

Chapter 12 Primary Source Activity



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Trade helped to build wealthy states and cities on the coast of East Africa (textbook pages 295–296). Travelers and traders, mostly Muslims, wrote glowing descriptions of these lively trading centers. Late in the 1400s, traders from Portugal also made their way to East Africa and soon destroyed the Swahili centers. One Portuguese trader, Duarte Barbosa, however, wrote his impressions of the cities as he first saw them, about 1500.

◆ *As you read, try to imagine the surprise of European traders at first seeing East African culture. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Swahili Cities of East Africa

KILWA Going along the coast from this town of Mozambique, there is an island hard by the mainland which is called Kilwa, in which is a Moorish town with many fair houses of stones and mortar, with many windows after our fashion, very well arranged in streets, with many flat roofs. . . . Around it are streams and orchards and fruit-gardens with many channels of sweet water. It has a Moorish king over it. From this place they trade with Sofala, whence they bring back gold. . . .

Before the King our Lord [of Portugal] sent out his expedition to discover India, the Moors of Sofala, Cuama, Angoya, and Mozambique were all subject to the king of Kilwa, who was the most mighty king among them. And in this town was great plenty of gold, as no ships passed towards Sofala without first coming to this island. Of the Moors there are some fair and some black, they are finely clad in many rich garments of gold and silk and cotton, and the women as well; also with much gold and silver in chains and bracelets, which they wear on their legs and arms, and many jeweled earrings in their ears. These Moors speak Arabic and follow the creed of the Alcoran [Quran]. . . .

SOFALA . . . [T]hey came in small vessels named *zambucos* from the kingdoms of Kilwa, Mombasa, and Malindi, bringing many cotton cloths, some spotted and others white and blue, also some of silk, and many small beads, gray, red, and yellow, which things come to the said kingdoms from great kingdom of Cambay [India]. . . .

The Moors of Sofala kept these wares and sold them afterwards to the heathen of the Kingdom of Benametapa, who came thither laden with gold which they gave in exchange for the said cloths without weighing it. These Moors collect also great store of ivory which they find hard by Sofala, and this they also sell in the Kingdom of Cambay. . . .

These Moors are black, and some of them tawny; some of them speak Arabic, but the more part use the language of the country. They clothe themselves from the waist down with cotton and silk cloths, and other cloths they wear over their shoulders like capes, and turbans on their heads. Some of them wear small caps dyed in grain in chequers [checks] and other woolen clothes in many tints.

Source: *The African Past*, by Basil Davidson (Little, Brown and Co., 1964).

“ . . . they are finely clad in many rich garments of gold and silk and cotton.”

Questions to Think About

1. What are some of the goods that the people of these cities trade?
2. What religion do the people of Kilwa and Sofala follow? What languages do they speak?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** From what Barbosa reports, what would you conclude was his reaction to what he saw in the East African cities? What things did he notice?
4. **Activity** Using an atlas, draw a simple map of the coast of East Africa today. Locate the trading centers mentioned in the textbook and the selection, such as Mogadishu, Zanzibar, Sofala, and Kilwa. Find out what modern countries they are in and what they are like today.

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