Chapter 4. Money and the Everyday: Reputation, History and Symbolism on the Eastern African Coast

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This chapter asks the question, “What is money for?” The occasion for this question is a study of the coins of the pre-colonial eastern African coast. During the period covered by this volume, that coast was a fully integrated part of the Islamic world, with connections to and knowledge of a network that extended from China in the east to the Mediterranean in the west. Yet the study of eastern African coinage is interesting because the people of this coast – known collectively as the Swahili – remained on the margins of the Islamic world. Although fully cognizant of people and practices in the heartlands of Islam, the Swahili were independent of direct control, and maintained their own unique practices. Coins were minted in only a few places on this coast, but in those places they were energetically adopted. The coins minted in centers like Kilwa Kisiwani and Mogadishu were also widely distributed along the coast and between residents of the towns. Coins are associated with all centuries of coastal occupation, linked to the trading society that developed here from the eighth century onwards.

In this chapter, the focus is on the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, coinciding with the era known elsewhere as the Renaissance. On the eastern coast of Africa, this was the peak of commercial prosperity in a pre-colonial trade network around the Indian Ocean world, in which the Swahili were active participants. This was a time on the eastern African coast associated with the construction of grand townscapes at some of the trading towns, apparently dominated by a wealthy merchant elite. Those groups were Islamic, highly cosmopolitan, and very aware of material and symbolic practices elsewhere in the Islamic world. This is a fascinating period to explore material objects in this region, linked to the golden age of pre-colonial Swahili prosperity. This is also a period from which we have particularly high-resolution data, from recent excavations at the site of Songo Mnara on the southern Tanzanian coast (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2010, 2011). Contextual information for the coins found in the archaeological record has given a new insight into the ways that coins were valued and used, as part of the everyday life of the site rather than as part of the town’s trade in bulk commodities such as gold, ivory and cloth (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2010; Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2012).

Here, the focus of attention is not on the monetary uses of coins. Instead this chapter will explore other ways that coins were used. These were as stores or markers of value; as structured deposits in the foundations of houses; as offerings on tombs; as decorative objects for adornment and display; and as mnemonics for the creation and maintenance of history. By looking at the full range of what people did with coins, we can begin to think about the question posed at the start – what is money for? On the pre-colonial Swahili coast money was not the only possible option for any of these uses. Why then was it adopted, and why did people find coinage useful?

This is of course a set of discussions and data that relate to a very specific time and place. At the end of the chapter, the issues raised for the Swahili coast are positioned within the world of Islamic coinage more generally. Eastern Africa emerges as a place with some particular characteristics, but with some insights that might shed light on the uses of coins elsewhere in the world. In particular, it extends some of the insights about the relationship between coinage and authority; expands on the ways that different parts of the Islamic world developed their own esoteric bronze coinages; and forces us to explore the reasons and mechanisms for the adoption of money in many parts of the world that had previously had no tradition of coinage. Islam brought coins and systems of value to many of those places.

**Coinage and Value on the Coast of Eastern Africa**

Swahili coins were minted at a number of locations along the eastern coast of Africa. This littoral is and was home to a series of urban centers, often known as stonetowns due to the vernacular tradition of coral-built architecture that they contain (See Figure 4.1; Kusimba 1999; Horton and Middleton 2000; Wright 1993). Towns on the Swahili coast have a long history of development, from initial settlement around the seventh century AD. The earliest sites were built entirely of mud and thatch architecture, yet were from the start extremely complex and sophisticated settlements. They were home to a multi-ethnic population supported by a diverse set of economic practices: agriculture, pastoralism, and a range of crafts. They were also connected from the start to trade networks with partners in the deep hinterland of Africa and across the Indian Ocean. These trade relationships came to define the Swahili in some important ways; as the towns developed from these early roots they continued to look outwards and the inhabitants positioned themselves as middlemen between Islamic merchant networks and webs of connection with African neighbors.

[Figure 4.1 near here]

There is evidence that Muslims were present in coastal sites from as early as the eighth century (Horton 1991, 1996; Fitton and Wynne-Jones in press), the ancestors of a long tradition of Islamic scholarship and practice on the coast that continues to this day. From the eleventh century, the start of building using coral and lime allowed the shaping of the unique townscapes of this region, with mosques, tombs, and later grand houses, populating the spaces of coastal settlement (Garlake 1966). Throughout, Swahili people engaged in a range of relationships across wide webs of connection, including interactions based on trade, religion and kinship with others around the Indian Ocean rim. Naturally, these connections were shaped by larger economic trajectories. The eighth-century explosion of trade at the time of the ‘Abbasid caliphate at Baghdad coincides with the first significant upswing in trade for the Swahili, and settlements on the coast can be seen to wax and wane in line with developments around the ocean rim (Horton 1987). By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, coastal towns had trading connections with the Persian Gulf, Fatimid Egypt via the Red Sea, ports on the west coast of India (notably in Gujarat) and as far afield as China. Zheng He’s early fifteenth-century voyage touched the Swahili coast at a number of locations, and evidence is starting to emerge for this in the archaeological record (Qin and Yu 2017).

The production and use of coinage in Swahili towns was a part of this engagement with the Islamic world. The initial idea of coinage would have arrived with other knowledge about that world, and some characteristics of Swahili coinage are also linked to the Islamic sphere. Most notably, perhaps, Swahili coins are inscribed in Arabic and they invoke the name of Allah and the virtues of piety and Islamic adherence. Yet the style of coins is unique to the Swahili world (Brown 1993). They do not bear dates, or the details of a mint. Instead they have a rhyming couplet from obverse to reverse, with the name of a particular sultan or ruler, and a phrase extolling his virtues. The only parallels for this format are found among the seventh- and eighth-century coins of the rulers of Sind (Hawkes and Wynne-Jones 2015: 13ff.) and on some amulets from Egypt (Brown 1993).

*Mints and Rulers*

The earliest Swahili coins seem to have been minted at Shanga, of silver. They date to the eighth to tenth centuries, and establish some of these standards with inscriptions relating to Muhammad and Abdallah (Brown 1992, 1996). There are no histories of Shanga that can cast light on the status of these persons, or their claims to authority at Shanga. The coins are only 20 in number, and presumably of limited circulation and use. In contrast, the most prolific mint on the coast was at Kilwa Kisiwani, whence many thousands of coins are known from the eleventh century onwards. These are predominantly struck in copper alloys, although precious metals are also known. A hoard of 2,000 silver coins, including 30 of Ali bin al-Hasan – the earliest known minter of coins at Kilwa – is known from Mtambwe Mkuu on Pemba (see Figure 4.2; Horton et al. 1986), supplementing rare finds from early levels at Kilwa Kisiwani itself (Chittick 1973). Copper coins of Ali bin al-Hasan are some of the most numerous and dominate coinage throughout the history of the town (see discussion below). In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, these early issues continued to circulate, alongside a host of other issues (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2010). By then, no silver issues seem to have been circulating, and only copper coins are found in the archaeological strata of Kilwa Kisiwani, and related sites at Songo Mnara, and on Mafia Island. Although other sites of the second millennium AD minted coins, no other town rivalled Kilwa for the quantity or spread of its coins; Kilwa-type coins typify Swahili coinage and are found at sites along the eastern African coast. One was even found at Great Zimbabwe, a contemporary trading town in the Zimbabwe plateau far to the interior (Huffman 1972).

[Figure 4.2 near here]

Numismatic study of Kilwa-type coins has a long pedigree (Walker 1936, 1939; Walker and Freeman-Grenville 1956; Chittick 1965, 1973; Freeman-Grenville 1957, 1958, 1971). They were initially recognized via a series of hoards and collections, and dated by comparison with the Kilwa Chronicle. The latter is an indigenous history of the town of Kilwa Kisiwani, one of a few that exist for the Swahili coast and the earliest to have been transcribed (Freeman-Grenville 1962). It existed in oral form and was transcribed by Portuguese chroniclers in the sixteenth century. A later version – similar in most respects – was transcribed in Arabic in the nineteenth century. The Chronicle relates the origin story of Kilwa Kisiwani and a record of the ruling dynasty over several centuries. Debate over how to use such histories is far from resolved, with aspects of the narrative perhaps best regarded as allegorical, some relating to the circumstances in which it was transcribed, and some apparently historically accurate and verified by other sources. The coins provided a sort of check on the veracity of the Chronicle and many – although not all – of the names found on the coins can be located in the story of Kilwa. In the absence of dates on the coins themselves, the histories provided a means of relative dating. This was then compared with the archaeological contexts from which some of the coins were recovered, and a tentative chronology was reached, albeit one that was subject to revision as archaeological data were refined and augmented (See Table 4.1).

[Table 4.1 near here]

By the fourteenth-fifteenth century, a large number of Kilwa-type issues were in circulation. Part of the reason for this diversity was that coin types seem to have continued in use long after they were first struck. This may have been due to continued minting, or immobilization, of popular issues (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2010); however, recent elemental analysis of the copper alloys suggests instead restricted periods of minting followed by extremely long use-lives for the coins (Perkins 2013). Thus, in these centuries one of the most numerous types of coin is those of Ali bin al-Hasan, the eleventh century sultan/ruler discussed above. Many thousands of coins must have been struck during his lifetime. To these are added an array of other types, most notably those of Hasan ibn Sulaiman, an early fourteenth-century sultan/ruler who is famed for his generosity and largesse. This was the sultan encountered by Ibn Battuta when he visited Kilwa in 1331 AD, and yet his coins are still much in evidence throughout the fifteenth century.

*Context and Archaeology*

The coins are found scattered through the archaeology of the site of Kilwa Kisiwani, in every level and context. Although the excavator of the site used the archaeological and numismatic evidence as a check on each other, there were drawbacks to his methodology that make these excavations less useful for exploring the everyday uses of coins (Chittick 1974). The main problem is that deposits at Kilwa were not excavated with much spatial control – the emphasis was on exploring chronology and development rather than thinking through daily life – thus it is not possible to position the coins with respect to daily life or practice at the site. Archaeological deposits were excavated wholesale without sieving, meaning that many fewer coins were found than might otherwise have been the case (beads and other small artefacts would have been similarly poorly recovered; Wood 2000, 2011). In addition, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the peak of Kilwa’s wealth and prominence, were not really the focus of the massive excavations at the site, which were instead concerned with origins and development. Until recently, the best collections for understanding Kilwa-type coins were those often called hoards, but they were often in fact collections made by colonial officials, which became available for study during the course of the twentieth century (often by circuitous routes; Perkins 2013). These offered a cross-section of Kilwa’s coinage, as well as giving a sense of their distribution, with a wide but sparse spread along the littoral and a focus on the sites under Kilwa’s dominion: Songo Mnara and Mafia prime among them (Sutton 1993, 1997). Recent large-scale excavations at Songo Mnara, a town dating exclusively to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, on an island adjacent to Kilwa Kisiwani, have provided new insight into this old area of study (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2010, 2011, 2016). These excavations have explored the uses of space across the site and have for the first time positioned the coins in their contexts of deposition, making it possible to think through the uses and value of Kilwa-type coins (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2012). This would have seemed self-evident to previous scholars, but excavations have shown some patterns that make Kilwa’s coinage unusual and privilege the everyday uses of coins, not all of them pecuniary. The types of coins found, and the ratios of different issues known, suggest particular importance for some of the symbolic aspects of coinage and links with rulers or powerful individuals. Find spots, which range from mundane domestic contexts, to ritual locations, to hoards removed entirely from circulation, point to the power of coins to act in multiple different spheres.

**International Standards and the Tri-metallic System**

All of these insights relate to Kilwa’s copper coinage, which is the most widely distributed and presumably the most prolific type. These coins did, however, exist within a tri-metallic scheme that included silver and gold issues also. As such, the coins of the Swahili coast fitted within the broader monetary world of Islam, where gold dinars and silver dirhams, as well as lower denominations of copper, set the standard for international measures of value (Mitchiner 1977; Broome 1985). Gold and silver coins on the eastern African coast may have been more plentiful than we now recognize; typically these metals would survive less well in the archaeological record. Yet gold and silver coinage is known from many archaeological contexts across the globe, and it would be strange for no trace to remain if gold and silver had been in common currency in coastal eastern Africa. Instead it seems that Swahili minting in precious metals might have been more sporadic and particular. Silver coins of Ali bin al-Hasan have already been mentioned. The largest number are known from a hoard at Mtambwe Mkuu (Horton et al. 1986), although isolated issues are also found in the Kilwa assemblage from the eleventh century (Chittick 1974). None are known from later centuries. This points to a chronological variation that might be related to the availability of metals (Perkins 2013: 205-218). The silver coins may also have served a different function than the copper, as suggested by their different distribution. The hoard found on Pemba, in the Zanzibar archipelago, suggests that they travelled further than copper issues, mostly used around Kilwa, and may have been linked to inter-regional exchange. Gold issues are only known from three isolated examples (Brown 1991), all dating to the fourteenth century, and all attributed to al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman, the wealthy ruler mentioned above. al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman is known to have made the pilgrimage to Mecca, and Brown (1991) suggests that these unique issues might have been created for distribution along the way. The format is different than the copper issues, using al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman’s nickname “The Father of Gifts” rather than the more usual format of his name.

The tri-metallic system of the Swahili coast is therefore not the same as the hierarchical system of dinars, dirhams, and bronze coins found elsewhere in the Islamic world. The existence of gold and silver coins is discontinuous and apparently related to particular types of interaction, rather than to the daily life of the coastal people. Silver was probably scarce in this region and at this period (Perkins 2013: 144), but gold was one of the major export goods through Kilwa and is known to have been used in other ways.

*Kilwa and the Gold Trade*

When the Portuguese arrived at Kilwa in the opening years of the sixteenth century, they recorded a sumptuous town with richly dressed inhabitants and many outward signs of material wealth. The women of Kilwa were reported to be lavishly decorated with jewelry of gold, as well as beads and fine imported fabrics (Pallaver 2009). One of the Portuguese sailors who plundered Kilwa in 1505 AD stated: “We found therein such great booty of gold, of silver and pearls, of golden pieces, and of sundry precious wares, that it was impossible to reckon their value” (Vespuccius, quoted in Prestholdt 1998: 38). The gold trade funneled through Kilwa from southeastern Africa was one of the main Portuguese ambitions in the region, and they were ultimately to capture supply directly from the Mozambique coast and eclipse Kilwa’s role as middleman. In the short term, they reported on the value of gold in the region in terms that referenced international standards, especially the *mithqal*,which was approximately 4.2g, the weight of a Cairo dinar (Freeman-Grenville 1962: 108).

This has led some to assume that a true tri-metallic system of coinage must have operated in the region (Horton and Middleton 2000: 92-4). Based on the known weights of Kilwa-type coins, Horton and Middleton calculate a ratio of 1:10:1,000, attempting to position Kilwa’s mint within known standards of weight and measure. In fact, this is difficult to sustain as Swahili coins are extremely variable in weight. Brown (1993) suggested that size was probably the more important feature of coins here, constrained by the die that was used, with variable amounts of metal poured in, leading to lack of standardization on weight or metal content. This has obvious ramifications for standardized systems of specie, and suggests that value was not tied to metal content in any consistent way (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2012).

Instead, then, the Swahili coast seems to have been a region in which an esoteric system of coinage existed. It was tied to the conceptual world of dinars, dirhams, and Islamic systems of commerce, but was not a part of that system. Instead the idea of coins was used in some varied ways. Differences existed between metals and the ways they were minted and used. Coins struck from copper alloys seem to have been the only ones that might be thought of as a currency, circulating within daily exchange. It is only now, with data from Songo Mnara on the contexts of use and deposition of Kilwa-type coins, that it is possible to begin exploring the ways that those currency objects were used and understood in daily practice.

**Coins and How They Were Used**

As discussed, copper coins of the Kilwa type have a wide distribution in areas that were part of Kilwa Kisiwani’s sphere of influence. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this extended to Songo Mnara and Sanje ya Majoma, which were both sites in the immediate archipelago of Kilwa, probably parts of the same urban configuration (See Figure 4.3). Kilwa also had a broader sphere of influence, with control claimed over the Mafia archipelago, and the towns of Kua and Kisimani Mafia found there, as well as sites of the Mozambique coast whence gold was transhipped for onward commerce out of Kilwa. Thousands of copper Kilwa-type coins are known from Mafia and from Kilwa Kisiwani (although not from Mozambique, which may simply reflect a lack of research in that region; Album 1999). It is only from Songo Mnara that coins have been recovered in their contexts of use, giving a unique insight into the circulation and use of these coins during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2012).

[Figure 4.3 near here]

Excavations at Songo Mnara since 2009 have recovered a corpus of 1,039 copper coins. They come from a wide range of contexts across the site (See Table 4.2). Excavations have been targeted at exploring the uses of space, both inside and outside the built structures of the town, and coins occur across every type of place excavated: houses, mosques, tombs, middens, wells, and open areas. This points clearly to the conclusion that they were in circulation around the site, supported by the specific places where concentrations were found. Large numbers were located in domestic settings, and particularly where there had been sandy or earthen floors. Where structures had plaster floors there were fewer finds in general, and fewer coins in particular; presumably daily objects were more easily lost on earthen floors. In addition, coins were recovered in exterior sites of domestic activity, such as surrounding the well, or in midden deposits outside the walls of houses. Coins were thus apparently part of the world of mundane activity, incorporated into the daily commerce of the town. This might seem obvious, but it is a point that can need to be made on the Swahili coast, where towns have been interpreted as having international trade as their primary function (cf. the approach to coins in Horton and Middleton 2000: 93, specifically targeted at locating Swahili coinage in the sphere of international commerce). It is thus necessary to demonstrate that coinage – even though derived from international concepts and standards – was a very domestic phenomenon, used in the daily round of activity, rather than part of the world of international commerce evoked by the discussion of *mithqal* weight standards and caliphal mints. The relationship with petty local exchange is further emphasized by the numbers of coins that were clipped – often halved and quartered – presumably to create smaller denominations. The need for smaller units again suggests that coins were part of a world of small-scale cash transactions, rather than being transferred in large numbers for grand-scale commodity purchase.

[Table 4.2 near here]

In addition to the daily commerce implied by the coins’ spread within the site, significant numbers were incorporated into non-monetary activities. Most notably, these include ritual activities: coins were used as offerings on tombs and graves at Songo Mnara, they were also incorporated into a foundation deposit beneath one of Songo Mnara’s stone houses. This deposit (Perkins *et al*. 2014) included 360 coins, along with a string of imported carnelian beads, interpreted as a household investment in the building of a home. This has especial resonance on the Swahili coast, where the ownership of and residence in a stonehouse is one of the key markers of prestige and rank in urban contexts (Allen 1979). The burial of a deposit of coins and beads was thus a powerful statement about investment in place, probably part of what gave the house value (Wynne-Jones 2013; see also Krmnicek 2012).

Multiple Routes to Value

The qualities of Kilwa-type coins, along with their contexts of use, suggest that they held value in many different ways (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2012). The sultans or rulers represented on the coins are extremely unevenly distributed. Two names are disproportionately represented. Ali bin al-Hasan, the earliest ruler to strike coins at Kilwa (also linked to the Mtambwe silver coins discussed above) was active in the eleventh century, but his coins still accounted for 18.2% of the identifiable assemblage in fifteenth-century Songo Mnara. Al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman, the early fourteenth century ruler whose gold coins were discussed above, also accounts for 33.3%, with other names much less commonly represented (Table 4.3). These rulers are well remembered in the oral traditions of Kilwa, as founders and key leaders of the Shirazi and Mahdali dynasties respectively. Their prominence may have contributed to both the quantity and the value attributed to their coins. It is also possible that the numbers of coins with these rulers’ names on them might have influenced their place in history, as the common circulation of their names would keep them alive in the shared imaginary of the town.

[Table 4.3 near here]

The coins themselves also had qualities that would have led to them being valued by the inhabitants of Kilwa and Songo Mnara. As mentioned, they were linked to the Islamic world, through their very existence and through their use of Arabic script and Islamic formulas in their inscriptions. These links were highly valued in the Swahili world, and connected to the ways that wealth and civility were expressed in a coastal milieu. The metal of their manufacture may also have been part of their appeal, as copper has always been sought after in eastern Africa, linked to concepts of power and kingly authority (Herbert 1984). Rather than a poor relation of the gold and silver coins, the copper coinage of Kilwa Kisiwani might have been deliberately struck in this metal that evoked local aesthetics and value systems, as well as connections with a lucrative trade with interior regions of Africa.

**What Were Swahili Coins For?**

The function of Swahili coinage is discussed by John Middleton (2003) as part of a more general consideration of how trade and exchange worked on the precolonial coast. His analysis of the uses of coins was informed by the numismatic work of Horton (Horton and Middleton 2000: 93) and Freeman-Grenville (1971) as well as by anthropological theory on sources of value (particularly Hart 1986). The specifics of his argument were also provided by a series of contemporary informants. The result is one of the only attempts to understand the rationale for coinage on the Swahili coast, yet it is difficult to find support for his arguments in the archaeological evidence. Middleton discusses the tri-metallic system, which he takes as having “corresponded to those of gold, silver, and copper used throughout the Indian Ocean and Middle East (and also to the Portuguese gold coins), in that like them they were in the proportions of 1:10:1,000 in value” (Middleton 2003: 515). He moves beyond this in some important ways, as he attempts to account for the different functions of gold and silver coinage vs. the copper coins that were used in petty exchange. He sees the coins in precious metals as having been distributed by the ruler to his merchants, who then kept them in secret vaults inside their houses, to act not as currency in international exchanges, but more as a form of guarantee. They were physical evidence of “comparable oceanwide standards of value of different commodities,” displayed in trade negotiations so as to make “direct exchange of commodities possible and easy” (2003: 515).

Elsewhere, I have suggested that the different aspects of value in Swahili society – symbolic value and currency value – were actually more closely bound than Middleton suggests (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2012). Ultimately his argument is let down by inadequate archaeological data. There is no evidence at all for these transactions, or stores of precious metals, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the suggestion that ratios of value of 1:10:1,000 existed is not sustainable in light of the coin data themselves (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2010), making the links to ocean-wide systems of value difficult to support. Yet, Middleton’s analysis was an entirely justified attempt to understand Swahili coinage as part of an international world of coinage and commerce. His work is also good for thinking through the fact that coins were not just coins, and that they were used and valued in ways not connected with commodity exchange.

As described above, the data from Songo Mnara allow us to explore the question of what coins were for on the Swahili coast on a much more solid foundation. Money was for lots of things, in practical terms. Gold and silver issues clearly performed a function on a broader stage, and seem to have had connections with moveable wealth and with the practice of spreading prestige through redistribution; the gold coins may have been tokens distributed by an especially wealthy ruler on his travels around the Islamic world. Copper coins were for more common and everyday transactions, probably including the purchase of daily commodities. Yet they were not simply mundane objects, solely for “petty” exchange within the towns. They, like the more precious metals, had symbolic and aesthetic value which would have been bound up with their value in use as well as with their contributions to history.

Coins were also not used in every Swahili town. Kilwa Kisiwani was unique in the quantity and ubiquity of its minting tradition, with more sporadic production at towns elsewhere. Some of the grander Swahili towns of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did not mint any coins. Gede, on the coast of Kenya, is a key example of this. The quality and range of imports at the site suggests it has nothing to do with a lack of wealth or of trade. Other currencies may have been in operation; the excavator suggested that cowries may have been a currency at precolonial Gede due to their ubiquity in the deposits (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2015).

Thus, rather than coins having a range of uses, we might envisage a range of everyday object roles that were – at Kilwa and its satellites – fulfilled by coins. Why was it coins that were used for those things? Once the connection with international standards of weight and value is broken, what made them suitable as stores of value, symbols of power, and items of daily exchange? This chapter has suggested a series of answers to that question, all of them residing in the realm of daily life and the experience of using and owning the coins.

The copper coins of Kilwa had strong links to Islam, a crucial aspect of Swahili self-identity from earliest times. The first mosque on the eastern African coast has been identified in levels dating to the eighth century (Horton 1991; see also Fitton and Wynne-Jones in press). For approximately 1,000 years Islam remained, in this region, an urban and coastal phenomenon, claimed by the coastal elite as a key marker of their status and their differentiation from the pagans of the hinterland. The material culture of Islamic trade therefore always carried high status in this region and the fact that the *concept* of coinage was here derived from that world would have contributed to the reasons for its adoption (Wynne-Jones 2016: 186). The more specific links to Islam, and the ways that the text of coins simultaneously invoked the name of Allah and of the ruler in question, would have made them valued links between the secular power of Kilwa’s rulers and religious power.

In and of themselves, Kilwa’s coins had important characteristics as things. The aesthetic properties of copper when shiny, and red, would have made these objects stand out and recommended them as stores of value. They had sonorous properties too, making them appropriate objects of adornment (see Kus and Raharijaona 2008 for comparable discussion of Marie Therese dollars on Madagascar). Many Kilwa coins are pierced (See Figure 4.4; an average of 4.95% in museum collections, up to 15.64% for one collection at the Fitzwilliam museum in Cambridge; Perkins 2013: 265), suggesting that they were worn, in which role their aesthetic and sonorous properties would have combined in people’s experience of them. Finally, all metals had a high status. Metal objects are rare in the archaeology of Songo Mnara and Kilwa, as they were valued, conserved, and reworked through time, meaning that few objects survive in the archaeological record. The particular enthusiasm of Kilwa for minting coins thus also comes into relief, as there is a continuing association of Kilwa with mineral wealth, with evidence for iron production in its earliest phases, before copper working began in earnest in the eleventh century. Kilwa’s role as the largest exporter of gold on the eastern African coast should not obscure the fact that they were clearly working copper and silver also, necessitating a web of connections with ore-producing areas in the African interior. Kilwa dominated these connections more than any other town, so their use of metal resources for everyday functions (such as might have been fulfilled by cowries, or beads, elsewhere; Pallaver 2009, Wood 2011; Sinclair et al. 2012) is explicable in these terms. In an African context, the mineral wealth of Kilwa Kisiwani would have been crucial to its status, as both metals and the technical skills required to work them have always been highly valued on the continent (Herbert 1984; Killick 2009).

[Figure 4.4 near here]

**East Africa and the Islamic World**

As described above, connections with the Islamic world were important for eastern Africa. Yet the Swahili coast remained outside the realm of direct control of Islamic caliphates. Unlike most other regions that minted a form of Islamic coinage, the eastern African coast was converted to Islam by contact and trade rather than by conquest. There was thus no requirement among the autonomous authorities on the coast to conform to Islamic standards of weight or of form. Yet, the relevance of Kilwa’s coinage to the broader world of Islam might be greater than is immediately obvious. This is particularly true for the copper coinage.

*Islam and Islamic Coinage*

Islamic coinage is a huge area, and few reliable overviews exist that can cover all Islamic lands throughout the period under study here (although see Broome 1985). The majority of scholarship on Islamic numismatics is focused on the earliest periods: the Ummayad and Abbasid caliphates of the first centuries of Islam. It is in this period that Islamic coins could be studied as a more unified phenomenon. An initial period of experimentation was based on earlier prototypes in the Islamic lands, establishing a system of gold dinars, silver dirhams, and copper fulus (sing. fals). Coins of the caliphate were then standardized at the end of the seventh century CE by the Ummayad caliph ‘Abd al Malik. He established a format for the style and content of dinars that was to persist for centuries thereafter, invoking the name of Allah as a form of legitimacy for the coins (Maurer 2005). It was the caliph’s prerogative to mint gold dinars, and ‘Abd al Malik set a standard weight formula of 4.25g for gold dinars and 2.85g for silver dirhams. The weight of copper coins was never standardized (Grierson 1960: 246-7), probably because they were normally minted locally, according to local weight standards (Grierson 1960: 254; Lowick 1990). By the tenth century, gold and silver were increasingly also subject to regional weight standards, which would be distinguished by the mint at which they were struck rather than by a centralized authority for the entire Islamic realm. From the twelfth century, one of the key reference points was created by the Cairo mint, whose dinar was commonly used throughout the Indian Ocean world as the *mithqal* standard. The gold coins of Kilwa, from the fourteenth century, are actually quite close to the weight of a Cairo dinar, suggesting again that Swahili rulers and their mints were fully involved in the Islamic world and cognizant of international practice.

Where the eastern African coast is unusual, then, is in the fully developed system of copper coinage that was in operation at Kilwa Kisiwani. Copper issues, or fulus, were known throughout the Islamic world. As discussed, they could be extremely variable in both weight and style as they tended to be based locally (Perkins 2013: 119). During the Ummayad period, fulus differed stylistically from gold and silver coins, as they did not mention the mint or name a ruler. Later some elements of the higher denominations were added, but they did not resemble dinars or dirhams (Schindel 2010). Under Abbasid rule, fulus were rarer, and of simple design without the ornamental symbols used during Ummayad rule (Broome 1985: 13-18). In later periods, copper coins seem to have dropped away from the repertoire in the main Islamic mints. The Cairo mint created no known copper coinage, dealing mainly in gold dinars. Copper coins were part of a much more diverse set of coinages created by local authorities for local purposes. They are not often reported in detail, yet the diversity of these might be illustrated by the lead coinage minted at Siraf: a unique local tradition using a base metal. The value of these coins was thus not obviously based upon specie value but instead on the *idea* of coinage, creating systems that worked locally (Lowick 1985). Local systems were also not always about creating smaller denominations; the Ottoman Empire of the fifteenth century actually created a whole series of higher denominations of silver coinage to deal with larger-scale transactions.

*Islamic Coins and Everyday Life in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*

By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Islamic world was enormous and diverse, encompassing multiple powerful centers from the Mughals in the east to the Ottoman Empire that dominated the Mediterranean world. In all of these regions, though, forms of coinage existed that drew on Islamic standards and prototypes. As discussed, the copper coinages had always been more varied, and thus were even more subject to regional manipulation. By this period, they were not common elsewhere in the Islamic world. At Kilwa Kisiwani, copper was developed into a fully functioning system of currency, which circulated at the site for multiple purposes. It seems that many of the ways these coins were used, and the ways they derived their value, were based in everyday uses. The ongoing circulation of issues relating to powerful rulers would have reconfirmed Kilwa’s position in history to the population as they used the coins. As well as being locally powerful, these rulers were also internationally active, embodying links with the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula through their claimed origins and via pilgrimage and scholarship. The material objects of the coins and their associations would therefore also reaffirm links with the Islamic world. Many of the aesthetic qualities of the coins would have positioned them within prized categories of wealth and display at Kilwa Kisiwani, and the use of coins for adornment and jewelry would again have been part of what gave them value. Finally, the particular qualities of coins as offerings in ritual contexts – in structured deposits beneath house foundations and on the tombs of important ancestors – would have added to the ways that they were valued and understood, not only as tokens of exchange but as potential repositories and symbols of value. Both of these aspects of coinage have parallels in more recent periods in eastern Africa. On Madagascar, the Portuguese introduction of *thalers* was hampered by the movement of these coins out of the circulation to be used as jewelry (Kus and Raharijaona 2008). Later indigenous coinage of the Merina dynasty was valued as a means of approaching and encountering royalty, and was prized in ritual contexts (Lambek 2001). It is suggested here that these very local, everyday uses at Kilwa might not have been so unusual in a very diverse Islamic world of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, where people were brought together by common beliefs, but also by common practices and interactions with the material world (Wynne-Jones 2016). Few have considered coinage in this light, as it is often seen as part of the economic realm, rather than in the world of things. Yet Flood (2009), for example, has written about how objects acted as mediators across the Islam world and at its eastern edges, drawing on evidence of art and architecture that created a mutually intelligible world. The coinage of Kilwa is particularly well-developed for a local tradition, perhaps because of the status awarded to copper in the African context (Herbert 1984). Yet it might be indicative of some of the other regional traditions seen across the Islamic world at this time.

Returning to the original question of this chapter then, and asking what coinage is for, the Kilwa coins have raised a series of interesting suggestions that might not be immediately obvious in studies of money. Coins are not simply tokens of exchange, they are also well suited to a variety of different purposes due to their aesthetic and material qualities, but particularly due to their associations. There are few studies that consider the role of coins in non-literate societies, or where literacy was linked fundamentally with religion and religious elites. On the Swahili coast, links to the Islamic world were always valued, but in fact the power of the written word would have been a broader phenomenon. In the world of fourteenth and fifteenth century Songo Mnara, coinage held a series of associations that linked inhabitants to their own urban tradition, and to a wider world of scholarship, travel, power, and interaction which was a powerful source of pride and esteem. Coins are therefore well-suited as stores and symbols of value due to their multiple resonances in symbolic and material ways. Links to power and authority are well explored, as the ”two sides” of the coin (Hart 1986), yet it is in the everyday uses of coinage that inhabitants of the Swahili coast found value in coinage and all that it could offer.

Notes

1 This chapter was written during a period of time spent as a *Pro Futura Scientia* fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study, Uppsala, and an Affiliated Researcher at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University. The author is a Lecturer at the University of York Department of Archaeology, and Core Group Member at the Center for Urban Network Evolutions, Aarhus University (funded by Danish National Research Fund, #DNRF119).

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**List of Tables**

Table 1. Chronology of major Kilwa-type issues

Table 2. Coins at Songo Mnara by context type

Table 3. Proportions of sultans/rulers on Kilwa coins

**List of Figures**

Figure 4.1. Map of eastern Africa showing major sites mentioned in the text. Drawing by Stephanie Wynne-Jones.

Figure 4.2 Silver coins from the Mtambwe Mkuu hoard. Photograph by Mark Horton, courtesy of Mark Horton.

Figure 4.3. Map of Kilwa archipelago, showing sites of Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara. Drawing by Stephanie Wynne-Jones.

Figure 4.4. Pierced Kilwa-type coin from excavations at Songo Mnara. Photograph by Stephanie Wynne-Jones.