

The Ancient Kingdom of Punt and its Factor in Egyptian History

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Part IV

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On the Records

Textual Accounts

It seems that some scholars have not paid adequate attention to the fact that Pliny, a Roman author (d. 79 CE), and others, state that the Egyptians had contacteded and influenced Somalia. There are at least two kinds of information in this regard.

Firstly, he attests to the existence of a city called Port of Isis, on the northern coast of Somalia. He described the port as a center to which Myrrh is brought by the area inhabitants, and he also associated it with the name Abalito, which is clearly the Avalite of Periplus, and the Awtal or Awdal of the Somalis. But even before Pliny, Strabo called 'tog' or river, near Raas Caseyr 'Isis'.

Isis is a Greek form of Iset, a very important deity which was the partner of Osiris and mother of Hoor. Hoor (Falcon); and Biset (cat), another leading deity, are also connected with Somalia, as explained earlier. Thus, symbols of Egyptian Culture are connected with historical Somali Ports.

Secondly, Pliny adds that, Sesostris led his army to Mossylite, a cape and harbor exporting cinnamon.¹ Sesostris was an Egyptian king who reigned over 3,900 years ago. Mossylite or Mosyllum is identified with Boosaaso or a nearby site, in the west of Raas Caseyr, by Periplus's account. This confirms that the Greco-Romans knew about the historical destination of Egyptians and Cape Aromata was derived from the very Egyptian term, Kheto Anti.

Since Strabo named some other places near Raas Caseyr with Greek appellations, the question now is, who did name Zaylac, and Raas Caseyr 'Isis', Egyptians or Greeks? It is unlikely that the Greeks did it, but even if they did it, it doesn't really matter because they were referring to an Egyptian tradition anyway. The Greeks just felt an Egyptian legacy in this land and sought to emulate this legacy by applying their names to these places.

The Greeks liked to put a Greek flavor into other cultures with which they got acquainted. For example we know that they changed totally or partly the Egyptian names and other symbols of that culture. Nearly 200 years ago, professor Heeren noted: “Whatever the Greeks adopted from foreigners they always stamped as their own property.”²

Another concern can be about the different names given to Zaylac. The site of the ancient city might have shifted from one place to another in the same location since Pliny’s very name Abalito is preserved by the village Abalit, on the north of Zaylac bay. The old city was lost to the advancing shore and even parts of the new city are sometimes endangered by the water. The city might have variously been called these names. There is another sign for the name’s existence in pre-historic times. It is identified with the Bible name ‘Obal’, since a name close to that form is not found at any other place in both sides of the Red Sea which the book pointed out.

This type of name change or name-form change is usual. Today’s ‘Mogadisho’ or Muqdisho has been called Maduuna and Xamar. In fact, the name ‘Xamar’, which was first recorded by Al-Hamawi of Syria around 1220 CE, is the newest name of the city. The name Awdal itself, which means island, has also been put as Awtal, Aftal and Adal, while Zaylac is also formed as Saylac, ‘Zaila’, or ‘Zeila’. The term ‘Zaylac’ itself was first mentioned by Al-Ya’qubi about 880 CE as a new name of the city.

The authors, therefore, did not only make clear that the Egyptians were going to Somalia, but they also put the history of these ports back to about 4,000 years ago. In fact, the Greco-Roman authors, namely Strabo, Pliny, and the writer of Periplus, indicate that these ports were age-old market-towns which have already adapted to become part of the international trade activities and to bring the exotic African raw materials from distant interior regions before the Roman time.

The Origin and Developments of Somalo-Greco-Roman Relations

The Greeks seemingly inherited some knowledge about the Horn of Africa during the early era of their civilization from Egyptians, Phoenicians, or Mycenaeans (the people in the land before the Greeks). Along with this early possible knowledge, the Somalis are viewed to be the Macrobian or long-living Eathiopians of Herodotus, who wrote in the sixth century BCE and is seen as the first known historian.

The Macrobianians whose country was the outermost corner of greater Eathioia - somewhere relating to the Indian Ocean - were pastoralists with trading cities of law and order, ruled by a king. As one of four major Eathioian groups in the Sudano-Somali region, they were a tall race with handsome bodies. Besides having meat and milk as a main diet, the appellation 'macrobian' itself is believed to be referring to pastoralism.

Gold was one of their main trading items in which the Persians in Egypt were particularly interested, and accordingly, they prepared to invade the country of Macrobianians, but they could not carry that out because of the country's remoteness even from southern Egypt. In fact, the Persians run out of logistics after they cut only 20% of the distance to the country.³

Although Herodotus's descriptions of the Macrobianians agree well with the characteristics of the Somali, their country may, however, cover the Eritro-Somali coast, since he was generalizing information given probably by the Egyptians, who could not supposedly give him the secrets of big commercial opportunities.

The Greeks, and the Romans later, gained more information about the Horn after their respective conquests of Egypt. The Greeks conquered Egypt in 332 BCE from Persians who were ruling the country since 525 BCE. But the Greeks were in Egypt as traders before their conquest. Herodotus's journey is a good example of Greek involvement in Egypt before the conquest. The Romans took the land from the Greeks in 30 BCE. But the Greeks remained in the country and continued to play a significant cultural and commercial role under the name Ptolemy. Right after their advent, the Greco-Romans became acquainted with Northern Somalia apparently through the inheritance of Egyptian traditions. The Greeks particularly began to record their contacts to Somalia during the third century BCE.

There is a lot of information about Greek involvement in Somalia and the commercial significance of the country during the three centuries prior to the birth of Jesus. At least 22 Greek copper coins dating to those three centuries were found in Somalia, as opposed to 52 Roman coins covering the first four centuries after Jesus.⁴ Besides the coins, various Greco-Roman relating wares dating to the same periods have been found along the Xiis-Xaafuun coast (see below).

Greek rulers of Egypt sent to Somalia a certain traveler, Ariston, who named Northern Somalia after the Greek Sea deity 'Poseidon'. A Greek tradition also mentioned that some travelers led by Yambul were captured in Northern Somalia.⁵ Agatharchides

affirmed the mission of Ariston about 150 BCE and he added that there were some people who traveled to the Aromatic Land or Somalia before his time.⁶ Meanwhile, Ptolemy Eurgetes (d. 223 BCE), king of Egypt who conquered the main port of Eritrea, Adula, was regarded to have reached out to Mosyllum.⁷

A non-Greek, possibly Indian, sailor also led some Greeks to Raas Casey and further India around 118 BCE.⁸ Raas Casey, the heart of Aromatic Land, was the last destination of Greek missions to Somalia at that time. Strabo's mentioning some places surrounding Raas Casey in Greek names, though he was a Roman, is a clear evidence of deep Greek involvement in the region before the Romans.

As to the Romans, six years after his nation conquered Egypt in 30 BCE, Strabo has made a short but a definite statement about the geography and commercial importance of the Raas Casey region. Explaining the sources of commercial revenue in Egypt, he states:

‘Large fleets are dispatched as far as India and the extremities of Aethiopia, from which the most valuable cargoes are brought to Aegypt and thence sent forth again to the other regions.’⁹ At those times Extremities of Aethiopia was the region of Raas Casey which he himself called the ‘Southern Horn’.

Juba, a Roman ruler of the Moroccan coast (d. 23 CE), was not so precise as Strabo. He confounded Boosaaso with Raas Casey as Pliny reports: “Juba holds that at Cape Mossylites begins the Atlantic Ocean, navigable with a north-west wind along the coast of his kingdom of the Mauretania.”¹⁰

It appears that Juba had a clue about the tip of the Horn so he was differing the Northern Somali Coast from the southern one, calling the latter ‘Atlantic’, and thinking that it immediately joins the Mauretanian coast. The rest of the Pliny's remarks reconcile Strabo's and Jubba's statements, as he adds: “Some writers place one Ethiopian town on the coast beyond this point.” This point means Mosyllum or Boosaaso, an important cinnamon-exporting city.

Raas Casey region including Xaafuun was the last point of the known world, and Greco-Romans knew not so much about the southern coast of Somalia. But mentioning the ‘Horn’ means that Strabo at least learned from the old regional sources that the Raas or Cape is the point of coast direction change toward the south. He further says “after

doubling this cape toward the south, we have no more descriptions of harbors or places, because nothing is known of the seacoast beyond this point.”¹¹

It was only the author of Periplus, an eyewitness, therefore, who actually possessed knowledge about the southern coast of Somalia. Why then did it take the Greeks to know about the southern coast of Somalia at least five centuries after they learned about the northern one from the time of Herodotus, and more than three centuries after their conquest of Egypt? To look for an answer of this question, let us mention a Portuguese statement on Raas Caseyr just about four centuries ago.

In the winter of 1624 CE, a Portuguese priest was prepared to travel along the coast of the Horn of Africa, from Malindi to Beylul of Afarland by a Portuguese ship, in an attempt at finding a way to Abyssinia. Passing through Raas Caseyr, he felt it as a historic opportunity to see the place and he expressed a very special statement about a history of the place, as he wrote: “we sighted the famous Cape Goardafui, celebrated in ancient times under the name Cape of the Aromas”.¹²

How did the Portuguese learn about the historical celebrity of Raas Caseyr? Of course, the only way he could do that was to make use the old Greco-Roman records. If the Portuguese could refer to 12 to 16 century old information, what about the Greco-Romans’ knowledge about Egypt’s past, an experience which they had directly inherited?

The Greco-Romans rarely initiated their ideas about the culture and history of Egypt. They just transformed the Egyptian experience into their own version and as such transmitted that to us. For example, we may think the very term Egypt or Aigyptos is from a Greek origin, but actually it is not. The Greeks derived it from Hekuptat, the name of the greatest temple at Memphis, and they applied it to whole country. Similarly, the Greco-Romans did not apparently originate the name Aromatic land. They were just referring to the Egyptian Kheto Anti.

Gheto Unsi, kheto Anti, and Cape Aromata

Within this experience, there is always a unique characteristic in their references about Somalia. It is the outstanding aspect in these interconnected experiences, and it is the core of the story and literature about the land and its special products. The land became celebrity by what? The Egyptologists, as explained in section 111, asserted that the core of Egyptian interest in Punt was to reach and obtain kheto Anti incense trees for the

services of their gods. Kheto Anti is identical in the Somali gheto unsi, now geedo unsi or geedo udgon, (Khet: Egyptian; and ghet or geed, plural geedo: Somali, means tree).

Besides this etymology, this remarkable product had dictated the region's concerned civilizations to pay attention to its history and celebrity nature. It was a heritage maintained in the literacy of these civilizations. It appears here that the Greeks and Romans did not initiate the term but, in their turn, they were referring to the Egyptian records or information. This explains why the Punt-Egyptian relationship was so strong and special and why the product and its name survive.

Greeks called the place Aronaton or Akro terion, and the Romans called it Tera Aromatica, or Aromatifera Regio, with the same meaning of Egyptian kheto Anti or Somali gheto unsi.

It is accordingly clear then, during their times, the Greco-Romans supported their experience about Somalia by the knowledge they absorbed from the Egyptian culture and conveyed that to us as the Portuguese did during their time in the region. The Portuguese were referring to Aronaton/Akro terion of the Greeks and the Tera Aromatica of the Romans while the Greco-Romans were just recapitulating the Kheto Anti of Egyptians, the Gheto Unsi of the Somali. Cape Guardafui, Cape Aromata, and Cape of the Spices, are the same thing, and it is Raas Caseyr, the very tip of the Horn.

The country itself was depicted as a special place due to its products and commercial activities. In the late first century BCE, Strabo mentioned the importance of the Mosyllum area. Pliny and the author of Periplus in the middle of first century CE and Ptolemy a century later viewed Zaylac and Mosyllum as leading market-towns among the most important few ports in both sides of the Red Sea region. Cosmas maintained the view in the fifth century CE.

These roles were due to historical and geographical circumstances in the region. Zaylac has long been serving a vast land which extended as far as to Bela Shangul and south of Omo Valley, the present-day Ethio-Sudanese border. Mosyllum was similarly the center of the northeastern part of the Horn which was fairly populated and economically and politically developed in ancient times. But, Raas Caseyr and Xaafuun in the tip of the Horn were not less important than the former. In fact, they were among the centers whose existence to the mid Middle Somali or Greco-Roman period has physically been confirmed.

There are many ancient towns, some still flourishing and others in ruins, along the Jabuuti-Xaafun coast. At least four of them have archaeologically been confirmed to have existed 2,000 years ago and earlier.¹³ They namely consist of: Salweyn (apparently Mundus of Periplus), in the immediate east of Xiis, about 200 km west of Boosaaso; Daamo (most likely Market of Spices in Periplus), 5 km west of Raas Caseyr (Cape of Spices in Periplus); two settlements in Xaafuun or Haphone (Opone of Periplus) which were termed as Xaafuun Main and Xaafuun West, on the local Peninsula 40 km into the ocean, about 140 km SW of the Raas.

Further, two researchers, Smith and Wright, in 1988 identified and analyzed 12 different types of pottery from the two sites in Xaafuun. They have found that, although the most common of the wares were locally manufactured, the rest were imported from Indian Ocean to Mediterranean ports. At the Xaafuun west, the foundation of stone-building complex with a number of compartments and courtyard has been discovered, as one of the ruins observed in the region.¹⁴

Greco-Roman associated objects including various kinds of pottery, fragments of glasses, beads, rims of jars, millstone, amphora, etc., have been unearthed from one site or another of these centers.¹⁵ These are clearly part of the centers enumerated by Periplus in the first century CE and Ptolemy in the second century CE, nine of them flourishing on the Northern coast, and three more in the far south. These roles were going back to 4,000 years ago on the basis of other accounts including above-mentioned ones.

In short, the Greco-Roman knowledge about the Horn before Periplus, went to the limits of the area of Egyptian interest which was confined to the tip of the Horn. They mentioned in one way, and indicated in another, that there was an Egyptian involvement in Northern Somalia.

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