

Three Kilwa Gold Coins

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By far the best known and most easily recognised of the Islamic coins of the East African coast are those of the sultans of Kilwa.¹ They are copper coins, of a relatively uniform size (20-25 mm) and weight (1.50-2.50 gm), and are characterised by the rhyme between the two sides: the obverse affirms the ruler's faith in Allah, in the form of the phrase 'yathiq bi-' ('trusts in...'), followed by an epithet of Allah chosen to rhyme with the ruler's name, which occupies the reverse. In no case is there any indication of the date, the place of minting or the denomination. No rank or title is attached to the ruler's name. These coins have no obvious antecedents in the coinage of the rest of the Islamic world.

Their area of circulation was limited; great quantities are found in the Kilwa region and in the Mafia group of islands, and a comparatively small number on Zanzibar and Pemba; further afield, examples have turned up in excavations in Oman,² and a single piece at Great Zimbabwe.³ Their function was, it would seem, principally to serve the domestic market. As for international trade, for which coinage in one or both of the precious coining metals would be required, this seems on the evidence so far available to have been kept in balance without recourse to coinage. There is some evidence for locally-made silver coins, probably of the eleventh century, in the Pemba area⁴ and of a certain amount of gold coin coming *in* to the Pemba and Zanzibar

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1. First published by J. Walker, 'The History and Coinage of the Sultans of Kilwa', *Numismatic Chronicle*, ser. v, vol. XVI, 1936, 43-81. See also J. Walker and G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, 'The history and coinage of the sultans of Kilwa', *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, no. 45 (1956), 33-65; Freeman-Grenville, 'Coin finds and their significance for eastern African chronology', *Numismatic Chronicle*, XI (1971), 283-301; H.N. Chittick, 'On the chronology and coinage of the sultan of Kilwa', *ibid.*, XIII (1973), 192-200; *id.*, *Kilwa: an Islamic trading city on the East African coast* (British Institute in Eastern Africa, Memoir 5), 1974. The last includes the materials excavated by Neville Chittick at Kilwa between 1961 and 1965. The hoard of over 500 very early Kilwa coins of Ali ibn al-Hasan, found by Chittick in a sgraffiato jar at Kisimani Mafia, is illustrated in J.E.G. Sutton, *A Thousand Years of East Africa*, 1990, 79. The present writer is undertaking a comprehensive survey of these East African coinages.
 2. Hand-list of coin-finds from excavations at Belid, near Salalah, Oman, 1981, kept in Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum.
 3. T.N. Huffman, 'An Arab coin from Zimbabwe', *Amoldia* 5, no. 32, 1972, 1-7. This is a copper coin of al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman of Kilwa, fl. 1320s-30s, whose gold coins are described here.
 4. M.C. Horton, H.M. Brown and W.A. Oddy, 'The Mtambwe Hoard', *Azania* XXI, 1986, 115-123.