

Ancient African Coins in Arnhem Land

Seeking answers in Aboriginal myth, history, and rock art

Ian S. McIntosh (2,200 words)

I have known about the Kilwa coins mystery since the late 1980s when I lived on the remote Aboriginal community of Elcho Island in north-east Arnhem Land. At that time I was working closely with the traditional owner of the Wessel Islands, the late David Burrumarra M.B.E. on issues of social justice, sea rights, and reconciliation. We tossed around various ideas to explain how 900 year old coins from East Africa could end up on a beach in the Wessel Islands 8000 kilometres away. These coins were among the first ever produced in sub-Saharan Africa. Only those from the Axumite Empire of Ethiopia, Carthage and Egypt predated them. Burrumarra and I toyed with the idea of mounting an expedition but funding proved elusive and it was largely peripheral to our more politically-driven agenda.

Over the years, a small photo of the world heritage ruins of Kilwa's Portuguese/Omani fort tacked to the wall of my study would remind me of those conversations. Burrumarra was Australia's first Aboriginal anthropologist and a pioneer of the Yolngu (Aboriginal) communities of Yirrkala and Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island). As the leader of the Warramiri-Golpa clan he would speak with unrivalled authority on the history of Yolngu connections with the wider world, for the north-east Arnhem Land coast is alive with references to past contacts. At the 'beginning of time,' for example, he told me that a harpooned whale had dragged a large sailing canoe on to the Australian coast. I wondered to myself if there were any physical traces of this historic encounter. Burrumarra would also talk about a beach where "men with hats of mirror" had come ashore, a possible reference to armour. Were they Portuguese freebooters, the ones who had looted and burned Kilwa in 1505? There are also accounts of Yolngu being swallowed by whales and regurgitated as white men, and of 'universal travellers' associated with the great celestial river called the Milky Way descending from the heavens in their Dreaming sea craft known as the Djulpan. The range of narratives seemed endless.

The academic study of myth and history is well advanced, though we understood that making definitive statements about what actually transpired was problematic. Arnhem Land, however, provides us with a unique opportunity; a rich source of material for contemplation including a stunning array of Yolngu rock art showcasing wave upon wave of foreign visitation.

Among the more tantalizing of Burrumarra's narratives were those associated with the 'flying fox people' who, in partnership with Yolngu, made boats from native timbers and iron implements (anchors, knives and axes) from local ironstone.

Elsewhere in Aboriginal Australia, early settlers and explorers were considered to be ghosts. Arnhem Land was no different. The small red flying fox known to Yolngu as the Matjurr gathers by the tens of thousands in the paperbark forests and jungles of the Wessel Islands each year. Then, after feasting on blossoms for a month or so, they head north towards New Guinea, never to return. For the Yolngu, they are traveling to the land of the dead, for the very next year, another batch has arrived, and is ready to depart from the known world. The first whites on the coast were identified by Yolngu using the sign of

the arms crossed over the chest, the same as for the Matjurr. The deceased in the form of these white apparitions, had come back to life.

Astonishing also are the Yolngu narratives that indicate that the Yolngu knew of the titanic struggles underway in the East Indies between crusading Portuguese empire-builders and besieged and growing Islamic civilizations. The Portuguese and the Dutch had sought total domination of Indonesia's spice trade and in Yolngu myth and ritual we see innumerable references to barbarous incursions, staunch resistance and the race for Christian and Islamic converts. Did the First Australians witness this centuries-long conflict first-hand?

My interest in the Kilwa coin mystery was reignited in 2012 after I had given a presentation at a conference on Macassan history and heritage at the Australian National University. One prominent Australian historian, Campbell Macknight, asked for my opinion on how the coins found their way to Australia. I wondered if they were talisman, good luck charms carried by Indonesian sailors who had interacted with the people of north-east Arnhem Land over many years. But what if multiple hands had been involved? It would implicate north Australia's indigenous peoples in the ancient Indian Ocean trading network, also known as the Maritime Silk Route, which linked such exotic ports as Kilwa and Zanzibar in East Africa with Arabia, Persia, India, China, and Indonesia.

During World War 2, RAAF serviceman Maurice Isenberg of Sydney had been manning a radar base on the Wessel Islands that tracked the movements of hostile Japanese air and sea craft. Darwin had been devastated by Japanese attack in 1942 and advanced warning bases such as Isenberg's were a vital part of the war effort. On a quiet moment fishing, he chanced upon five copper coins from the once thriving Swahili port of Kilwa in modern day Tanzania. He also found four Dutch coins from the East India trade at the same location. The rare Kilwa coins, which bear the names of various Sultans, were over 900 years old.

The Wessel Islands Kilwa coins are a complete mystery. Kilwa coins have only ever been found in two places beyond the immediate vicinity of their manufacture in East Africa, one in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe in southern Africa and one in the Dhofar region of Oman on the Arabian Peninsula. Dutch coins, by comparison, have been found all along the Arnhem Land coast, especially in association with the trepang (*bêche de mer*) fishing camps of the Macassans from Sulawesi. These monsoon traders, under colonial rule by the Dutch, frequented the Australian coast on a seasonal basis for perhaps 150 years or more beginning in the mid-1700s.

According to Burrumarra's son, clan elder Terry Yumbulul, the Yolngu are guided in their reflections about ancient contacts by their oral history, sacred mythology, as well as place names. The 130 kilometre long wall of rock that is the Wessel Islands is rich in sites that speak of extensive foreign interaction through countless generations.

Any number of hypotheses can be developed to explain the presence of the Kilwa coins in Arnhem Land. Macassan traders, for example, developed close working ties with the Aboriginal land owners over many generations. Did they offer up coins to the Yolngu for access to their land and sea resources in the first wave of contact? While the Wessel Islands were not a source of the trepang species desired by

Macassans for their Chinese clients, the large freshwater lake on Marchinbar, the northern Wessel Island, was probably a reconnoitring point for the Macassan fleet right up to the late 1800s. Yolngu are still very familiar with the location of many Macassan camp sites, often marked by tamarind trees and the stone lines that supported trepang cooking pots, as well as the whereabouts of many Macassan shipwrecks.

Historical records describe how Yolngu travelled aboard the trepangers' praus to many south-east Asian ports, like Makassar, Singapore, and Banda. In discussions with me, some Yolngu even wondered if their ancestors had travelled further afield, as far as East Africa.

In the same speculative manner, some of our expedition team believe that the Portuguese were in some way involved as they had controlled the waters to the immediate north of Australia from the early 1500s, and had major forts in Makassar, Ambon and on the island of Aru. The unparalleled Chinese expeditions led by the Muslim eunuch Zheng He (with over 30,000 men) in the early 1400s had touched upon the Swahili coast including Kilwa. Could some of these have found their way down into south-east Asia and eventually Australia?

The Arabs had been trading along the Zanj coast from the Horn of Africa to Mozambique from the latter part of the first millennium and were also well established in Asian ports like Cambay, Calicut, Malacca and Guangzhou. A shipwreck in the 800s at Belitung Island near Sumatra dates from the Tang Dynasty and is testimony to early Arab mobility in the waters to the north of Australia. Alternatively, the former colony of Tanganyika was a German possession until after World War One, and so was New Guinea, and there was probably communication between them. Could coins have come to Australia via this connection?

In a 2012 article in Australian Folklore, I shared the view that Burrumarra and I had discussed in the 1980s that the coins might have represented the worldly wealth of the Indonesian shipwreck survivor from the late 1800s, a man called Budiman who lived close to where the coins were found.

One thing was very clear to us all. These many hypotheses challenge Australia's 'myth of isolation'. The idea that Australia lay secluded in the great southern ocean, hidden from view until the European 'enlightenment', is an anachronism, a relic of the mindset that produced the myth of terra nullius. With the Kilwa coins, we have potential evidence of much earlier contacts from across the vast Indian Ocean that challenge the out-dated Captain Cook-centred view of Australian history.

Opinions: Sandy Horne, Expedition Researcher

Many sources remain to be explored so important clues may be just a page-turn away. Worthy of consideration as sources of the coins are the nineteenth century British explorers such as Matthew Flinders and Phillip Parker King who are known to have visited the region. One explorer in particular came to my attention. Francis Cadell was a well-travelled man of questionable character who made his name as an adventurer and explorer before setting off to chart Australia's northern coastline in 1867. Given his familiarity with the Wessel Islands, there is some suggestion that Cadell could have been the source of the coins.

Opinions: Peter Lane, Numismatist

As the coins were all found within a few metres of each other it is reasonable to postulate that they arrived there at the same time. The most recently struck coin is dated 1784 and is worn, which suggests that the coins arrived there anywhere from 1800 to 1900. When coins are lost in sand they hit the surface and instantly disappear, so it is highly unlikely they were accidentally lost as some were found on the surface. Tim Stone, our geomorphologist, claims that 'waves, wind and currents are very effective sorting agents on beaches. Beaches are often capped by deposits of coarse sediments (e.g. whole shells, pebbles) above the high water mark. It is possible that the coins got to the top of the beach face by 'normal' wave action in the same way as any coarse sediment. ...From a geomorphic perspective, there is no reason to doubt Isenberg's account of his find. He was just lucky the coins happened to be at (or near) the surface that day. A day later he probably wouldn't have found anything.' Thus coming from a shipwreck is the most plausible explanation.

Opinion: Bob Sheppard, Heritage Detection

I believe that both the African and Dutch coins arrived on the Wessel Islands sometime after 1784. Are the coins shipwreck related? Possibly, but the ship might not be close by. My field research on Western Australian wrecks shows lots of wreckage nearby. This is related to the salvage and activities of survivors. This isn't the case on Marchinbar Island and we used metal detectors to search a large area. So how did the coins and other shipwreck material reach there? We know indigenous inhabitants or survivors can move material a long way from a wreck site and this may be the case. The important shipwreck related artefacts that the expedition located using metal detectors included a modified brass screw, an iron "dump" and an iron chisel, which can all be used as tools and appear to have been deliberately hidden for later use. Therefore, I believe these items could have been selected from shipwreck material and traded or moved from elsewhere. Further searches will probably locate more shipwreck related items and possibly more coins.

Mike Hermes, Archaeologist

The conquest of the Spice Islands by the Portuguese in the early 1500s intensified the hunt for slaves to tend to the immensely valuable and labour intensive crops. Slavers from Kupang in Timor and other ports in what is now eastern Indonesia raided Australia's Tiwi Islands and perhaps also the Wessels. But why were the slavers carrying obsolete coins from such a far flung Sultanate? Were they used as barter items in remote areas where formal currency was unknown, or were they used as a ballast material, the copper also being a cashable commodity in certain ports? For Aborigines the coins may have been imbued with a spiritual or sacred power and significance, and become heirlooms passed down through the generations. A number of Arnhem Land communities traditionally kept bones of ancestors in a 'spirit bag' and perhaps the coins were also revered and retained.. Finally, perhaps in the nineteenth century when small pox decimated the Yolngu population, the spirit bag containing the coins was interred, lost or discarded. The bag rotted away, leaving a small but bizarre collection of coins spanning 500 years.