PRIMITIVE ISLAM AND ARCHITECTURE IN EAST AFRICA

K. A. C. Creswell never visited East Africa; indeed if he had he would have seen very little that would have illuminated his understanding of early Islamic architecture. In the 1930's archaeological investigations had not begun, and most of the monuments were covered by thick and impenetrable bush. But within the last thirty years much has been done to clear the principal monuments and make plans and elevations.1 Archaeological excavations provide a chronology, extending back into the early Islamic period and detailed evidence for timber as well as stone structures. The result is an important group of buildings that illuminate our understanding of the use of Islamic architecture beyond the centers of scholarship and craftsmanship of the central Islamic lands.

Creswell's comments that "Arabia, at the rise of Islam does not appear to have possessed anything worthy of the name of architecture"2 is a view that could better apply to East Africa, south of Ethiopia. Indigenous stone structures that are known from the region, such as those from the Zimbabwe plateau and in the highveld of southern Africa, belong generally to the later Iron Age, that is, after A.D. 1000; archaeological investigations have as yet failed to identify an African tradition in substantial timber architecture.

A common view of the genesis of Islamic architecture is that, as it spread into centers of civilization and city life, so it adopted and modified the existing architectural forms of these regions. One exception to this thesis is the coast of East Africa, where there was no such architectural tradition. Therefore one might expect to find traces of "primitive Islam" as defined by Creswell transmitted directly from the Arabian peninsula and unaffected by contact with complex societies. While the phase of primitive Islam may have lasted only a very short time in Arabia, it was able to continue in the more remote areas of the Swahili coast.3 Thus the possibility of making significant archaeological discoveries is so much the greater there. During excavations at Shanga in the Lamu Archipelago, precisely such remains were discovered, which are of interest to our understanding of the development of Islamic architecture.

THE ORIGINS OF ISLAM AND THE SHANGA EVIDENCE

The early Islamic history of the East African coast is poorly documented. Traditional chronicles and oral history provide a narrative for the arrival of Islam, but these were only written down in the nineteenth century and are generally held to be unreliable.4 The only eyewitness descriptions by Arabic writers are those of al-Mas'udi and Ibn Battuta. Al-Mas'udi5 describes a coast largely pagan in 916, with one Muslim royal family residing in Kanbalu. Ibn Battuta6 describes, from his visit in 1331, a devout and wholly Islamic society, extending from Mogadishu to Kilwa. Other descriptions can be shown to be based on hearsay evidence and often with little basis in fact. Idrisi, for example, does not mention any Muslim communities, but dated Arabic inscriptions survive from some fifty years before he was writing.7

The most recent archaeological work undertaken by the British Institute in Eastern Africa has gone some way to establish the chronology of Islam in the region. An eight-year program of excavations at Shanga, in the Lamu archipelago (fig. 1), has been followed by extensive surveys and excavations in Zanzibar and Pemba and a reassessment of previous work at Manda, Mafia, and Kilwa. The broad conclusion from this work is that old ideas of Arab "colonization" of the African coast for the purpose of trade have been largely replaced by a broad process of conversion of indigenous coastal communities to Islam through contact with the monsoon trading system of the western Indian Ocean.8

Excavations at the site of Shanga in the Lamu archipelago between 1980 and 1988 revealed a sequence in the center of the site with which we can begin to identify these processes of Islamization. Shanga was a minor Swahili trading center, abandoned in the early fifteenth century, but which enjoyed an early importance, with stratified occupation levels up to five meters in depth, extending back to ca. 750, dated on the basis of imported pottery and radiocarbon dating.

The primary occupation lies directly upon white
Fig. 1. Location map of early sites in the Lamu archipelago.

beach sand. The pottery assemblage is 96 percent local pottery of the Tana tradition, but there are a few sherds of imported Sasanian Islamic and unglazed storage jars, as well as Chinese stonewares, suggesting that from the outset Shanga was in contact with the monsoon trading systems. The house structures are of timber post-hole construction and circular in plan.

The layout of this early settlement is very characteristic. Excavations revealed a series of shallow gullies cut into the sand, which had been redug on many occasions and which apparently contained a fence. This fence can be shown to have enclosed a rectangular area, approximately 100 meters by 80 meters, with excavated entrances on its west and east sides. The enclosure was precisely cardinal north-south in orientation, and in the geometric center was the well. Later reconstruction of this well damaged its early form, but a concreted surface of sand leading down to the well, formed by the repeated slopping of water onto the surface, indicated that it was either an open hollow or shuttered with timber in a temporary manner. Five meters to the east of the well was a large tree, whose burnt-out tree stump was excavated, and much iron slag was found around it. Elsewhere within the enclosure there was little trace of habitation, only short gullies and slots for temporary structures, often associated with craft activity such as