

Ancient Afro-Asia Links: New Evidence from a Maritime Perspective

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Abstract

Historical records have shown that the East African coast was connected to ancient global trade networks. These early overseas contacts are evidenced by references to trading voyages in the early 1st millennium AD and in the 11th to 14th century AD. During these periods, exports to India, China and the Persian Gulf included skins, horns, ivory and gold, whilst pottery, glass, textiles and beads were imported. Maritime archaeological studies have produced pottery, beads and shipwrecks that have showed links between East Africa and the Middle East, Indian sub-continent and China. Furthermore, historic Kenyan coastal settlements such as Mombasa, Malindi and Lamu were important port towns of call for merchant shipping, as they were strategically sited along busy sea-lanes. This paper examines this historical connection between ancient Kenyan coastal towns and the Asian continent. It explores results of previous and ongoing underwater archaeological research in Malindi and Lamu archipelago that has produced evidence of Asian cultural heritage.

Keywords

East Africa; Kenya; Maritime; Swahili; Mombasa; Lamu; Pate, Malindi; Ngomeni

Introduction

Kenya is one of the East African countries that border the Indian Ocean. The East African coast littoral of the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) is referred to as the "Swahili coast" and its coastline extends for 3000 km from 1° North in Somali to 25° south to the mouth of Limpopo (Morgan 1973; Sanseverino 1983; Kusimba 1999). The dimensions of this coast cover the coastal littoral and the off-shore islands of Lamu, Pemba, Zanzibar and the Comoros (Chami 1998:199-218; Horton 1984; Sutton 1990). However, its width varied historically depending on the rate of interactions. For example, between 11th and 15th century AD, this coast extended from 50 – 300 kilometers (km) to the interior, while between 7th to 9th century AD and after 17th century AD, the width was 100 km (White 1983; Chami 2006). The coast is characterized by alternating beaches, rocky outcrops, coral reefs, large estuarine areas, wetlands, lagoons and inter-tidal flats (Ase 1987:276–295). On its part, the Kenya coast extends over 600 km in length bordering Somali in the north (at Kiunga) and Tanzania in the south at Vanga (see Figure 1). It has an almost continuous fringing of coral reef shelf running parallel to the coastline and extending 0.5 – 20 km offshore (Obura 2001:1264-1278). Over the years the adjacent continental shelf has been subjected to marine activity thereby leading to creation of new coastlines through fresh deposition of sand dunes and formation of coral rocks (Ase 1987:276–295). In other cases adjacent lands have been eroded away or have been sunk (Obura 2001:1264-1278). There is evidence that oceanic wave turbulences as well as human activities have, through the years, caused wreckage to a number of ships and canoes with cultural materials in them (Patience 2006).

Communities who settled along the Swahili coast have had a history of long and continuous interaction with not only the hinterland communities but also across the Indian Ocean seaboard. This Ocean has permitted a close network of sailing routes between its surrounding continents based on regular and predictable monsoon winds (Hall 1996). These winds allowed the Kenyan coast, being part of the WIO, to be visited

by seafarers from distant lands: Greece as early as 2000 Before Present¹ (BP) (Coupland 1938; Inghams 1962:1-2; Freeman-Grenville 1975:1-4, 14-24, 50-112; Hourani 1963), China and Persia in the 900 – 1400 AD (Boxer 1960; Chittick 1979:273-277; Sutton 1990). These visitors left material remains such as ceramics and shipwrecks that are reported in the seabed of Kenya. Local fishermen have reported features on the seabed along many parts of this coast and collected and handed to the National Museums of Kenya pottery, stone anchors, cannons and canon balls (Bitá and Wanyama 2007; Bitá 2008; 2009a). Recent archaeological and non-archaeological expeditions have yielded significant materials that are confirming this historical AFRO-SINO-ARABO connection (Bitá and Wanyama 2007; Bitá 2008; 2009a; 2011a).

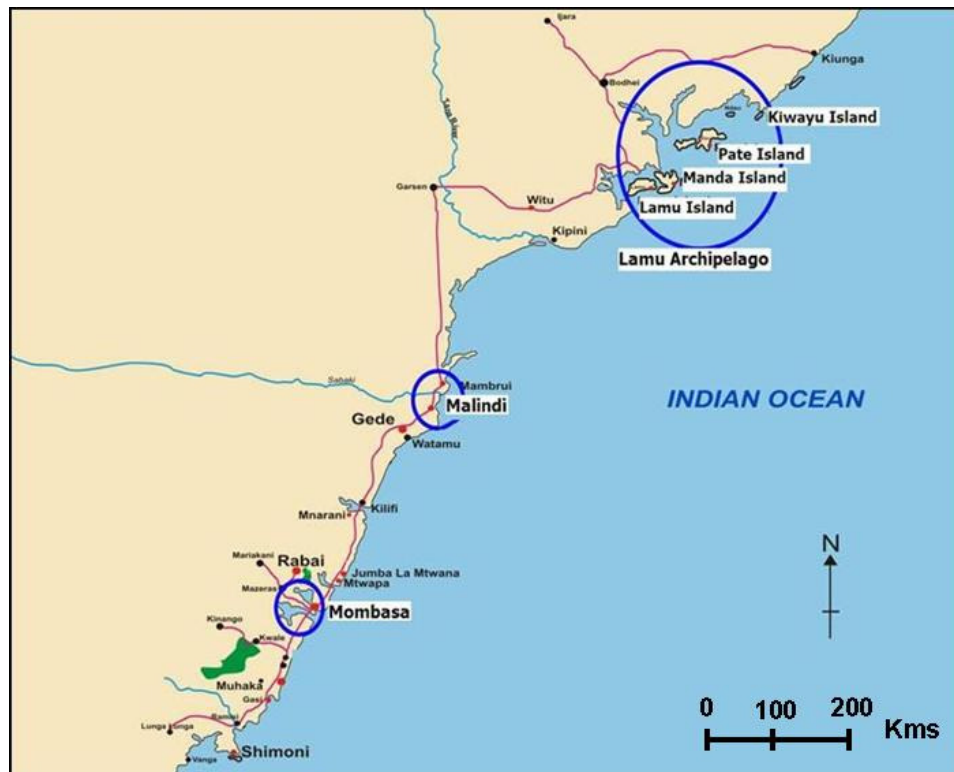


Figure 1. The Kenya coast showing location of some of the sites mentioned in the text (Bitá 2010).

Historical links

Historical records reported by travelers as well as chronicles have showed that for centuries, the people who lived along the east African coast had developed international trade links (Boxer 1960; Freeman-Grenville 1975: 1 - 4, 14 - 24; Chittick 1976; Huntingford 1980; Smith and Wright 1988; 115 - 145; Casson 1989; 117 - 134; Sutton 1990; Hall 1996; Chami 1999: 237 - 241; 2001: 7 – 20; Mbida, *et al* 2000: 151 - 162). However, the scale of this trade seems to have been limited and there is a marked hiatus in trading activity at most sites from the fourth to the eighth / ninth century AD (Forsythe, *et al.* 2003:133-138). Thus, it is at the latter date that the dynamic commercialization in the WIO truly begins. During this period, the Swahili coast was a busy highway for international traders and travelers some of whom recorded observations of the areas they visited (Hollingsworth 1951; Mathew 1963:94-114; Dato 1970:65-77; Freeman-Grenville 1975:1-4, 14-24; Huntingford 1980; Kirwan 1986:99-114; Casson 1989; Chami 1999:237-241). Even before the arrival of the Europeans, Africans had connections with people from the India-subcontinent. According to Martin

¹ used to indicate a date before the present era, commonly 1950 is the chosen date of reference because this is when the radiocarbon dating method was first invented.

(1973), Indian traders had been visiting the East African coast from at least the early centuries of the first millennium AD with some settling in the region. Today, Indian-descendants' enterprise and business acumen has introduced and currently runs most of the cloth shops in the coastal towns (Martin 1973; Bita 2005; 2008).

When one walks the streets the notable Indian heritage includes the architectural styles of storey buildings with penthouses and outer wooden stairways, a style that has remained unique in some infrastructure found in the region. Interestingly, other assortments of artifacts of Asian origin have been adopted as cultural heritage of the local people. These include for instance, Indian grinding stones and wooden pestles for making noodles (Bita 2005; Bita 2008). Other forms of heritage resulting from the Asian contact are the introduction of *Hori* (type of canoe) and *Ngalawa* (boat with outriggers) both of which are still in use in the region (Martin 1973; Bita 2005; Bita 2009a; Bita 2009b).

During the Ming dynasty the Chinese launched various missions to the African continent. Two of these voyages made between 1417-1419 AD and 1421-1422 AD have descriptions of the African territories visited, such as Maqdishu (Mogadishu), Brava, Juba and *Muâ-lién* / Mo-lin (Inghams 1962:5; Kirkman 1964:86-89). These areas have been identified as East African coastal towns with, *Mua-lien* as the town of Malindi on the Kenyan Coast and *Maqdishu* as Mogadishu in Somali (Inghams 1962: 1 - 3; Freeman-Grenville 1975: 7). The descriptions of these territories have been preserved in the *Ming Shih*, the official history of the Ming dynasty (Inghams 1962:5). The same record has also been preserved in the *Hsing- ch'a sheng- lan* which is a record of the lands visited by *Fei Hsin* who sailed as a junior officer on some of the voyages (Inghams 1962:5; Freeman-Grenville 1975:7; Kirkman 1964:86-89).

The fifth Chinese expedition was between 1417-1419 (Inghams 1962:5) to Malindi and was a reaction to a gift of a giraffe sent to the Chinese Emperor by the King of Bengal Saif-ud-Din, as a gift from the Sultan of Malindi (Kirkman 1964:86-89). The gift included a 'celestial stag' or Oryx, and a 'celestial horse' or Zebra. The arrival of an African giraffe in China was made possible by the established seafaring networks between the Kenyan coast and countries bordering the Indian Ocean.

The legendary Chinese explorer *Zheng He* is said to have visited Malindi several times during the Ming dynasty, when maritime trade grew unabated (Inghams 1962:1-5; Kirkman 1964:88-89). In Zheng He's travel he would have been privy to this commercialization, the most obvious signs of which include a wide range of imported ceramics, beads, glassware and metal artifacts imported from the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, India, Southeast Asia and China. Artifacts of these types have been found in most archaeological excavations along the Kenyan coast (Wilson 1982; Abungu 1994; Chami 2006; Kusimba 1999; Breen and Lane 2003; Bita 2011b). China was known for its porcelain production. Coming from China, the porcelain was traded on the Swahili Coast in exchange for mangrove poles, ambergris², leopard skins, slaves, ivory, gums, rhinoceros horns, and tortoise shells (Chittick 1979:273-277; Whitehouse 2001:411-424; Forsythe, *et al.* 2003:133-138).

The ancient Afro-Asiatic trade connections are said to have existed for several centuries in the Swahili Coast before the arrival of Europeans. This historical link is today evident by, the suspected shipwreck of *Zheng He* and the associated descendants of his shipwreck survivors in the Lamu archipelago (Bita and Wanyama 2007; Bita 2009a). During one of *Zheng He's* voyages to East Africa, around 1458 AD, one of his ships is said to have capsized near Pate in the Lamu archipelago (see Figure

²A gray waxy substance secreted from the intestines of the sperm whale consisting mainly of cholesterol. It is found floating in tropical waters or on beaches and was an important export commodity to the Far East and Middle East mainly for perfume-making.

1). After the Chinese the next well-documented foreign arrivals to the Kenyan coast were the Portuguese, eighty years later (Bitá 2005; Bitá 2008).

Previous research

Previous archaeological research has revealed that the Kenyan coast has had long contacts with Far Eastern countries. An underwater excavation of the Portuguese shipwreck *Santo Antonio de Tanna* recovered a lot of pottery identified as manufactured in the Far East (Figure 2) including India, China, Thailand and Burma (Piercy 1977:331-347; Piercy 1978:301-319; Sassoon 1980; Lynch 1999). In Malindi, fishermen have been collecting Chinese porcelain in the sea (Bitá 2008; Bitá 2011a).



Figure 2. Jars from Thailand and Burma (*Courtesy: Fort Jesus Museum, Mombasa*)

Present work

Current maritime research is concentrating in Malindi and the Lamu archipelago, areas known for their historical global trade links. Malindi, located 120 km northeast of Mombasa and about 250 km south of Lamu, among the towns that have shaped the history of the East African coast. The town appears in Chinese records of the 9th century AD (Freeman-Grenville 1975:7; Kirkman 1964:86-89) and was visited and described by Arabs and Portuguese visitors in the 12th - 15th centuries AD (Freeman-Grenville 1975:1-4; Inghams 1962:5-15; Ross 1995; Hall 1996; Sassoon 1980). By the 15th century AD for instance, the Chinese explorer *Zheng He* is said to have visited the town where he was given a giraffe as a present by the Malindi ruler (Kirkman 1964:86-89). By then it was a thriving town an attribute that led the Portuguese on their arrival to make it their headquarters for international trade links between Europe and the Indian sub-continent (Boxer 1960; Freeman-Grenville 1975:50-75; Kirkman 1964:89-95; Kirkman 1974; Hourani 1963; Martin 1973; Martin 1975; Martin and Martin 1978; Sutton 1990; Bitá 2011b).

In trading areas, shipwrecks would be closer to certain shipping hazards such as reefs and projecting headlands. In Malindi, maritime investigations are confined in the areas of Ras Ngomeni and Leopard Bay. Ngomeni is located near a headland whereas Leopard Bay is in a navigation channel between two reefs. In the two areas many ships are suspected to have sunk and locals have been collecting Chinese and Persian ceramics from underwater (Bitá 2008; Bitá 2011a; MS, Malindi).

Recent maritime surveys in Leopard Bay have identified a ship engine block, Chinese porcelain of the 14th century and Indian wares (Bitá 2008; Bitá 2011a). There are several Portuguese shipwrecks in Malindi whose locations have not been found

(Bitá 2008), including one allegedly discovered by local fishermen containing Indian and Chinese pottery (Patience 2006; TA, Malindi).

Ngomeni village, about 50 km north of Malindi town, stands on an arm of land jutting towards the sea (Ras Ngomeni), which offers a protected shallow harbour formerly used as a gateway for all seafarers from Lamu to Malindi (Wilson 1982:210-219; Bitá 2008; Bitá 2011a). The area was known for mangrove growing which was exported to, and used in house-roof construction in, cities around the Gulf (Wilson 1982:210-219; Whitehouse 2001:416). Recent maritime archaeological studies in the area have discovered a 14th century AD wooden shipwreck about 40 m long at a depth of between 7 – 10 m partially covered in sand (Plate 1). On-going studies seek to establish the origin of this shipwreck (Bitá 2011a).



Plate 1. Bottom plank of a shipwreck in Ngomeni, Malindi (Bitá 2011a).

Other artifacts recovered, which confirm the trade links between Malindi and the Far East, include a complete Far Eastern pot, white-glazed plate from Thailand (Figure 3), Islamic green glazed pottery, bronze mortar, copper plates and bowls (Bitá 2008; Bitá 2011a).



Figure 3. Glazed pot, Ming Dynasty pot with Dragon and Thailand plate (*Courtesy: Fort Jesus Museum, Mombasa*)

Lamu archipelago is composed of several islets but the main inhabited islands include Lamu, Manda, Pate, Ndau and Kiwayu, all with ancient towns by the same names. The archipelago and its settlements are important landmarks in the history of the East Coast of Africa. This archipelago was the most important centre of the northern Swahili world with Manda and Pate revealing evidence of early occupation (Chittick 1984; Horton 1987b:290-322). The Island of Pate borders Manda Island to the south and the Indian Ocean to the east. The island's main town of Pate is significant because it was among the earliest sites founded upon the East African coast (Wilson and Omar 1997:31-76; Kusimba 1999). Previous research has indicated that Pate fully participated in the development of the Swahili culture from these beginnings and grew to be one of the most politically influential and economically prosperous communities on the Swahili coast (Wilson and Omar 1996:453-554; Wilson and Omar 1997:31-76).

Pate Island for many years served as the gateway to Lamu for sea travelers. Up to the present locals refer to its eastern shores as *mlango wa Lamu* (gateway to Lamu). The Portuguese used this route for decades controlling the WIO trade (Freeman-Greenville 1975:50-112; Kirkman 1964:86-117). The Arabs dominated the coastal strip long before the Portuguese and used the same route for hundreds of years in trade with the Persian Gulf (Chittick 1979:273-277; Chittick 1984; Hall 1996).

A narrow creek divides Pate Island into two halves. In the past the creek was deep allowing sailing ships to anchor for the loading of copra, tamarind, dates, mangroves, leather products, furniture and other Swahili crafts; and off-loading products from various markets (Chittick 1967:37-67; Chittick 1979:273-277; Whitehouse 2001:411-424). The eastern side of this creek has silted heavily allowing mangrove forests to grow hence they cover the entire original anchorage. Pate Bay has several long reefs and many rock outcrops such as Pazzali, Mwamba Hassani and Mwamba Hanawi. The lack of nautical charts for this area caused many early seafarer casualties on these coral rocks when sailing through this bay.

Over the years, fishermen in the Lamu archipelago have been recovering archaeological pottery at various sites along the reefs and channels (Bita and Wanyama 2007; Bita 2009a). A distinct find was a pot with a dragon emblem (see figure 3), believed to be of the China Ming Dynasty period. In one of the Chinese Ming Dynasty missions to East Africa one of *Zheng He's* ships is said to have wrecked in Pate bay, around 1458 AD, where survivors went to stay with, and later intermarried with, the local population (Bita 2009a). The union led to a generation of locals who claim direct decendency of the Chinese shipwreck survivors (SK, Pate; AS, Lamu; SM, Lamu; HK, Mombasa). Their physical features and DNA analyses (SM, Lamu; BS, Pate) attest to this and locally they are referred to as Wa- China (local for Chinese people). The clan name of these people is Wa- Shanga (people from Shanga) which local people claim is an abbreviation of Shanghai (meaning the ship wreckers may have originated from modern day Shanghai, China).

Recent Evidence

The *Zheng He* phenomenon in Pate and the prolonged recovery of Chinese cultural materials in Lamu has prompted further underwater archaeological research. Recent maritime and underwater archaeological surveys have recovered data that further supports ancient trade connections between Kenya and Asian countries (Bita and Wanyama 2007; Bita 2009a; Bita 2011a). Seabed survey identified scatters of Far Eastern and Chinese pottery and several copper ingots. Several underwater sites were identified, although yet to be confirmed, indicate presence of historic shipwrecks (Bita 2011a).

The studies have also established existence of a strong tradition and a generation of locals who claim ancestry from the *Zheng He* shipwreck in Pate (SL, Pate;

AS, Lamu; SM, Lamu; SK, Pate; SM, Pate; BS, Pate; Bitu and Wanyama 2007; Bitu 2009a). In relation to the shipwreck survivors there are also two graveyards: one with elaborate tombs and the other, thought to belong to the Chinese, has simple graves with headstones that Chinese informants from Xinhua News Agency identified as Chinese tombstones (HK, Mombasa). In the nearby villages of Pate, Faza and Siyu, there are a lot of Chinese porcelain of the 14th century, used in decoration of niches of tombs and houses (Horton 1987b: 290-322; Bitu and Wanyama 2007; Bitu 2009a).

Conclusion

This paper has considered multiple sources in the research to define the extent of the significance of the Swahili Coast in past Indian Ocean maritime activities. The *Periplus*³ documents refer to east Africa's coast as early as 2000 BP. Chinese sources mention presence of a cattle economy at Berbera coast, Somali by late 800s AD, as well as their involvement in trade with foreigners from the Far East. Historical records by Arab travelers and geographers in mid 900s AD mention thriving maritime communities along the east African coast. These records are correlated with data coming from terrestrial archaeological investigations at many sites on the Swahili Coast.

Maritime archaeological studies which are producing evidence in forms of shipwrecks lend support to these ancient trade links. Additionally, the probable presence of the *Zheng He* shipwreck(s) in Pate; and cultural materials of Chinese, Indian, Thai and Burmese in underwater archaeological sites signify that communities of the Kenya coast were in continuous interaction with the Asian continent. Accordingly, that the Kenyan coast was (and still is) a highway for international maritime travelers, and has had historical trade connectivity with regions surrounding the Indian Ocean, makes it an important area for maritime studies as traces of these connections could be lying on the seabed.

Oral Sources

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³ Documents by anonymous first century AD traveler written as a guide to the ports and trade of East Africa and connecting areas of Arabia, India and China.

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