**ARTICLE TEMPLATE: Core Case Study Article**

In order to ensure consistency, depth and quality across this ground-breaking reference work, all articles of this type must incorporate the structure and points outlined below.

Article Aim: to provide a brief case study of an important event or topic within key themes, for example the First Crusade, Peasant's Revolt, etc. This should include topics/events commonly studied on courses, but also more examples from outside Western Europe to encourage a more global approach

**Summary Checklist**

- ✓ 5 keywords or phrases relating to the topic/event to help aid online discovery of your article
- ✓ Article should be approximately 3,000 words in total
- ✓ Includes basic information about the event or topic
- ✓ Examines the context and culture in which the event/topic is situated
- ✓ Explores the key debates relating to the topic/event
- ✓ Provides important examples and sources
- ✓ Compares and contrasts with related topics or regions

**Editor: Dr. Adam Simmons**

**Name of event/topic:** The Cowrie in East Africa

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**Keywords:** cowries, Africa, trade, currency, value

**Topic/event Description:**

Cowrie shells present a fascinating story as a key economic and social product of the medieval world, taking on major importance in places such as West Africa, China, Bengal, and Northern Europe. Their widespread popularity and exchange, and the range of uses to which they were put, make these shells a key theme in global history. They were used, loose or strung, as currency; combined with other elements to form charms, added onto clothing and other materials as decorative elements, grouped for use as vehicles of divination, or deposited as grave goods or votive offerings. Tracing the exchange of cowries brings to light the expansive networks that linked different regions across the medieval world, while similarities and differences in their use provide critical insights into past economies and social lives.

The association between cowries and the African continent is particularly strong. Of the many species of cowries, *Monetaria moneta* and *Monetaria annulus*—the money cowrie and the ring cowrie—have been most popular over the centuries and most amply discussed by the scholarly literature. These molluscs live in low-energy inter-tidal zones in warm waters, covering large sections of the Indo-Pacific region. As such, the occurrence of these shells on the African continent is limited to part of its eastern seaboard. However, despite their natural occurrence, the exchange and use of cowries in East Africa (Figure 1) is poorly documented, and they hardly feature in medieval historical records. Ibn Battuta, a crucial witness regarding cowrie fishing and usage in the Indian Ocean archipelago of the Maldives and in West Africa, makes no mention of them during his visit to East Africa. They only appear in later historical sources relating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and only briefly. This is in stark contrast with the situation in other parts of Africa, especially North and West Africa, for which we have repeated accounts of cowrie usage and exchange from the medieval period onwards. This

presents an interesting paradox, and the present contribution therefore takes as a starting point the issue of cowries in eastern Africa.

FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE

**Perspective:**
The question of cowrie shells has been approached through a range of different disciplinary approaches, as these items have been variously examined as currency, food refuse, symbolic items, and prestige goods. The debate has been particularly well rehearsed in West Africa, where the diverse roles of these shells, not native to the region, have been highlighted in different time periods.

Since cowries were fished alive from the reef, not collected as beach wash, they have pertinently been referred to as processed, or even manufactured, items. They are often modified, with a perforation in their dorsal surface that facilitates their stringing or attachment to clothing or bodies (Figure 2). For at least 1000 years, historical sources have insisted that the Maldives were the prime source of cowries for global markets. Travelers such as Al-Mas'udi in the tenth century and ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century documented the intensive harvesting and exporting of large quantities of cowries there. From the sixteenth century *moneta* cowries from the Maldives were brought in enormous quantities to West Africa by European ships to meet a thriving local demand and be exchanged for captives destined for the Atlantic trade. In the mid-nineteenth century, Europeans also began to trade East African *annulus* cowries to West Africa.

FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE

Scholarship has tended to follow the line set by the historical accounts, and to assume that most of the billions of cowries that fed international networks in the medieval period were sourced in the Maldives. The possible role of other regions of the world as both producers and consumers of cowries has been almost completely neglected. In the case of East Africa, part of the problem is that formal economic models suggest that valuables must be scarce or difficult to obtain and, since *annulus* cowries occur naturally on this coastline, it has been assumed that they were of little importance and little valued until Europeans developed their trade to West Africa. However, this reading is informed by a narrow understanding of what constitutes value, and is invalidated by archaeological data that show that cowries were used in many parts of East Africa in the deeper past. The following sections draw on a combination of sources to present examples from an area covering parts of present-day Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Madagascar. The aim here is not to provide a comprehensive catalogue of such occurrences, which would be an impossible task, but rather to offer a range of case studies illustrating the myriad uses and meanings of cowrie shells.

**Scope :**
The East African coastline is broadly characterized by a narrow coastal shelf and a complex of different environments, including reefs, mangroves, and sandy beaches, and the various coastal resources exploited and exchanged by current and historic inhabitants include fish, mangrove wood, coral, seaweed, coconuts, and tortoise shell. Other coastal resources include cowries, of which certain species, like *annulus*, are particularly abundant (Figure 3). Historical sources on the medieval Indian Ocean show that some East African communities were linked into wide-ranging trade systems from the first millennium AD onwards. Among the best discussed developments is the growth of coastal "Swahili" settlements with a combination of shared characteristics, including evidence of long-distance trade, the adoption of Islam, coralstone architecture, and urban style living. During the so-called "Swahili golden age" (eleventh-sixteenth centuries), a period that has been well studied by archaeologists, historians, and a range of other researchers, Swahili settlements were cosmopolitan spaces not dissimilar to other coastal ports documented in the global Middle Ages.

FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE

As is the case in many other parts of the medieval world, the past can be explored through both written and material sources. These historical and archaeological perspectives and data tell somewhat different stories. In East Africa, finds issued from archaeological work have demonstrated that the picture presented by historical data substantially underestimates the antiquity and scope of global medieval connections. One issue relating to the written sources is that they tend to describe just one segment of complex long-distance networks. They focus on the northern part of the East African coastline, which was tied into networks organized around the

monsoon weather system, and have relatively little to say of the regions south of the Pangani River in the north of present-day Tanzania. The issue of partial representation is acute as far as the question of links inland is concerned: there, we are almost entirely dependent on archaeological data. More widely, the focus on maritime activities, long distance trade, and global connections often obscures the complex ways in which coastal societies were enmeshed within local, regional, and inland political economies. Cowries, as objects of both global and local circulation and use, offer an avenue for exploring these dynamics.

Historical records show that in the nineteenth century cowries were used as currency in certain parts of East Africa and that East African cowries were exported to West Africa, despite being initially less desired there, ostensibly due to their larger size. This trade was documented for example by a European witness in the mid-nineteenth century, who reported that it was in the hands of Muslim traders and that while some shells were sent inland and northwards, most were exported to the West African coast, where they were used as currency. The trade was described as very lucrative by a British visitor, with one Hamburg shipping house allegedly rising from one to eighteen ships, of which seven were engaged in shipping cowries.

Earlier historical sources are sparse, but they suggest that cowries first became a major item of export from East Africa in the mid-eighteenth century, when they were sent to Bengal and possibly West Africa. It appears that several areas along the coastline were major producers for the shells, especially the islands close to the present-day border between Kenya and Somalia. According to a local ruler in 1756, 600 barrels could be obtained annually, though this figure was revised downwards to 200-300 barrels by a French trader investigating the economic potential of the trade. The Dutch were importing cowries from Mozambique in the second part of the eighteenth century, at half the value of Maldives cowries, as the latter were smaller and considered more valuable.

A close reading of archaeological site reports indicates that cowries were harvested and used in the much deeper past in coastal East Africa, and this provides rich insights into the multiple lifeways of communities during the global Middle Ages. Small numbers of *annulus* and *moneta* cowries have, for example, been recovered from coastal sites dating to between the seventh and tenth centuries on the islands of Unguja (Zanzibar) and in the Mafia archipelago. The occupants of these sites were members of small scale societies, and mollusc collection and use were part of a broad economic strategy. Further south, at the coastal midden site of Chibuene in Mozambique, marine shells occur in huge numbers but very few cowries were recovered from first millennium contexts. Given this, cowrie collection and use may have been on a small scale, intermittent, or indeed have varied from site to site, cowries variously constituting by-products of food procurement, items of social or symbolic value, or adornment.

Striking patterns of cowrie accumulation and deposition occur in the second millennium with the recovery of cowrie 'hoards' at certain Swahili settlements. At Shanga, Kenya, occupied between the eighth and fifteenth centuries, over 400 cowries were retrieved in contexts probably dating to the early/mid second millennium, found either as single occurrences or in small groups, and often under walls or pathways, interpreted as significant places. Cowries occur in a range of contexts across sites of the Swahili sphere, and their recovery in different deposition contexts suggests they had multiple uses. Large (unspecified) numbers of cowries were reported at the iconic sites of Kilwa Kisiwani (Tanzania) and Manda (Kenya), as well as Gedi (Kenya), where one structure earned the name "House of Cowries" due to a number of these shells being found in a doorway. Often, though, cowries and beads have hardly been recorded, or recorded with little detail, in the archaeological record. Most instructive, thanks to its close concern with the question of cultural constructions of value, is recent research at the fourteenth–sixteenth century site of Songo Mnara, in the Kilwa archipelago (see below).

Southern Madagascar presents an interesting case. During the tenth to thirteenth centuries AD a widespread settlement pattern centred on large sites, often with surrounding walls or embankments, is seen as the most southerly extent of a Swahili-influenced proto-urban lifestyle. The coastal shell middens of Talaky are seen as marginal, temporary sites that may have been involved in transferring trade goods inland. They feature small numbers of cowries and their occurrence alongside other marine shell in a context of marine resource exploitation, but alongside small numbers of exotics such as imported pottery, renders their interpretation complex.

Cowries recovered from the interior of East Africa reveal networks of connections and relationships between coastal and inland communities from very early on. For example, very small numbers of cowries are present,

alongside other marine species, from 50-60,000 years ago at the peri-coastal site of Panga ya Saidi in southern Kenya. They are interpreted as items transported for their symbolic or aesthetic value. Inland sites in Tanzania, in the lower Pangani Basin, have also yielded cowries from the first millennium AD, including pierced *annulus* suggestive of use as beads or adornment. Other shell beads, copper items (possibly originating from central Africa), and glass beads from the wider Indian Ocean region are further evidence of symbolic and/or distant material culture usage at this time, suggesting cowries formed part of suite of beads used as decorative and symbolic items by both coastal and inland communities. *Annulus* cowries appear at a range of other inland sites in southern and central Africa throughout the mid-first to second millennium AD. Research at Korogwe, Tanzania, has shown that cowries (particularly *annulus*) were part of a long history of regional trade. Indirect evidence of cowries also exists, for example through impressions on daub fragments.

**Key Debates:**
The relative popularity and abundance of cowries on archaeological sites across different regions of the African continent raises broader questions relating both to the topics of medieval connectivities and constructions of value, and to disciplinary and regional research traditions.

The presence of cowries at sites in eastern Africa indicates their exchange and use has long been a feature of societies in the region. However, in contrast with other parts of Africa, where cowries have been studied with the same detail as items such as beads and invoked as evidence of long-distance connections, in eastern Africa cowries have hardly been discussed by historians and archaeologists. One driving issue here is no doubt that some of the most prized cowrie species can be collected on many parts of this shoreline, and so they attracted little notice from archaeologists and from medieval and present-day historians. In a similar way, at coastal archaeological sites in West Africa native cowrie species are often included in faunal assemblages, while Indo-Pacific species are treated as small finds.

While in western and northern Africa a very close connection existed between the trade in captives and the trade in cowries—well illustrated by the title of the seminal work on the economic history of cowries in the Maldives and West Africa, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade*—the connection is less strong, or non-existent, on the eastern part of the continent. Although some historical sources for the eighteenth century allude to the profits to be made by the export of East African cowries to West Africa, this appears to have been only one part of the market, which also served parts of India; and there are few or no mentions of the exchange of captives for cowries. A possible association between the use of conus shell ornaments and low, possible unfree, status at Songo Mnara has recently been proposed—an argument that deserves to be developed specifically for the case of cowrie beads as does, indeed, the geo-chemical analysis pointing to the preparation of shell beads in public spaces, perhaps suggesting this was a communal activity.

The study of cowries in eastern Africa raises important questions on the nature and role of currencies. In terms of classical economics scarcity is a prerequisite for attributing value to any form of money, and in some regions cowries derived their value from being rare and exotic. Indeed, cowrie shells possess many of the characteristics that economists identify as necessary to a currency: they are light, durable, relatively even in size, and difficult to counterfeit. They differ from other forms of currency such as metals or textiles, because they cannot be transformed, melted down, or diverted for other practical purposes, except for adornment. A vast anthropological literature, dating back to the late nineteenth century, discusses the function of cowries as "primitive money." Early colonial commentators were exasperated by the use of these shells as currency in West Africa, considering them to be cumbersome and time-consuming to count.

It is certainly known through historical sources that cowries were used as currencies in parts of West Africa and in Bengal in the medieval and modern periods. In many parts of the world, researchers have tended to assume, on the basis of analogies drawn from historical sources, the same function for often much earlier cowries recovered on archaeological sites. This analogy comes with its own problems, as historical sources may conflate concepts such as value, treasure, and money. This is shown for example by the extensive, largely inconclusive debate that has unfolded on the uses of cowries in Bronze Age China. There, contemporary written sources describe the granting and receiving of cowries, but this does not imply they had an economic or monetary function; like jade or turtle shells, they may have been considered exotic and valuable. Interestingly, the issue of analogy through historical sources has not been a feature of the scholarship of eastern Africa; although some excavators have assumed that the cowries they recovered represented a form of money—as at Gedi for example—this appears to be an exception rather than the rule. In the case of the Swahili settlements, the

contemporary metal coinage struck locally has commandeered most attention. However, the monetary system of the Swahili coast may well have involved other items. In this light, do the cowrie caches recovered at Shanga represent money, or currency, or was their deliberate deposition related to other social or ritual purposes?

Research into how coastal Swahili communities used cowries is still in its infancy, but promising new research avenues are developing. Key issues to consider are the changes in types of cowries exploited and the nature of trade networks. While today the tourist trade has privileged larger, eye-catching cowries, the smaller *annulus* and *moneta* shells clearly occur in some quantities at medieval archaeological sites, both coastal and inland. The focus on cowrie shells, a single commodity and object type that had such widespread use across the continent and beyond, can bring to light the ways value was negotiated and constructed in space and time. Indeed, as more than a commodity, cowries potentially constituted the mechanism by which other commodities were exchanged. And even items classified as "money," such as coins, had complex social biographies.

The natural occurrence of *annulus* cowries in East Africa, and their low-key prominence in historical literature, exposes an overlooked range of actors, traders, and networks. This entry has focused on the medieval period in East Africa, but cowries are of global significance across many periods: the Neolithic skulls at Jericho, the Atlantic slave trade, and Bronze and Iron Age China are just some indications of their iconic status through time and space.

**Further Reading:**

Biginagwa, T. J. and E. B. Ichumbaki. "Settlement History of the Islands on the Pangani River, Northeastern Tanzania." *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 53, no. 1 (2018), 63–82.

Pioneering archaeological research into connections into the interior of East Africa.

Einzig, P. *Primitive Money in its Ethnological, Historical and Economic Aspects*. London: Eyre (1949).

A landmark early survey of the various currencies used worldwide; although dated through some of its terminology, its survey of historical data and case studies is important and the book devotes substantial attention to cowries.

Faulkner, P. et al. "67,000 Years of Coastal Engagement at Panga ya Saidi, Eastern Africa." PLoS ONE 16, no. 8 (2021): e0256761. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0256761

A good case study of the uses of cowries and other marine resources at an archaeological site away from the coast.

Hogendorn, J. and M. Johnson. *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

A fundamental work on the extraction and exchange of cowries in the Maldives, Bengal, West Africa, Europe, and East Africa.

Horton, M., Brown, H. W. and Mudida, N. 1996. Shanga: the archaeology of a Muslim trading community on the coast of East Africa. BIEA.

Classic archaeological monograph on a key Swahili site, with cowries among the finds.

Wynne-Jones, S. and A. LaViolette, eds. *The Swahili World*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017.

A landmark overview of the current state of knowledge on the Swahili settlements of east Africa and the key topics within the subject.

Yang, B. *Cowrie Shells and Cowrie Money: A Global History*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018.

Wide-ranging survey of the use of cowrie shells across the world.

**Image captions:**

Figure 1
Map of East Africa and some of the sites mentioned in text. Author image.

Figure 2
An example of a cowrie shell with a perforated dorsal surface. This shell was recovered from KwaGandaganda, a first millennium AD archaeological site in southern Africa. KwaZulu-Natal Museum collection. Author image.

Figure 3
A live *annulus* cowrie, in a near shore coastal environment in Vilanculo, Mozambique. Author image.