

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

EARLY HISTORY

Mombasa unlike Nairobi, has a long history. Al Idrisi, the Arab geographer at the court of Roger II of Sicily, was the first to mention the town by name, when writing in 1154, but there are references to trading towns on the coast of East Africa dating back to the second century A.D. Mombasa's most prosperous time was probably in the fifteenth century, when with Kilwa (in Tanzania), it was the largest and most sophisticated trading town on the coast. Spices, gold, ivory and iron were traded for cotton cloth and jute from India, ceramics from Persia and China, and foodstuffs. Iron ore was mined in Tanzania and Mombasa was famous for its manufacture of ivory inlaid daggers.

The coastal towns were controlled by the Swahili, or Moors as they were then called, and they operated as independent principalities, not unlike Italy at the same period. Rivalry was intense as each town struggled for ascendancy over its neighbour. According to Portuguese eyewitnesses about the year 1500, the inhabitants of Mombasa wore cloth of gold and lived in splendour in multi-story dwellings lavishly decorated with carved wood.

Nothing remains of this early town, although when digging the foundations for the Coast General Hospital extensions, south of Nyali Bridge, archaeological remains of a medieval town were found, and the old Portuguese maps show a walled 'city of the Moors' situated along the bay just below the present site of the hospital. (See Plate 6a)

PORTUGUESE PERIOD (1498-1697)

In 1498 a Portuguese fleet bound for India and commanded by Vasco da Gama called in at Mombasa, but finding the inhabitants too hostile sailed on and landed in Malindi, where a base was established. But the Portuguese were to return to Mombasa, and during the sixteenth century the town was looted and burnt four times by the Portuguese invaders, who wished to gain control of the trading ports along the coast. In 1589 Mombasa finally succumbed and the Portuguese Captain moved his headquarters from Malindi to Mombasa. The foundations for Fort Jesus were laid in 1593 and the Fort was largely built by 1596. Fort Jesus is the most well preserved and complete Portuguese fortification along this Coast. In its own right, it is a fine example of sixteenth century military architecture.

The assault of 1589 was the death blow for medieval Mombasa. At the same time as the Portuguese attacked from the sea, a savage horde of cannibals called the Zimba was ravaging the nearby countryside. After the Portuguese had withdrawn, with the main leaders captive, the Zimba came through by the Makupa Ford and slaughtered what was left of the already