

Kilwa Kisiwani

On land | Tanzania | 9th-16th century | Grades 6-8

Name _____ Date _____

Kilwa was once so rich that a famous traveler called it one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

Read the story

Kilwa Kisiwani grew into one of the richest towns on the Swahili Coast of East Africa between about 1000 and 1500 CE. Swahili culture mixed African traditions with ideas from Arabia, Persia and India, all connected by the Indian Ocean.

Kilwa's rulers controlled the trade in gold that came from Great Zimbabwe and the inland, along with ivory. Ships sailed with the monsoon winds to Arabia, India and even China. Kilwa minted its own copper coins, and one of them was found as far away as northern Australia.

In 1331, the traveler Ibn Battuta visited and praised the city's beauty. Kilwa's builders used coral stone to make the Great Mosque and a huge palace called Husuni Kubwa, with more than 100 rooms and an eight-sided pool.

How it ended

In 1505, Portuguese ships attacked Kilwa and took over the gold trade. Trade routes shifted, and the town slowly lost its wealth and people. Its stone buildings were left to crumble beside the sea.

Key words

- monsoon: seasonal winds that change direction and help sailors cross the ocean
- Swahili: the culture and language of the East African coast
- porcelain: fine, hard pottery first made in China

Wow facts

- A Kilwa copper coin was found on an island off northern Australia.
- Husuni Kubwa palace had an eight-sided swimming pool.
- Chinese porcelain was so loved here that bowls were set into the walls and ceilings as decoration.

Talk about it

1. How do you think the monsoon winds helped Kilwa become rich?

2. What do the objects found at Kilwa tell us about how connected the world was 700 years ago?

Try this

Draw a map of Kilwa Kisiwani as it looked at its busiest. Label three things people did there.

Quick quiz

Circle the best answer.

1. What was Kilwa's most valuable trade good?

- A. Gold
- B. Oil
- C. Coffee
- D. Tea

2. Which famous traveler visited Kilwa in 1331?

- A. Marco Polo
- B. Ibn Battuta
- C. Leif Erikson
- D. Zheng He

3. What were Kilwa's big buildings made of?

- A. Coral stone
- B. Wood only
- C. Ice
- D. Steel

Go further

Open ruinscape.live/kilwa-kisiwani/ for photos, the Then and Now picture where there is one, and links to museum collections and research. On the globe, Lyra Kael can fly the class there and answer questions.

Answer key (for teachers)

1. A. Kilwa controlled much of the gold trade of East Africa.
2. B. Ibn Battuta visited and praised the city.
3. A. Builders used coral stone from the coast.