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From Africa to Australia: a find of coins from Kilwa, Tanzania, and from the Netherlands, in the Wessel Islands.

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In October 1983 Mrs Helen Mitchell Brown, of the Heberden Coin Room, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, kindly sent me a cutting from World Coin News, vol.10, no.38, dated 20 September 1983. It reported a remarkable find of coins on Marchinbar Island, the northernmost of the Wessel Islands, off Arnhem Land, Australia. They were medieval Islamic coins from Kilwa, capital of the former Sultanate of Kilwa, but now only a village on an island off the coast of the present Tanzania (formerly Tanganyika), and from the Netherlands of the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. The report made quite startling claims, one of which was that 'Kilwa coins have been found in hoards before in India, and even in Indonesia, but never before in Australia'. This statement is quite incorrect so far as India and Indonesia are concerned.

The coins had, however, been satisfactorily identified, by R. Domrow, of Brisbane, and then by Dr N.M. Lowick, of the Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum, London. My own interest in the matter is that since 1954 I have published a number of articles in the Numismatic Chronicle (the Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society, of which I am a Fellow) on the coins of Kilwa, and also on issues that apparently should be ascribed to Zanzibar, and on others found predominantly in Mogadishu and its vicinity, the capital of the present Republic of Somalia. The Kilwa, Zanzibar and Mogadishu issues are the only issues of coinage known to have been made in Africa south of the Sahara in pre-colonial times, other than those of Axum. Those of Kilwa and Zanzibar may be placed between the late ~~twelfth~~ century and the Portuguese arrival in East African waters in 1498; the Mogadishu issues seem to belong between c.1300 and c.1700.

LC 4th  
mid 15th

I am obliged to Dr Lowick for providing me with a reference to an excavation at Zafar, near Salah, Oman, and his unpublished list of coins found there, and also for showing me his correspondence with Dr W.J. Mira, of Bexley, Australia, whose article 'Fourteenth century coins in Arnhem Land heard' and 'Early Malay visitors brought Dutch coins' appeared in the Australian Coin Review in September 1983. These two articles were careful, sober and studious, in contrast to say the least - to the exaggerated account in World Coin News. Dr Mira's two reports, so he has kindly informed the writer, were originally a single article which the Australian Coin Review divided into two. I am also grateful to him for a letter dated 7 November 1983, in which he corrects some of the misconceptions of the piece in World Coin News. To quote him, the 'journalist'... 'let his imagination run a little riot, converting possibilities to facts.' And Dr Mira adds, 'Nowhere do I even hint at Kilwa hoards (his italics) having been found in India or Indonesia. For, as we shall see, only a single Kilwa coin has ever been reported outside East Africa, other than those now reported in Australia. The find, therefore, has an altogether special importance for the history of Australia and its trade and other links. It must be examined within the context of what is known of the Kilwa coinage and the trade routes in the Indian Ocean along which it can have been transmitted to Marchinbar Island.

The composition of the find was:

- AE Sultans of Kilwa
- Sulaiman ibn al-Hasan
- Ali ibn al-Hasan
- al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman

2  
2  
1  
5

## A3 Netherlands

<u>Doits</u>	Gelderland, 1690	1
	Zeeland, 1724	1
<u>Iiard</u>	Johann Theodor van	
	Bayern (Bishopric	
	of Liege), 1745	1
<u>Doit</u>	Zeeland, 1784	1

4 Total: 9

Dr Mira's article followed the dating of the Kilwa issues in an article by the late John Walker in the Numismatic Chronicle, 1936. All the Kilwa issues bear no date, but Walker calculated them from the regnal dates of the sultans given in a unique MS in the British Museum, Or. Ms. 2666, Kitabal-Sulwa fi Akhbar Kilwa (The Book of Consolation concerning the History of Kilwa), a nineteenth century copy of a work by an anonymous author c. post 1520. We shall mention it again later on. Walker's calculated dates are: Sulaiman ibn al-Hasan: c. 1294-1308; Ali ibn al-Hasan: c. 1480-2; and al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman: 1482-93, dates which I myself accepted in my Medieval History of the Coast of Tanzania, 1962.

Between 1958 and 1967 the late H.N. Chittick excavated at Kilwa. His findings are published in his Kilwa: an Islamic Trading City on the East African Coast, 2 vols., Nairobi, 1964. Chittick ascribes the coins of Ali ibn al-Hasan to the late twelfth century, and those hitherto ascribed to al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman IV (1482-93) to an earlier al-Hasan (c. 1294-1308) (1310-33), who succeeded Sulaiman ibn al-Hasan (c. 1294-1308) after the two-year regency of his brother Daud ibn Sulaiman. I have discussed his chronological system in several articles, initially in the Numismatic Chronicle, 1971, and in detail so far as coins are concerned in a review article, 'Numismatic evidence for chronology at Kilwa', Numismatic Chronicle, 1978, as well as in the American Historical Review, 1977, and art. 'Kilwa', Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition, and it is unnecessary to repeat the arguments here. As I have explained, there are grave difficulties about Chittick's interpretation of the stratigraphy of coin finds at Kilwa that still demand solution. Additional excavations at certain specific points are needed if existing hypotheses are to be regarded as realities. As to the very numerous coins bearing the name al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman, with their varying legends and decorations, we need in particular to ascertain whether some pieces should not be ascribed to the third

ruler and others to the fourth ruler of that name. It is not possible to ascertain this from what has been published.

For the moment, then, there are three options: there is John Walker's dating, which would place the whole series between c. 1294 and 1493; there is Chittick's dating, which would place it between the late twelfth century and 1356; and there is the possible development of this hypothesis which would include both al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman III and al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman IV that is, from the twelfth century to 1493. What makes this plausible is that, when the Portuguese under Francisco d'Almeida sacked Kilwa in 1505, Hans Mayr, a German who sailed on his ship Sam Rafael, and wrote a report of the whole proceeding that can still be seen in Lisbon, actually saw in circulation 'copper coins like our ceplis, four being equal to one real'. Portuguese coins have the same value there as at home. It is quite implausible that in 1505 Kilwa was using a coinage of which the last issue had been so long ago as 1356, or even posthumous imitations of it.

The four Netherlands issues present in the find fall within a period of just less than a century, and all of them some two centuries later than the latest plausible date for the find last of the Kilwa series. We must thus ask whether the finds to be regarded as a single unit or, as has been supposed a possible hoard, or whether we are not in the presence of separate deposits made at the same place at different times. If Chittick's hypothesis were accepted, the difference in time between the latest of the Kilwa issues present and the first of the Netherlands issues present would be 357 years, an even greater gap that might make separate dates of deposit more likely.

It is here that the circumstances of the find seem helpful. They are certainly clear enough. During World War II No. 312 Radar Unit was stationed at the ~~east end of~~ Marchinbar Island. It was a forward observation post in case of attempted raids by the Japanese. Here the island is only a few hundred metres wide, and it is the only place on the island where there is a freshwater spring. The Unit's choice of site was doubtless determined by the proximity of fresh water. Nearby at the end of a long, sandy beach one of the men used to fish in a deep-water tidal creek that runs inland for about thirty metres. There, at a spot that regrettably was not marked, one metre above high water mark. He found that they were coiled and then discovered five more in an area that all told was little more than one square metre. Here unfortunately his curiosity ran out. He put the coins in an airtight tin in his kit-bag, where they lay until 1979. In that year he came across

them still in his kit-bag, and mentioned them to a friend, who in his turn mentioned them to Dr Mira.

I regret that here in England I have no access to detailed maps of Australia, nor do I know whether Marchinbar Island has been surveyed in minute detail. A thirty metre creek is a very small detail. If the island has been mapped in detail, there should be no difficulty in identifying the freshwater spring or the deep-water tidal creek nearby. Indeed, perhaps this individual - his name has never been disclosed - might be able to identify both on the map. It is likely that there are still traces of the huts in which the Radar Unit was quartered, and this too could aid in identification of the approximate area. It is possible that the Australian Ministry of Defence (if this is the correct title) possesses maps which show all three features. In any case, the site is so remote that it seems unlikely that it can have been disturbed in the forty or so years that have elapsed since the discovery.

This report, and one from Oman, to which we shall come shortly, are the first reports of Kilwa coins found outside East Africa. In 1962, in my Medieval History of the Coast of Tanganyika (which was not renamed Tanzania until its union with Zanzibar in 1964), I published a detailed breakdown of the find-sites of Kilwa coins. They are remarkably few. They have been found principally on Kilwa Kisiwani, and then in the Mafia Islands - at Kisimani Mafia and Kua, Juani Island, on Zanzibar at a single site only, at Wete on Pemba only, on the whole Kenya coast five pieces at Lamu and one each at Gedi and Marani; and finally a handful in Mogadishu amongst more than seven and one half thousand local issues found mostly in the course of digging sewers. The handful at Mogadishu was not a surprise, for Kilwa and Mogadishu have close commercial connections in the middle ages. Yet equally Kilwa had close commercial and political connections with Aden: in the fourteenth century a Sultan of Kilwa was sent there and afterwards to Mecca for his education, and in the fifteenth century a deposed Sultan of Aden sought refuge in Kilwa. Yet there are no Kilwa coins among the numerous local finds in the museum collection that I saw there in the 1960s. During the past twenty years Chittick has found several hundred more pieces at Kisimani Mafia, and some 4,500 at Kilwa. Of these, some 2,000 were beach finds. There have been no new site-finds anywhere in East Africa.

It seems evident that the area of circulation of the Kilwa currency in East Africa was very limited, and, moreover, that very few places used currency at all. None have been found at large and important sites in Kenya, such as Faza, Wanda, Fate, Shanga, and Siu, nor was there a local coinage

at Lamu before the nineteenth century; none at Malindi, and only a short-lived local issue at Mombasa in the nineteenth century. When I was in Kenya in 1982, I asked Mr Athman Lali, the very perceptive Curator of the Lamu Museum, and himself a local man from the Bajun Islands, what he thought the roads off Lamu. He pointed to an Iranian vessel anchored in the roads off Lamu. It had come to obtain mangrove timber, which for more than a thousand years has been used extensively in both Iran and Arabia for building purposes. In exchange it had brought Persian carpets and other local products - not, so it was rumoured, to the exclusion of some products that were strictly under the counter, so that eventually we watched the vessel proceed out of harbour under Customs escort. He said that the people of Lamu found it more convenient to arrange matters by barter than to take currency which was quite valueless to them. As he spoke, I found myself back among the canny merchants that Ibn Battuta so accurately delineates in fourteenth century Mogadishu and Oman, and of whom the best modern account is by a distinguished Australian, the late Captain Alan Villiers.

Mr Lali's explanation seems a sound one, and helps also to explain why, apart from the pieces found on Marchinbar Island, only one specimen of the Kilwa coinage has been found outside East Africa. It is a copper piece of Da'ud Ibn Sulaiman II (Regent, 1308-10; Sultan, c.1333-56). Together with a number of other copper pieces, it was excavated at al-Balid (otherwise al-Balad, or al-Bilad, all three spellings being recorded), a ruin site two miles east of Salalah, the capital of the province of Dhufar, or Zafar, in Oman. Here there are the remains of an ancient Sabaean city to which the Habudi ruler Ahmad ibn Abdallah moved his capital from the interior in 1223, naming it al-Mansura. It has recently been excavated by Dr Paolo Costa, and the site is described by him in the Journal of Oman Studies, V, but without any discussion of the coin finds, for which I depend solely on the list kindly supplied by Dr Lowick. Associated with the single piece of Da'ud Ibn Sulaiman are thirteen pieces of a Sultan al-Nasir Nasir al-Din Ahmad, of whose issues many specimens have been found at Kilwa, together with several pieces that appear to have come from Mogadishu. The presence at this South Arabian site of coins from both Mogadishu and Kilwa cannot be regarded as wholly surprising, for Salala was Ibn Battuta's next port of call after he sailed from Kilwa. He calls it Zafari'l-Humud, but the identification is certain.

To return to Kilwa, a brief glance at its history can be helpful in considering the deposit of coins on Marchinbar Island, for its trade tentacles were extremely far-reaching. The earliest levels excavated by Chittick at Kilwa are attributed

to the eighth or ninth century AD. One might reasonably surmise that it was the nucleus of a seasonal trading centre such as in the nineteenth century Sir Richard Burton found at Berbera. Here, in my view in the tenth century, and in Chittick's in the twelfth, a trading city-state developed. Its story is told in the Arabic history of Kilwa to which we have already referred. The sultanate appears to have been founded c.957. At first it was of little importance, but in the twelfth century a chance discovery led to the acquisition of a monopoly of the gold trade that flowed from the mines in what today are the Republics of Mozambique and Zimbabwe. This, coupled with a long-standing trade in ivory with India, now made Kilwa the most prosperous state on the East African seaboard.

When Ibn Battuta visited Kilwa in 1331 gold was so plentiful that it was never minted, but only exported. Chittick has uncovered luxurious palaces in the town, and outside at Husuni, with a splendid swimming-pool, and a number of mosques, of which the Friday Mosque Hans Mayr likened to the Great Mosque, the famous Mosque of Cordova. I have visited them both, and, if the Friday Mosque of Kilwa is smaller, lacking in mosaics, and partly ruined, its forest of pillars makes the comparison valid. In the fifteenth century the sultanate suffered decline, and in the sixteenth it went down sharply. The first cause in that century was the trade monopoly the Portuguese tried to establish throughout the Indian Ocean. The second was the irruption of the wild Zimba tribe from somewhere near the R.Zambezi: after 1585 they took to a campaign of rapine and pillage and slaughter, eating their enemies as they went northwards. Eventually they reached Malindi in Kenya, where the local people combined with the Segeju people to bring the Zimba to utter defeat. A sober account of their attack on Kilwa is given by the Dominican friar Joao dos Santos, in which four-fifths of the inhabitants were killed and eaten. The city that in 1500 had had some ten thousand inhabitants was reduced to less than a thousand by 1600. Kilwa never recovered, although at the end of the eighteenth century it revived a little, as I have recounted in my The French at Kilwa Island, 1965, as a result of the activity of French slave traders.

In all this long period that we have traversed, from the tenth to the eighteenth century, only one visitor from the Netherlands is on record, Jan Huygen van Linschoten, who passed Kilwa on his way to Cochin in 1583. Not one other visitor from the Netherlands is known anywhere in East African waters. There seems no likelihood, therefore, that the four Netherlands coins found on Marchinbar Island can have any possible connection with the trade tentacles of Kilwa, which

we must now try to sketch briefly.

I say briefly because I have already answered this question some length in a paper 'Some aspects of the external relations of the East African coast before 1800' in K.Ingham's Porn Relations of African States, 1974. Almost all the documentary evidence is printed in translation in my East African Coast Select Documents (1962), 1976, still in print (Fex Collin). Except for two poems of uncertain but possibly earlier date in the Archives of Oman, Kilwa is not mentioned in Arabic literature before the Travels (Rihla) of Ibn Battuta, c.1351. The poems are unpublished, but refer to religious stations. Kilwa cannot be identified with any of the places mentioned in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea which, c.106 describes the trade system of Alexandria and the Red Sea wards as far perhaps as the Mafia Islands, and eastwards Arabia as far as western India, and finally with a tantalising reference to China. The most convenient form of the text is the Kilwa History we have already mentioned. It relates frequent intercourse with Aden, the Gulf and India. Thus, as one reads Ibn Battuta, one can feel no surprise that at Delhi he heard gossip about the court of Daud ibn Sulah, 11 of Kilwa (Hakluyt edn., 11.382). A second account of that history of Kilwa is embedded in Joao de Barros's Da Asia, 1.1. It appears to have been composed c.1506, and to be from an independent source. Both accounts allude to relations with Persia. In addition, there is material evidence in the great quantities of Chinese porcelain that testify to an entrepôt trade via India, which brought cloth and silk in return for gold and ivory. There are also substantial quantities of ware from the Persian Gulf, from Sassanian times on.

There are some external sources. In 1511 Tomé Pires was sent to India by the Portuguese Crown as 'factor of drugs'. From 1512 to 1515 he was resident in Malacca, a cross-roads of Eastern trade, before being transferred to China, where he spent the last twenty years of his life as ambassador. His Suma Oriental paints a broad picture of Malaccan trade at the time, and its tentacles and ramifications. Aden and Arabia trade with Mogadishu, Barawa, Malindi, Mombasa and Kilwa in eastern Africa, and with Cambay in India; merchants from Ceylon bring goods from Italy, Greece and Damascus to Aden, traded also with eastern Africa and Cambay - and take back with them all the trade goods of Malacca: cloves, nutmeg, mace, sandalwood, brazil wood, silks, seed pearls, musk, porcelain, and also rice, wheat, soap, indigo, butter, lard, oils, carnelian and coarse pottery like the sort made in Seville (it is stated and all kinds of cloth. In Malacca too there are resident merchants and trade agents who are brought thither in Gujarati ships, from Cairo, Aden, Ethiopia, Hormuz, Kilwa, Malindi, Mombasa, Mogadishu, Persia, 'Rumes' (presumably Greeks from

Asia Minor?), Turkomans, Armenians, Indians from the Deccan and from Cambay, and men from Shiraz and Khorasan. These all trade goods from China and from the Molucca Islands westwards.

This pattern of trade thus reached within some 500 miles of Australian territorial waters within less than twenty years after the Portuguese intervention in the Indian Ocean, and is presented in a rather different form in the Log Books of Ahmad ibn Majid. They belong to the beginning of the sixteenth century. He was the pilot who conducted Vasco da Gama to India, an act for which he is still execrated by the seamen of East Africa, as related in the reminiscences of the late Captain Alan Villiers. (For the Log Books I have used the Portuguese edition edited by T.A. Chumovsky, Pres Roteiros Descobridores de Ahmad ibn-Majid, Lisbon, 1960, my Arabic copy having disappeared during a journey in South Yemen). It gives navigational particulars by the stars, and names every port, small and great between Sofala in the present Mozambique across the great arc of the Indian Ocean to Malaysia and Java. In particular it names numerous places in the Malacca region.

It is interesting to compare these place-names with those in a work of entirely different character, also the work of a pilot and seaman, Captain Buzurg ibn Shahrivar of Ramhormuz, The Book of the Wonders of India, Mainland, Sea and Islands, which I edited and translated in 1981. It is a collection, wholly random and haphazard, of old salts' tales, put together c.953 (the latest date in any of the tales), and in any case before the death of al-Mas'udi in 956. It contains tales, anecdotes, observations and apophthegmata, like Sindbad or the One Thousand Nights and One Night, intended primarily to amuse. Its ethos is primarily that of a harbour bar parlour. Its absence of a formal structure or intention make it all the more valuable, because the narratives are unselfconscious and simply by the way. It also ranges from Sofala to Java, but without naming quite so many places as Ahmad ibn Majid. It can be seen that the pattern of trade in the late fifteenth century and the early sixteenth differed little, if at all, from the tenth century.

Thus, between the tenth and the sixteenth century no great difficulty arises for the transit of Kilwa coins between Kilwa and far away to the Moluccas. As we have seen, by the end of the sixteenth century, Kilwa had collapsed: it is not really plausible that Kilwa coins would have moved out of the range of original circulation after that collapse. Indeed, the archaeological evidence so far indicates that they seldom circulated far even before the collapse took place. And that event took place long before the first of the Netherlands

pieces present was minted in 1690.

Dr Mira suggests that all these coins, Kilwa and Netherlands, could have been brought to Marchinbar Island by Malays from Macassar (Ujung Pandang), some 1500 km. (912m.) away in the Celebes Islands. These people were accustomed to come to North-West Australia for many years in search of trepang (beche-de-mer, sea slug or sea cucumber). Some seventy processing sites where they boiled and dried these creatures for export to China, where they are esteemed a delicacy, have been identified. One would imagine that an inspection of the site could settle this quite easily. Dr Mira also lists a number of early Dutch visits to Australia, from the beginning of the seventeenth century, when equally the Netherlands issues could have been deposited.

Such a hypothesis could also suggest shipwreck, and perhaps not only one. Here an examination of the site for deposits of wood or even pottery sherds could prove informative. Both can be dated. May I hope that some enterprising Australian archaeologist will search the whole area? If this conference is to have any positive result, and I am confident that its inspiration will stimulate many, may I express the hope that the challenge will be taken up - and speedily?

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