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A DUTCH and EAST AFRICAN COIN "FIND"
FROM NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

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In 1983, my report dealing with the above was published in The Australian Coin Review. It recorded the discovery of Dutch 18th century and Kilwa Sultanate coins, then thought to be of the 14th century, on Marchinbar Island in the Wessell Group off Northern Australia. Some very sensational mis-interpretations by the press, of what the find indicated, did little to encourage further study.

Since 1983 nothing new has been learned regarding the actual deposition of the coins but, through the good offices of Dr. G.S.P.Freeman Grenville of York, England, a recognised authority on East African/history and coinage, additional information has become available from recent archaeological finds. This has modified the attribution and dating of the East African coins. Two of those found are now considered to be from the 10th century and three from the 13/14th century.

Such was the interest of Freeman Grenville in the coin find and the significance he placed on it that, in 1984, he prepared a paper, **"From Africa to Australia: a find of coins from Kilwa, Tanzania and from the Netherlands, in the Wessell Islands"**. This was read at the Second International Conference on Indian Ocean Studies, held in Perth, Western Australia, in 1984. It has since been published in The Swahili Coast, art. 1X, London 1988.

In 1992 another paper, mentioning the find was prepared by the same author, **"A New Look at the Chronica Dos Reyes de Quiloa Following Recent Archaeological Discoveries"**. This was presented to the National Committee for the Commemoration of Portuguese Discoveries: Symposium on Maritime Routes and Associated Networks held in Portugal, May 1992.

My present report presents, in an edited form, much of what was published in 1983 but with the addition of new information. For this, the papers noted above are freely drawn upon, along with data obtained in personal communications from Dr. Freeman-Grenville. Portion of the final paragraph of his 1984 paper is worth repetition:

"May I hope that some enterprising Australian archaeologist will search the whole area (of the coin find). If this conference is to have any positive result.....may I express the hope that the challenge will be taken up -and speedily". To

Almost a decade on, no one in authority has the slightest interest. Perhaps the renewed interest for the mahogany ship in Victoria may stir action.

Documented European contacts with the mainland are many. In the north, the Duyfken, 1605; in the west, Dirk Hartog, 1616, and Houtman, 1619; in the south, Thussen, 1627, and Tasman, 1606. Torres, in 1606, may well have glimpsed the mainland of the continent, as he inched his way into the strait which still bears his name. These 17th century European voyagers gave cartographers sufficient data to produce, in broad outline, the northern, southern and western coastlines of Terra Australis Incognita.

The final piece in the jig-saw had to wait until 1770, when Captain James Cook charted the salient features of the eastern coast. From a European point of view, it all fits very conveniently, with an expanding acquisition of knowledge leading to the drawing of a satisfactory map of the last unknown, the southern land mass.

The Circumstances of the Coin Find

In 1944, during World War 2, the 312 Radar Unit was stationed on Marchinbar Island, as a forward warning station against Japanese aircraft, surface vessels and submarines threatening northern Australia. At the radar site, the island is only a few hundred yards wide, has a rocky east coastline and a sandy western, with tides up to fourteen feet. It is the only point on the island, where fresh water is available from an underground spring.

A member of the unit, the late M. Isenberg, spent his spare time fishing and wandering along the shore. At the centre of Jensen Bay is a sandy beach with a tidal creek, which extends about forty metres inland.

One day, whilst fishing, he saw four green circular objects lying in the sand, about one metre below the high water mark. He picked them up, realised they were coins and poked around in an area of about four square metres, finding five more. Having no interest in coins at that time, he looked no further but did put the coins in an airtight match tin; this went into his kit bag and returned with him to Australia.

It lay forgotten until late 1979. Coming across the coins again, he cleaned them sufficiently for the design and legends to appear. He mentioned them to G. Kohn, who brought them to the writer's attention. The coins were made available for study and photographing and have since been donated to the Museum of Applied Arts &

sciences, Sydney. It is these nine coins which have prompted intermittent research over the past ten years.

The Wessell Islands

These form a group extending in a chain, for a distance of 75 miles north east of Napier Point, in north eastern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. They are marked on early Dutch charts and the name was endorsed by Matthew Flinders in 1803. Several of the islands are renowned for their aboriginal rock painting.

THE MARCHINBAR COINS

The Low Countries

1. AE. doit 1690: 20mm: Gelderland (D/GEL/RIAE)
2. AE. doit 1724: 22mm: Zeeland (ZEE/LAN/DIA)
3. AE. doit 1784: 21mm: Zeeland (ZELAN/DIA in, cartouche)
4. AE. liard 1745: 23mm: Bishopric of Liege

Kilwa, East Africa

Dynasty of Ali ibn al Hasan (late 10th century)

- A1. AE. 2 grams; 20mm: Ali ibn al-Hasan;
Obv.: Ali ibn al-Hasan Sa'ida
As Walker X111 (Plate V111, 9)
- A2. AE. 1.45 grams; 21mm:
As A1. but rev. die in another hand.

Sultans of Kilwa

Sulaiman ibn al-Hasan (1294-1308)

- B1. AE. 3.1 grams, 23mm.
Obv.: Sulaiman ibn al-Hasan Sa'ida
Rev.: Yathiku bi Maula'l-Minan'Azza
"Sulaiman son of Hasan (may he be happy)
trusts in the Master of Bounties (He is glorious)"
As Walker 111 & 1V (Plate V111, 3 and 4) but dies in another hand
 - B2. AE. 2.35 grams; 22mm: as B1 but dies in a different hand
- al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman (1310-1333)
- C1. AE. 2.25 grams; 23mm: al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman;
Obv.: al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman 'Azz Nasrahu
Rev.: Yathiku bi'l Wahid al-Mannan
al-Hasan son of Sulaiman (may his victory be glorious) trusts in the One (God), the bountiful..

The Netherlands coins are all of continental issue (cf. the Macknight series) and span a period of just under 100 years, with the latest date 1784.

I am indebted to R. Domrow, Brisbane and the

late N.M.Lowick of the British Museum, whose expertise identified the East Africa coins. A point worthy of mention here, is the remarkable state of preservation of the East African specimens. It is not much different to that of the Dutch pieces, which are several hundred years younger. Is this consistent with them being in the sea or in the sand for several hundred years?

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The Macassans

Macassan seafarers in search of trepang had been making voyages to the north and northwest coast of Australia probably long before the arrival of Europeans. When these Macassan expeditions began is not known with certainty but they ended legally, in 1906. Their home ports were in the Macassan states of Gowa and Tallo and to a lesser extent the Bughis states of Bone, Wajo and Sopping. The north west coast was known as Kaya Jawa, the northern, as far east as the Gulf of Carpentaria, Marege.

The trepang (beche de mer, sea cucumber, sea slug) were collected, taken ashore, gutted and boiled in large shallow copper dishes. They were then buried in sand pits to dry out. Taken back to the home ports they were sold to Chinese traders and shipped to China where they are considered a culinary delicacy.

In June 1818 Lt. P.P.King on a surveying voyage along the western coast in H.M.Cutter Mermaid, reported from Timor:-
"...from the conversation I had with the Rajah of a fleet of proas...who fish on the coast of Australia every year...the coast is called Marega and the natives Maregas".

The trepang expeditions continued until 1906, when the South Australian Government (the Northern Territory was administered by S.A. from 1863 until 1911) ceased to issue licenses for Macassan trepang boats.

Although regular and wideranging (about 70 trepang processing sites have been located and confirmed), no attempt was made at permanent settlement nor is there any substantiated evidence of intermarriage with the aboriginal population, although some aborigines made the trip to and back from Macassar.

Thus, though the contacts were impermanent, they were, however, substantial and regular, with long periods of residence (weeks to months) on the continent's north and north western shores. The authoritative work on the trepang trade is "Voyage to Marege" by C.C.Macknight, The Australian National University, Canberra. He carried out a vast amount of background research in Indonesia

and on Dutch records, as well as archaeological investigation of several processing sites. Fireplaces, broken bottles and pottery, fish hooks and graves have been located, examined and documented. Six coins were also found; all are Dutch doits, the earliest date is 1742, the latest 1790.

The Macknight Coins

Reference numbers and descriptions are those used by Macknight in his thesis "The Macassans - a study of the early trepang industry along the Northern Territory coast."

- S54 AE doit V.O.C. 1790 - Scholten 316 Or 745c
316 - struck at Utrecht 1790 to be sent to the Indies.
745c- struck by official mints at Batavia and Surabaya in 1840-43.
- S55 AE doit 1790 - Zeeland-not located in catalogues
- S56 AE doit 1838 - Scholten 735a or 735b. Either struck at Surabaya in 1838
- S97 AE doit V.O.C. 174?2 - Scholten 88. Struck at Dordecht, Holland in 1742
- S111 AE doit V.O.C. 1780 . Struck at Dordecht 1780

The sixth coin, dated 1779 was reported in 1943; no other details are available.

It is interesting, that all the attributable coins were specifically struck for use in the Dutch colonies. Macknight opines that, from the available evidence, the trepang trade began some time between 1650 and 1700.

Kilwa

Located on the East African coast of present day Tanzania, Kilwa began as a small trading station, probably in the 10th century. By the 12th century it was an entrepot for the export of gold and ivory from southern Africa and the import of goods from India, the Indies and the China. Cargoes were transported in long distance, ocean going Arab vessels, based mainly in the Persian Gulf ports of Siraf and Suhar.

The first ruling sultan known to have issued coinage was Ali ibn al-Hasan (12th century - J.R.Crawford, 1968: "Late 10th century", Freeman Grenville, 1992). Recent evidence suggests he ruled over Kilwa, Mafia and the islands of Pemba and Zanzibar. The surviving copper coins of this early dynasty are numerous: the silver, less so. (Marchinbar coins A1, A2).

From the aspect of known coinage issues we must pass to the end of the 13th and beginning of

the 14th centuries. By this time, through an unknown series of events, perhaps triggered by its development as a principal trading station, Kilwa/Mafia constituted a separate sultanate. Coinage issues of the Sultans of Kilwa pertinent to our topic are those of Sulaiman ibn al-Hasan (Marchinbar coins B1, B2)) and al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman (Marchinbar coin C1).

Kilwa gradually lost its pre-eminent position as a trading station and around the second half of the 14th century it ceased coin minting (Crawford).

The Marchinbar find thus has two examples from the late 10th (Freeman-Grenville) or early 12th century (Crawford) and three from the 14th century.

Both Crawford and Freeman Grenville agree that, on present archaeological evidence, the East Africa coins under discussion had an area of circulation limited to East Africa.

Freeman Grenville however, makes a most important observation: "..only a single Kilwa coin has ever been reported outside East Africa, other than those reported in Australia"

This lone specimen "was a copper piece of Da'ud ibn Sulaiman 11 (regent, 1308-10; sultan c. 1333-56)... excavated in Oman".

This brings us to the nub of the exercise - why and how could five examples of East Africa coinage, covering 10th/12th and 14th century strikings, in association with late 17th and 18th century Low Countries pieces be deposited on a remote island off the northern coast of Australia?

That the coins arrived by sea is beyond doubt; that a wreck(s) was involved is very probable, but did they all arrive at the same time? In other words was there one deposit or two or even three. Freeman Grenville subscribes to the view that, because of the wide time span involved in the coin dates, (four and possibly eight centuries), one must at least give strong credence to several depositions.

If only the Low Countries specie had been found then a simple scenario can be proposed. The last dated coin is 1784, it was struck in the Netherlands. By the time it was shipped to the Indies, passed into circulation and moved to the Macassan region, several years may have elapsed. So the time the coins were deposited was probably 1790 at the earliest.

The site of the find is not a proven trepang processing site, however, Isenberg recalls trees about ten feet high with a round fruit. These are tamarinds which are not indigenous to Australia.

The seeds came via the Macassan fishermen on the trepang expeditions. They are a reliable indicator of such visits. A proa may have been wrecked and the coins washed ashore; or they were lost by the trepang processors during their stay ashore. Macknight was informed by a local Aboriginal, that there was "no trepang on Marchinbar".

Matthew Flinders records that, in 1805, he came upon a wrecked proa on the south western shore of Marchinbar Island. The currents are such, that even a floating hulk on the eastern side of the island could be swept through Cumberland Strait, which separates Marchinbar from its southern neighbour, Guluwuru Island. This explanation completely ignores the presence of the East African coins.

If all the coins were deposited at the same time, the above arguments still hold with the addition of a further supposition. Sometime after the second half of the fourteenth century, an unknown number of Kilwa coins moved to the Indies. How and why is a mystery. Also a mystery is why they would be kept for almost 400 years. They had no bullion value and why were they on a vessel sailing off Arnhem Land?

If one subscribes to a multiple deposition theory then the Kilwa coins were already there, when the Dutch coins were lost or washed ashore. It would be an incredible coincidence for this to be the case, but truth is often stranger than fiction. Freeman-Grenville (1992) opines:-

"The find was a beach find. No attempt was made to search the sand, let alone excavate. A true hoard, that extended from the late tenth century until the late eighteenth, would be wholly unexampled. The dates between the pieces of Ali b. al-Hasan and the two Sultans of Kilwa are separated by three centuries; between the pieces of the Sultans of Kilwa and the earliest of the Netherlands pieces are three and one half centuries. I would hazard that below the surface there are yet more coins to be found, and that the find site is in fact the top of a midden, or of wrecks where coins have been accidentally deposited at three different periods. The problem could only be solved by excavation."

If this be the case, what ships could have been sailing, either directly or indirectly, between Kilwa and the Indies between the 10th/12th and 18th centuries?

The Arabs

For centuries before the arrival of Europeans, Arab traders from the Arabian Peninsular made regular voyages along the East

African coast and to the Spice Islands. Writing of his experiences, between 1512 and 1515, as a Portuguese agent in India, Tome Pires commented on the trade through Malacca:

"In Malacca too, there are resident merchants and trade agents, who are brought thither in Gujerati ships, from Cairo, Aden, Kilwa...Mombasa, Mogadishu...these men trade goods from China and from the Molucca Islands to the westward".

This observation establishes the existence of a link between the sultanate, the trading centres of the East Indies and the ships, that serviced both.

If Kilwa coinage had been an accepted exchange medium outside the sultanate, then it would have moved on these vessels; if so, why has only one coin been found outside East Africa?

The Portuguese

When Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1497, he opened up the Indian Ocean to European traders. As he sailed through the Mozambique Channel in mid 1498, he was not far from Kilwa. During da Gama's second expedition to India in 1502, he "gained submission from the rulers of Mozambique and Kilwa", so consolidating Portuguese influence in south-eastern Africa.

In 1571 the Portuguese established a separate Governorship of Mozambique. Their influence expanded and became more entrenched, with the area becoming part of the empire... Portuguese East Africa. It continued as such until decolonisation began in the second half of the 20th century. Between 1502 and 1504 five Portuguese fleets sailed to India.

An event, perhaps important to our quest for an answer to the Marchinbar conundrum, took place in 1505. Francisco d'Almeida sacked Kilwa. Is there an even remote chance that, because of their limited area of usage, 14th and even 10th century Kilwa strikings were still serving their purpose as a local medium of exchange? Sam Rafael, a German, who was present, wrote of "copper coins, four equalling a real", being in circulation. (Freeman Grenville).

Could an unknown quantity have been taken by the Portuguese as "treasure trove"? Not perhaps, for its intrinsic worth, but more as a means of interfering with the regional economics and making it more dependent on Portuguese coin and trade goods. Again we must pose the question. Why, have more not turned up in areas of Portuguese influence in India and the East Indies? One account of the sacking records, that three vessels

involved; one of these subsequently appeared.

From their bases in India, the Portuguese extended their influence to the east. In 1511 they occupied Malacca. Stations on the east African coast were consolidated and Mombasa occupied. Traders would have made frequent calls at Kilwa and other East African ports in the ensuing decades. As a result, there would have been innumerable occasions, when Kilwa coins could have found their way onto Portuguese vessels. The Indian Ocean, in the 16th century, was a "Portuguese lake".

In just over two decades, Portuguese traders had stations throughout the Indies; from Malacca to Timor. The latter were set up in 1516 to obtain sandalwood. They were getting very close to Marchinbar.

Having sailed over 15,000 miles to reach Timor, it is hard to believe, they would not have explored further to the east. Logic dictates they would at least have had a look. The result would be landfalls on the Australian mainland and adjacent islands.

Similar logic can be applied to the Arab traders. Timor is 5,000 miles from their home ports on the Persian Gulf; what was another few hundred miles? They had been sailing the region since, perhaps, the seventh century.

While all this Portuguese exploration had been going on, the arch rival, Spain, had been mounting expeditions from South America in search of a western approach to the Spice Islands. Awareness of a Spanish presence would certainly not have induced the Portuguese to make any discoveries public. The further they moved to the east, the closer they came to the line of demarcation created by Pope Alexander VI (Treaty of Tordesillas), which split the known world between Spain and Portugal.

For a detailed appraisal of this possible Portuguese exploration, the reader is referred to "Discovery of Australia" by George Collingridge, 1895 and a more recent extension of this treatise "The Secret Discovery of Australia", by K.G. McIntyre 1977.

At the turn of the 17th century, Portugal's power ceased. It was replaced, in the Indian Ocean, by England and Holland.

The English and the Dutch

The English were to predominate in India and eventually establish convict settlements in Australia, whilst the Dutch began the colonisation of the Indonesian Archipelago.

Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Netherlands continental coinage was to have widespread acceptance in the Indies. This almost certainly accounts for the Low Countries specie in the Marchinbar find.

Both powers had ships plying the Indian Ocean. Their approach to the East, however, differed from that of the Portuguese. Initially both Dutch and English avoided the Mozambique Channel and the Portuguese enclaves, including Kilwa on the coast, by sailing to the east of Madagascar. The Dutch, in 1611, followed Bower's route sailing east after leaving the Cape, then turning north, just west of the Australian coast. Several mis-calculated and finished as wrecks on the Western Australian shores (The Gilt Dragon 1656, The Zuytdorp 1712, The Batavia 1629, The Zeewyk 1727). Large quantities of coin, principally silver serving as bullion to pay for goods purchased, have been recovered from these ships but nothing of East African origin.

Similarly the English utilised the "roaring forties" in the passage from Britain to New South Wales. Trade, between NSW and the east, utilised the passage through Torres Strait and thus went just to the north of Marchinbar Island. However, none of the coins in the find were common in the specie starved settlement.

It seems unlikely that the Kilwa coins have an English connection. Any link to the Dutch would be tenuous, except for the possibility, that they transited through a region, Holland ultimately administered.

We are left with the most likely possibilities being some link with Arab traders, the Portuguese and the Macassans. What the true facts are, we will probably never know, but the possibilities are fascinating.

As suggested by Freeman-Grenville, the only way additional information could be obtained would be to examine the site and look for other coins, perhaps of the Kilwa period but not of Kilwa. Are those found a random sampling of the unknown total deposited? Isenberg only scratched around on the surface of a small area for a short time. What would he have found if he had made repeated searches? One could look for artifacts, which may precede the Macassan visits. It is unlikely, that an intact wreck would be found but a survey of the nearby ocean floor may detect metal, a cannon would be a prize par excellence.

Luck would have to be on the side of any investigative expedition. The wartime occupation and subsequent mineral exploration have probably left their fair share of modern "rubbish". To

compound the dilemma even further; could the coins have been washed there from an even more remote site?

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