

# The wealth of Africa: 4,000 years of money and trade

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Gallery 69a

Admission free

Africa has a long, rich and diverse history, incorporating ancient kingdoms, colonisation and independence. Using the medium of currency, **The wealth of Africa** provides an insight into this dynamic continent, from coins to copper ingots, raffia cloth and cowrie shells.

The story begins with the use of weighed metal in ancient Egypt, and with Africa's earliest coins in the Greek town of Cyrenaica (in modern-day Libya) dating back to the sixth century BC. Other ancient empires such as the Romans and Persians introduced their coinage to Africa when they controlled northern parts of the continent.

Symbols of identity are often stamped onto coins, and two of the exhibition's display cases track the changes brought about by two major religions when they arrived in Africa. When the ancient kingdom of Axum (in modern-day Ethiopia) converted to Christianity during the reign of king Ezana in the fourth century, the change was quickly reflected in the coinage. Similarly, with the spread of Islam in Africa from the seventh century, coinage featuring distinctive Islamic calligraphy spread along the North and East coasts.

The wealth of Mali, Great Zimbabwe and the Swahili Coast show Africa's power and influence in the centuries before the arrival of European colonisers and slave traders, whose legacy still lingers. The relationship between traditional currencies (like cowrie shells, copper manilas, and raffia cloth) and the new colonial coins and banknotes was not always trouble-free: the authorities sometimes tried to control the local currencies, but did not always manage it.

Later, in the twentieth century, newly-independent African nations redesigned their money as a statement of their new national identities. Some kept the old colonial currencies, though many did not, and most changed the old designs for new ones which proudly emphasise Africa's past and future. The redesign of the South African currency after the end of Apartheid incorporated the stunning wildlife of the region – a national symbol everyone can agree on – into banknotes and currency.

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