

Kilwa

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Kilwa is the name of various localities and islands of the east coast of Africa. The town of Kilwa is divided into three different towns. Kilwa Kivinje, Kilwa Masoko and Kilwa Kisiwani with Songo Mnara and Sanje Ya Kiti. Kilwa Masoko is of little historical value.

Kilwa Kivinje is a 19th century Arabian slave and ivory trading town from which southern caravans started off into the interior of Africa. The market hall and fort (with a canon from the First World War) remain from the German period. There are also two stone pillars to commemorate the tribal dead of the Maji Maji uprising by the tribes of Southern Tanzania against the German colonial authorities. Kilwa Kivinje also played an important role in the United States. Located on the southern slave caravan route, the town exported at least 20,000 slaves during the 1860's - most of these were sent to the United States.

In the 11th century, the island of Kilwa Kisiwani was sold to 'Ali bin Al-Hassan Shirazi the son of the Shah of Shiraz and of an Abyssinian mother. 'Ali bought the island from the preceding pagan ruler, marrying his daughter and founding the city. Over the next few centuries, Kilwa grew to be a major city and trading center along the coast. Trade was mainly in gold and iron from Zimbabwe, ivory from Tanzania, and textiles, jewelry, porcelain, and spices from Asia.

At the zenith of its power in the 15th century, the Kilwa Sultanate owned or claimed authority over the city-states of Malindi, Mombasa, Pemba, Zanzibar, Mafia, Comoro, Mozambique, Sofala, and the trading posts across the channel on Madagascar.

Vasco da Gama sailed past Kilwa in 1498. Francisco d'Almeida took it by storm in 1505. A Portuguese fort controlled it until 1512 when an Arab mercenary captured Kilwa and expelled the Portuguese. A population of perhaps 10,000 in 1500 had already dwindled to about 4,000 by 1587, when marauding Zimba massacred 3,000 inhabitants. Kilwa never recovered.

After the Omani capture of Mombasa from the Portuguese in 1698, Kilwa was made a tributary to Oman. Later it became part of the colony of German East Africa from 1886 to 1918.

In the 18th century the slave trade developed greatly, but Zanzibar was the main entrepôt. Zanzibar finally absorbed Kilwa in 1843, deporting the last sultan.

Kilwa Kisiwani is where the greatest collection of ruins are to be found. Directly on the Northern shore lies the old Omani Fort, which is built on the foundations of the old Portuguese fort, in the early 19th Century. The Big Mosque is from the 12th Century and was further extended up to the 15th Century. It was said to be the largest mosque in East Africa.

In 1981 Kilwa was declared a World Heritage Site, and noted visitor sites are the Great Mosque, the Mkutini Palace and some remarkable ruins.