

Shifting Patterns of Trade in the Western Indian Ocean Zone: Northern Zimbabwe, 1500-1750 AD

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Innocent Pikirayi

INTRODUCTION

Prior to 1560 trade along the western Indian Ocean coast and adjacent hinterland territories of eastern Africa had been dominated by the Swahili. These had a longstanding history of settlement and commercial interaction with the whole East African coast from Sofala in Mozambique to the Somali coast in the Horn of Africa. Archaeological and historical evidence points to trading networks and contacts with the Far East, the Persian Gulf as well as India (Chaudhuri 1985, Kusimba 1999) based on interchange of goods between coastal entrepreneurs and commercial interests in the interior. The Portuguese, who arrived in the East African region just before 1500, established a system of captains on a number of forts adjacent to Swahili towns with the objective of taking over the commerce from the latter. They failed however to dictate the terms of trade, as they could not maintain a strong military presence in the region. The situation changed just after 1560, when an attempt to introduce Christianity in the interior seriously backfired, resulting in the murder of a Portuguese priest. This provided the Portuguese with an excuse to intervene militarily in the hinterland at the same time taking control of the gold trade. The gold trade became an aggressive commercial undertaking, which adversely affected some societies in the African hinterland.