
3. What made trade with East Asia possible?
4. Which goods came from Africa?
5. How did Kilwa make money from this trade?
6. How successful were the Swahili cities at trade?
SHEET 4: CHINESE ADMIRAL ZHENG HE VISITS
THE SULTAN OF KILWA, 1415

Questions

1. What are the Chinese offering to the Kilwans?
2. What are they getting in return?
3. What does the visit of the Chinese tell you about the importance of Kilwa and the Swahili Coast?
SHEET 5: HOW POWERFUL WERE THE SWAHILI RULERS?

There is limited information on the political history of Kilwa or other Swahili states, so historians have to make up their minds based on archaeological remains such as the palace, later Swahili chronicles, and on the occasional accounts of travellers. See if you can work out what the rulers were like.

Source 1
This sultan is a very humble man. He sits with the poor people and eats with them, and gives respect to people of religion.
Ibn Battuta describing the Sultan of Kilwa (c. 1330), in Hamdun & King 1998: 24

Source 3
All the people walked barefoot, and there were raised over his head four canopies of coloured silk and on the top of each canopy was the figure of a bird in gold. His clothes that day were a robe of green Jerusalem cloth and underneath it fine loose robes of Egypt. He was dressed with wraps of silk and turbaned with a large turban. Before him drums and trumpets and pipes were played...
Ibn Battuta describing the Sultan of Mogadishu (c. 1330), in Hamdun & King 1998: 19

Source 5
The palace itself with its bathing pool, three domestic courts, and up to a hundred rooms, is the largest single building complex in sub-Saharan Africa.
Posnansky 1978: 501

Source 6
For nothing was left for Kilwa to conquer, as it was mistress of Mombasa, Malindi, the islands of Pemba, Zanzibar, Mafia, Comoro, and many other settlements.
Moon 2005: 9

Source 7
The successors of Ali varied in talents and success. Several were deposed, one beheaded, while another was thrown down a well. Though the sultan possessed much power, his authority was obviously not absolute. If he failed to perform his duties, the local people or his own relatives might dethrone him.
Elkiss 1973: 123

Source 8
In terms of administration, a wazir (prime minister) was appointed, together with an amir (army commander), muhtasib (police chief), Qadi (Chief Justice). Beneath them was a bureaucracy of tax collectors, auditors and other minor officials. Later sultans appear to have delegated powers to these officials while they enjoyed a life of luxury.
Elkiss 1973: 126

Questions
1. What does the palace tell you about the power of Swahili rulers?
2. What impression do you get of Swahili rulers from these sources?
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