

■ TANZANIA

Scale and Temporality in an urban settlement system: Fieldwork in Kilwa Region, southern Tanzania

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Introduction

This paper is based on the findings of a recent regional survey around Kilwa Kisiwani, on the southern coast of Tanzania. It is not intended as a catalogue of sites located (see Wynne-Jones 2005), but instead presents a summary of some of the results and the issues that they raise regarding urbanism in the region. Kilwa Kisiwani itself was one of the principal trading ports that flourished along the coast of East Africa from the late first millennium AD. The stonetown itself is well known, both through the extensive excavations that took place there during the 1960s (Chittick 1974), and from the accounts of it in travellers' accounts and indigenous histories (Freeman-Grenville 1962a, b). The first settlement of the site dates from at least the ninth century, and perhaps even earlier (Chami 1994), growing in the subsequent centuries to become a major port of trade in the Indian Ocean world. As this trade intensified and diversified, so the town itself developed, with the addition of monumental architecture built of coral and lime plaster from the eleventh century and a number of building projects of great ambition completed in its heyday of the fourteenth century (Sutton 1998). Despite the wealth of data relating to the town, there had been no previous analysis of its wider region, perhaps partly due to the rhetoric of separation from that region that was promoted by Kilwa Kisiwani's erstwhile rulers.

Urbanism at Kilwa

The motivation behind survey in the region of this important coastal town was the elucidation of the 'settlement system' of Kilwa region. The idea

that a town – or indeed any site – exists within a wider regional pattern of settlement is enshrined in the archaeological literature, forming the basis of attempts to understand landscape dynamics. In recent years, this logic has been applied to a number of areas of the East African coast, as researchers have sought to contextualise knowledge of the individual stonetowns. Comprehensive surveys have been conducted to establish regional histories (Helm 2004), interactions (Abungu and Mutoro 1993; Mutoro 1998) and urban trajectories (Fleisher 2003). This has been combined with a movement towards the recognition of the "hidden majority" (Fleisher and LaViolette 1999) within coastal society: those who would have occupied wattle-and-daub areas within towns (Koplin 2001) and regions (Fleisher 2003). An heterogeneous coastal society is thus understood to have existed, incorporating multiple groups and their material expressions and the exclusionary histories of the coastal elite have been reassessed as cultural manifestos, rather than historical truths (Horton and Middleton 2000; Fleisher 2004).

Urbanism, therefore, has been recast as a relative phenomenon defined and understood through its relationship with a wider network of settlement. In sub-Saharan Africa, the recognition of this type of settlement has been a key feature of post-colonial scholarship (Sinclair *et al.* 1993) and yet researchers have struggled with definition: the perceived need to provide African examples of 'universal' standards of development has clashed with the individuality of many of the examples examined. Paradoxically, attempts to engage with universal themes have tended toward very particular understandings (Stahl 1999). One potentially liberating approach, advocated by Susan McIntosh (1997) and more recently by LaViolette and Fleisher (2005) calls for an understanding of urbanism through its function. Again, the concept is embedded within a wider context; for the examples cited, that context is understood to be the countryside immediately surrounding the town. Yet the function of the town in relationship to its hinterland will obviously be different than its function at a larger scale: this is seen in the differential emphases of pan-coastal studies of process, which tend to highlight intercontinental trade and broad-scale changes such as the introduction of Islam (Horton 1987; Wright 1993) and of the explicitly local studies referred to above. Clearly, any consideration of the growth, function or material manifestation of urbanism must consider the different scales at which

the town exists and interacts. This observation was underlined by regional research at Kilwa, which revealed a pattern of local continuity that contrasted with the changing role and status of Kilwa Kisiwani on either a coastal or an international stage.

Fieldwork in Kilwa region

Survey in Kilwa was conducted over two seasons of approximately five weeks each in 2003 and 2004. A zone of 30 km² around the town was chosen, as large enough to contain a reasonable sample of the regional pattern, without simply showing satellite settlements of Kilwa Kisiwani. It was also deemed the maximum extent that could practicably be sampled during the time available. Practical considerations also necessitated concentration on either the area to the north of Kilwa Masoko, towards Kilwa Kivinje (Figure 1), or the southern part of the bay, around Pande; it was not possible to encompass both, as travelling between them would necessitate a long road journey. The area to the north was chosen, for the simple reason that it was easier to conduct survey here and there were more roads and trackways allowing travel across the landscape.

Areas of around 1 km² were surveyed at approximately 5 km intervals along random transects. These transects ultimately followed roads and trackways, after attempts to impose a grid on the area resulted in a large amount of time wasted walking between areas. Areas were covered by walking repeated transects on foot, and recording all surface features: in practice these were mainly artefact scatters, particularly concentrations of ceramics. The landscape around Kilwa is very dry and sparsely vegetated – as a consequence there seems to have been substantial soil erosion. This meant that artefacts were everywhere exposed across the surface of the landscape and surface survey resulted in a vast quantity of data, with multiple small and undiagnostic artefact concentrations. Although in the field all such concentrations were recorded and collections made, many were discarded during subsequent analysis. It was decided that only concentrations of >20 sherds would be classed as ‘sites’ and, further, that only those with clear traces of daub would be considered the loci of former settlement. Although this may have excluded a number of sites that were the remains the former habitation, it was felt necessary to apply such criteria to create order from what was a bewildering

profusion of archaeological debris across the entire region. This scattering is pertinent to the discussion below, as it is clear that this landscape has been widely occupied and exploited for many centuries, not always in the format required by studies of ‘settlement pattern’.

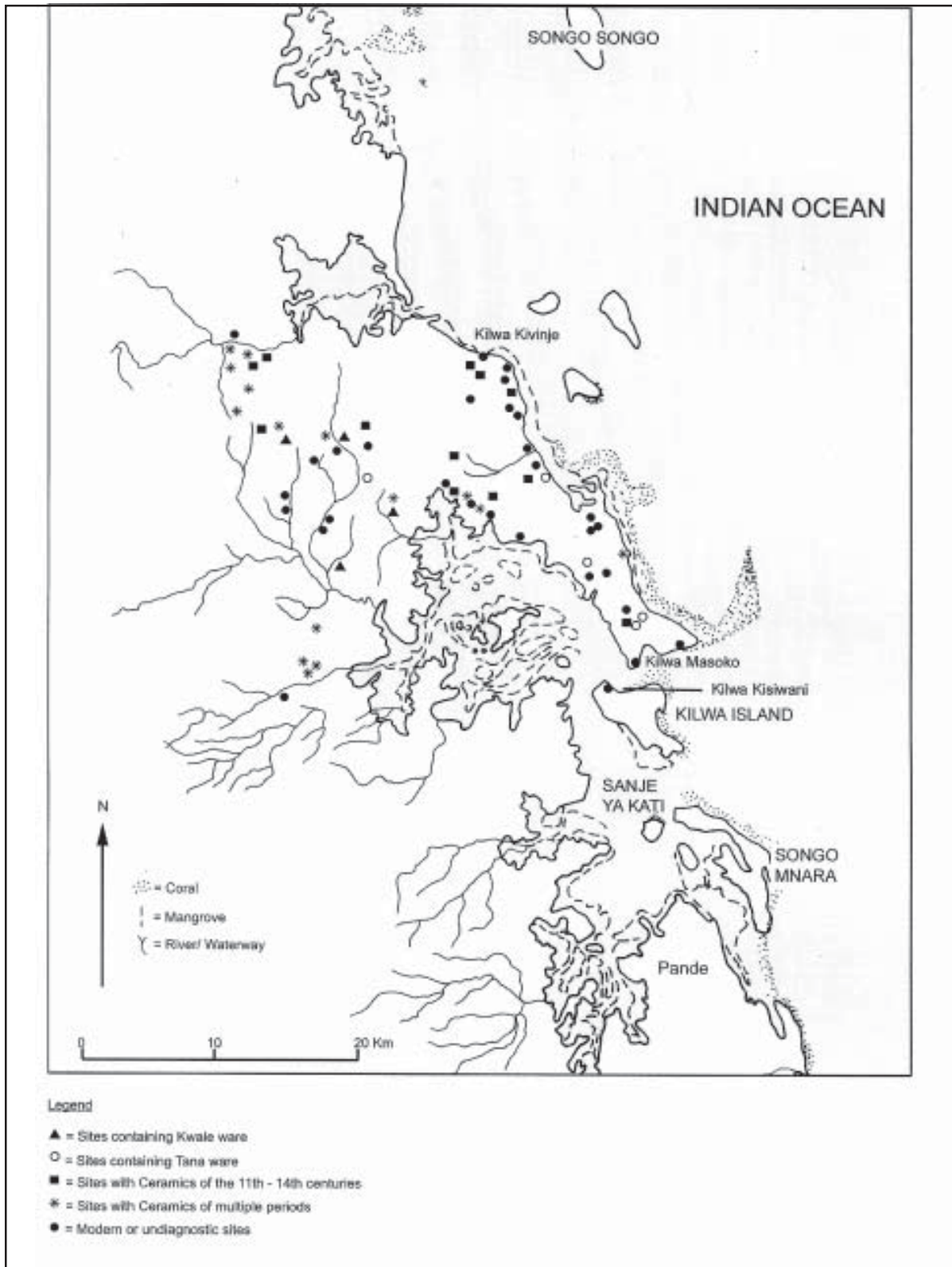
Still, once all such background debris had been eliminated, sixty-six sites were visible, which contained not only clear concentrations of artefacts, but also evidence of structural remains (mostly daub, but in a few cases, restricted to the immediate coast, coral building materials had been used). Some of these sites were later excavated, but in all cases deposits were extremely shallow, largely mirroring the surface assemblages.

The full results of these investigations have been laid out elsewhere (Wynne-Jones 2004, 2005) and this paper can only draw out a few aspects of the settlement pattern so revealed.

Firstly, the distribution of sites was fairly even across Kilwa region during all periods (Figure 1). Although evidence was found for occupation from the early centuries AD – in the form of sites containing Kwale ware – and for continuing exploitation until the present day, there was no noticeable clustering or movement during the period of urban development at Kilwa Kisiwani. The only change of distribution noted was a general expansion to settle coastal areas during the period associated with Tana ware, yet this was not a movement towards the coast, but rather was part of an overall expansion of settlement that occurred at this time. Thus it is difficult to compare the growth of the town on Kilwa Island with any models of developing urban geography. In this case, change in the form and positioning of settlement seems to have been largely restricted to the town itself.

Secondly, the stratigraphy at all sites was extremely shallow. This was partly a result of erosion, but also partly a function of the type of settlement recovered. Structures had been almost universally of wattle-and-daub, and occupation of sites seems to have been relatively short-lived, perhaps as a result of shifting agricultural practices, similar to the type seen in the region today. Although some sites contained remains of more than one period, with distinct ceramic traditions represented, it seems that this may indicate the repeated use of particular points in the landscape, rather than protracted use of a single

Figure 1. Location of sites described in the text.



site. The shallowness of deposits revealed by excavation does not indicate dense or long-lived occupation.

This latter feature also puts the low-level scatter across the landscape into context, as part of a regional pattern of shifting exploitation that is difficult to reconstruct archaeologically. The sites that were discounted from analysis may also have been sites of occupation, perhaps seasonal, using different construction materials, such as makuti. The recognition of such practices remains a problem for archaeology and one can only state the probability that a range of settlement forms existed in the past, just as they do today.

Urbanism at Kilwa Kisiwani

This patterning has implications for our understanding of urbanism as discussed above. The town of Kilwa Kisiwani existed in this settlement landscape in a different role than has been revealed through other regional studies. For example, Jeff Fleisher (2003) demonstrated that the development of stonetowns on Pemba was accompanied by profound changes in the settlement of the countryside and that the fortunes of the two were intertwined. Yet in Kilwa region the growth of the town was instead set against a background of local continuity, at least in terms of site type and location. The growth in the region of a few more permanent sites characterised by coral architecture, such as Songo Mnara or the small mainland site of Mtanga Makutani, excavated in 2004, seems to have been a secondary development – they were offshoots of the town rather than comparable sites during its period of growth.

Thus, within the pattern of small-scale, ephemeral settlement, the town appears to function as a fixed point in the landscape, its durability opposed to the short-lived nature of the hinterland sites. Yet, would this relative permanence have been evident at the timescale of lived experience? A wattle-and-daub settlement that appears fleeting at an archaeological timescale can in fact exist throughout a lifetime: it is thus, in effect, permanent. During the course of survey in the Kilwa region we visited the homes of numerous local residents who had lived their entire lives in a particular wattle-and-daub house. Normally, these had been extensively repaired, renovated and extended, but remained the same essential structure.

At one level up the scale, the Kilwa District Map offers another glimpse into the temporality of settlement. Many of the small villages recorded for posterity by the cartographers of the 1960s do not now exist. Yet at the time the map was created, we must assume that the settlements were deemed ‘permanent’, and indeed for the contemporary inhabitants they may have been.

Of course, the permanence of Kilwa Kisiwani was not its only distinguishing feature; and yet in a discipline based on the underlying logic of settlement change as an indicator of social development, this consideration of different temporalities is interesting. It necessitates a consideration of our basic assumptions, inasmuch as they cannot necessarily be compared with the way that past peoples would have understood or experienced change. It also highlights the problems with our models of urban development, as they are ill-equipped to deal with impermanent and constantly shifting settlement.

As well as temporal scale, the results of survey at Kilwa require a consideration of geographical scale. It appears that the developments at Kilwa Kisiwani were rather isolated and restricted to the town limits. This is in some ways illusory, as a shared tradition of material culture indicates a continuing relationship between the people of the town and countryside. Yet in terms of settlement – and urbanism is fundamentally a type of settlement – the town does seem to have been fairly isolated from its neighbours.

However, although the assumption of many analyses of settlement dynamics is that a site will be integrated into its immediate region, perhaps for Kilwa Kisiwani it is necessary to consider other spheres of interaction. Examination of the interplay between different trading ports or ‘peer polities’ provides an alternative perspective on urbanisation at Kilwa Kisiwani, and a developmental trajectory of which it may have been more thoroughly a part. This is not to claim that Kilwa Kisiwani had no relationship with its hinterland, but that an analysis of urbanism through function must consider numerous different scales of interaction and the possibility of different roles in each. Elsewhere (Wynne-Jones, in prep.), I suggest that the concept of heterarchy (Crumley 1979, 1995) might be a useful means of understanding the way that these geographical and temporal scales articulate.

Future Directions

This paper has been necessarily brief and partial; as such I am aware that it poses more questions than it answers. I aim simply to present some of the patterns that emerged from survey in the Kilwa region. I have not been able to refer to the record of material culture, which both reinforces and further complicates the picture from the settlement pattern. It is an area of ongoing research for me, as I try to develop a comparison between town and countryside assemblages. This paper, then, can only reiterate the particularity of the urban process in different areas, drawing attention to the difficulties and limitations of the ways we understand settlement change. Continued attention to multiple scales, regions and timeframes will help us to build more nuanced understandings of towns such as Kilwa Kisiwani.

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