

The Ancient Kingdom of Punt and its Factor in Egyptian History

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Part 1

Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to shed more light on the location of ancient land of Punt and the nature of its relationship with ancient Egypt through discussion on the following points: origin of Somali history (introduction); review of the opposite arguments on the location of Punt; Punt as a kingdom; the scope of its trade; the evidences in the exported Plants and Animals; Greco-Roman account for the location of Punt; linguistic evidences; ethnographic significance of Puntite names; genetic evidence; archaeological and cultural connections; continuation of commercial aspect; Conclusion.

Note: In this document, as in many of other records, the names Somali, Somaliland, Somali Peninsula, and the Eastern Horn of Africa are substitutable; the terms 'North East Africa' and 'Horn of Africa' (from Sudan to the north and the east of Kenya) also do mean a same thing, although if it's said 'the Horn' only, it usually refers to the Somali Peninsula, not the greater Horn of Africa; but still the term 'Horn of Africa' is used elastically depending on the context. On the same token, the terms Southwest Asia, Near East, and Middle East are interchangeable.

I.Introduction: Origins of Somali History

Origin:

Notwithstanding some previously-presented hypotheses on origin of the Somalis, Somalia is a six millennia-old nation that has been occupying the Somali Peninsula throughout the time of its history. Even the last and most accepted one of these hypotheses which originates the Somali from Omo-Tana region cannot be valid anymore, and it is not logical even, because of various, ignored accounts.

These accounts clearly suggest that the ancestral home of the Somalis was the northern part of the Peninsula with the Peninsula always being inhabited by the Somalis.¹ In one of the recent studies on Somali history in general and reassessments of Omo-Tana story in particular, an intimate authority has announced:

“this hypothesis cannot be taken uncritically because cave paintings, dating back to 9,000 BCE, found in northern Somalia, as well as studies of ancient pyramids, ruined cities, and stone walls confirm that an ancient civilization thrived here at least from the late Paleolithic or Stone Age... along with the fact that the ancient Kingdom of Punt once flourished within Somali borders’... ‘Somalia is a nation with a history that stretches back more than ten millennia to the beginnings of human civilization’.”²

I have come to a similar conclusion on the question over six years ago. Somalia is one of not so many countries around the world in which a population change has never been indicated, and any sign of a noticeable substratum has not so far been observed genetically, linguistically, and anthropologically. There is no evidence for south-emanated expansion toward the north, but there are evidences for the opposite. The largest lexical statistics, and other linguistic standards, from various Afroasiatic languages are used in a forthcoming comparison for reconstructing the Somali history.³

Affiliation:

This does not necessarily mean that the Somalis were the first humans who have populated the Horn. In fact, Old and Middle Stone Ages (Paleolithic & Mesolithic) cultures were observed across the Somali Peninsula and relating areas. We can particularly mention the Mesolithic, and Neolithic (New Stone Age) artifact cultures from 10,500 BP (before present) in the Peninsula, which are named after their respective primary site: Magosian 10,500-7,500 Bp found in Dirir Dhabe, Goday, and Buur Haybe; Hargeysan 9,500-7,500 Bp in Nugaal-Sanaag-Dirir Dhabe belt; Doyan 7,000-4,000 Bp across Nugaal-Jubba region; Wiltoniod 7,500-5,000 Bp in Hargeysa-Nagele (Upper Daawa) belt. The times and locations are in approximation here.

Magosian and Wiltoniod were also found in Afarland. Besides the well-known Capsian culture, which is particularly connected with North Africa, Magosian and Wiltoniod were also discovered from some sites in East Africa. These cultures, as such, overlap in times and artifacts.

Besides these Mesolithic and Neolithic cultures, a pastoralist culture also appeared throughout that period. The linguistic comparisons provide a significant information on a Cushitic civilization of fully food producing and settled life in the region about 7,000 BP or earlier, in connection with the developments in the Near East, Nile Valley (Egypt and Sudan), North Africa, and Sahara.⁴

Apart from the Somali Peninsula, material evidences of this culture in the region dating from 5,500 BP approximately have been found in Afarland - NW of Harar (cattle); north east of Lake

Turkana (cattle, goats/sheep, pottery - some dating to 7,000 BP); Upper Daawa - the southern tributary of Jubba River (cattle, camel, sheep, goats; and pottery); Axum area, in northern Ethiopia (camel and pottery); and Putana Plain in eastern Sudan (cattle).⁵

The quite time range between the linguistic and material evidences is apparently due to poor archaeological work across the region at general and in Somalia at particular.

It has been suggested that this food production developments corresponded to a great expansion era of Afroasiatics from a center which isn't known with certainty, and even once was suggested for North Africa, or Palestine,⁶ but "Today, however, it is widely held that this family may just as easily have originated in Africa, to the West of the Red Sea." That is the northern Horn of Africa.⁷ With no enough evidence to rule out Palestine, the Capsian artifact culture in East Africa and North Africa from 10,500 BP, and rock painting Pastoralist culture in the Sahara and the Somali peninsula from 7,000 BP may serve as a sign for primary or secondary Afroasiatic center. Further, traces for human occupation of the Horn before the rise of Cushitics nearly 8,000 years ago have also been observed.⁸ But there is no doubt that the developments in question were within a Cushitic civilization.

The Cushitics involved in the overlapping Middle and New Stone Age, and Pastoralist cultures. And the above-mentioned region of these cultures is historically Cushitic inhabited area,⁹ except the Putana-Omo belt which was a contact area of Nilotics, Omotics, and Cushitics. The view then tends to interconnect the expansion and food production developments in Africa, particularly pastoralism and some major crops.¹⁰

Taking these accounts together, the most probable predecessors of the Proto-Somali in their homeland were just their distant ancestors, the Proto-Eastern Cushitics. Thus, the northern Somalia is not the point of origin for the Somalis only, but also it may be the eastern flank of the Cushitic ancestral home in general. As a result, the Somali nation rose during the fourth millennium BCE from an autochthonous people and remained there while others moved out.

Evolution:

Extensive linguistic and ethno-archaeological evidences show that interlinked developments of nation-evolving process and food-producing progress were taking place during the fourth millennium and early third millennium BCE.¹¹ Genetic findings also reveal that a gene marker which now distinctly defines the Somali in large was developing about that general time.¹² But the pastoralist rock painting culture in the Peninsula is one of the most important manifestations of that process.

The existence of many cave painting sites throughout the Peninsula has been known for decades.¹³ One of them, at Laas Gaal near Hargeysa, have been examined by a team of French

archaeologists in 2002 and reveals that its early occupation was sometime between 15,000-8,000 BCE, as one of the earliest known rock cultures in Africa. The dating of this site is even much earlier than the previous dating, 5,500-3,500 BP, of some of other rock paintings throughout Eyl-Boosaasa-Harar region by other scientists.¹⁴

To be sure, the rock paintings in that region have mostly been dated to 5,500-3,500 BP. But if some of the drawings were conducted 10,000 BP or earlier, that means Northern Somalia is another one of the earliest food production centers in the world besides the Middle East which is not far from it. The first signs of domesticated plants, goats, sheep, and cattle as the last one of them, appear in the Middle East during 10,500-8,000 years ago with still foraging lifestyle. By 8,000 BP, people became settled in Egypt and begun herding and farming economic life. However, our Middle East constitute for this case: Shamland (Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Israel, and Lebanon), SE Turkey, Iraq, and neighboring parts of Iran.¹⁵

There are many caves and rock shelters that are yet to be investigated across Somaliland (the whole Somali inhabited areas). But about twenty sites have been located, and a few of them investigated. All of them except three lay in the above-mentioned region: six of them in coastal Sanaag, throughout Cal Hills between Boosaaso and Maydh; at least three of them in Nugaal Valley, namely Xuddun and Eyl districts; one site for 20 interconnected shelters near Hargeysa; and six sites in Harar-Dirir Dhabe (Dire Dawa) area.

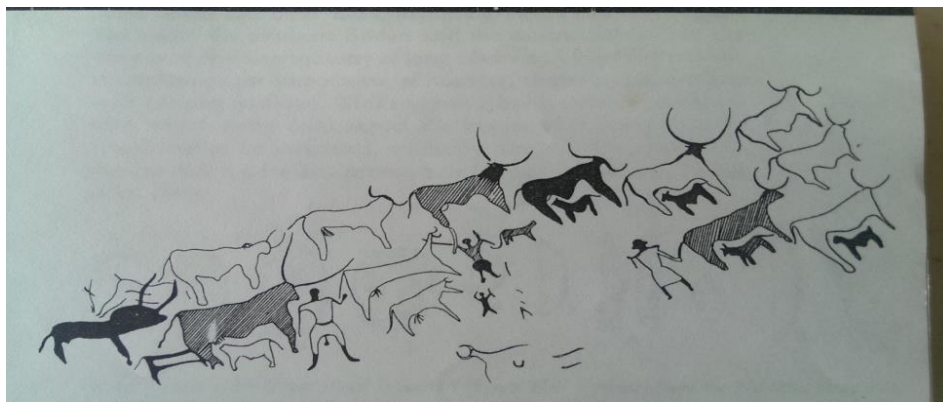


Fig. 1 humpless cattle and herdsmen. Painting at Genda-Biftow, Dirir Dhabe (Dire Dawa), after J. D. Clark, 1970 (Originally, after H. Breuil, 1934).

Whether it was in the same period or later extension from the north, the culture was also practiced in the south to some extent. This is represented by two disfigured engraving sites on a hill in central Shabeelle and one cattle painting site in Buur Haybe, in the north and west of Muqdisho respectively. But the other solid version of the rock culture, Megalithic tombs or

cairns, swept the entire south from the north. (More about the rock paintings and other ancient earth works in Somali see section X, forth coming.)

The culture consisted of both painting and carving practices. For example, in Tog Qululle, near Port of Eyl where Nugaal Valley empties on the Indian Ocean, footprints of humans, cattle, and goats and sheep, were carved on a granite rock; but, in another place near the port, some inscriptions were painted on the rocks. In the most of places, paintings or carvings contain numerous inscriptions, various animals, and humans in less number. Of the livestock section, cows are the most, followed by camels and goats.

The fact that this cattle-loving and rock-painting culture both in pictures and inscriptions has been run by people who physically (in their dress, weapons, and appearance), resemble the living Somalis¹⁶ is material support and explanation for the other findings.

How have the paintings been dated? It seems that a very few of them were directly dated, but there were other ways to do so. First, they have been dated on the basis of artifacts found within them, particularly on Wilton Industry (7,500-5,000 BP).

Second, the Sahara (southern Algeria and Libya, and northern Chad) is the only place in the world in which similar rock paintings have been found,¹⁷ where raising goats, sheep, and cattle traces back to nearly 7,000 BP.¹⁸ The earliest cattle paintings in Sahara are from 5,500 BP but the domestication begun earlier. Third, the archaeologically known cattle domestication in the Horn of Africa is from 5,250 - 4,600 BP (see above). But, naturally, the domestication began earlier than those times. Fourth, the ancient Egyptians depicted the cattle 3,500 BP as a primary life stock of the Puntites.

Fifth, on the paintings, the cattle are always depicted as hump-less and mostly long-horned, a fact that indicates cattle was old and indigenously domesticated specie. On the other hand, pictures of humped cattle were displayed in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa civilization in Pakistan, and Sumero-Akkadian civilization in Iraq by 4,500-3,500 BP. It is then believed that the present humped cattle were introduced to Africa from Asia, at some time later than the era of the humpless cattle.¹⁹

The background of these facts should generally be consistent with the linguistic suggestions on cattle, goats, and sheep domestication in the Horn nearly 7,000 BP.

Moreover, the lowlands of North East Africa such as Somalia are regarded to be the original center of the bicolor Sorghum, from which the crop was introduced to the rest of the continent, and to the other world through Middle East and Indo-Pakistan around 3,500 BP.²⁰ The earliest known sorghum grass collection has been unearthed in Napta Playa, in SW Egyptian Sahara dating to 8,000 years ago.²¹

If there is a feeling that, although indigenous in NE Africa, Durra, the type of Sorghum now cultivated in the region, was redistributed from the SW Asia during the early Islamic period,²² in fact that is not the case. There is no indication that the Durra or bicolor Sorghum in General was not always a native crop in the region. Besides its Widespread Cushitic name, massago, the early medieval Muslim records hold that the Durra cultivation was part of the lifestyle in the Horn of Africa. Ibn Hawqal recorded in 970s CE that both the Cushitic (Beja), and the Nubian Sudanese in the Eastern Sudan, were cultivating Durra.²³ Similarly Al-Idrisi stated in 1154 that the Berbers (Somalis) in the Lower Shabeelle Valley, Mugdisho area, were Durra farmers, with describing them as Kafirs, non-Muslims.²⁴

From this background, the ancestors of Proto-Somali lived about 6,000 years ago, as an Eastern Cushitic tribe over its own territory. Thus, around 5,000 years ago they have already evolved their nationhood; inherited or adapted to an appreciable stage of economic development in food production: herding goats, sheep, and cows; and farming sorghum, barely, xiji (incense) for trade and home consumption. They even got involved in camel domestication an early time of third Millennium BCE, and they were probably familiar with a sort of wheat. Alongside raising crops and livestock, they gained knowledge in metallurgy using probably copper, and possibly bronze through importation, for the trading was also part of their living at that time. However, a portion of the nation has preferred to remain in fishing, gathering, and hunting activities.

Expansion:

As the archaic Somali communities had initially peopled the North-Shabeelle region including Harar highlands, many communities which consisted of the so called Somaliod groups, Jubba-Tana groups, extinct and semi-extinct groups begun further expansion to Rift Valley in the West and Southwest, and Tana River basin in the South prior to 3,000 years ago. This was the beginning of Middle Somali (about 1,300 BCE-700CE) whose clan group names are mostly known, and who has preceded the founding fathers of the majority of present clans. Present Macro-Somali consist of New Somali (from about 700 CE onwards), Middle Somali, and a few survivors from Old Somali which was largely assimilated by the Middle Somali.

During the first millennium CE, some of them further occupied some places beyond these points. As the traditional strong hold of the pre-historic Somalis was the North and subsequently the center, the outflanking or offshoot communities in the far west and far south became the oldest known communities.

Historically considering, the Somalis may have not always been the same as we know them today. Since we have reasons, documented on another work, to believe that the name had emerged during one of the first two earliest stages of Somali language developments, Pre-Somali

and Proto-Somali, it might have once been applied to some groups to which it is not applied today explicitly.

Admittedly, the available archaeological data in Somalia are from limited, old works. But, the new studies on linguistics, genetics, records, and paintings, have made remarkable contributions to the capacity of managing the gap, and to the reconstruction of Somali history.

Identity:

As far as the historical nature of the name ‘Somali’ is concerned, since immemorial time the Somalis have called themselves ‘Soomaali’. Unlike many country names around the world today the name is naturally inherited, not politically coined. But, like the names Yemen and Malay, no one knows with certainty about the meaning or root of the term. This obscurity of the meaning of the name, and the unusual early acceptance of common name among the Somalis - with strong beliefs of descending from different ancestors and highly guarded culture of sticking to these varying lineages - is part of the evidences which definitely give the term a very unique nature of antiquity.

The outsiders, however, have employed for the Somalis various names. By that, Somalia has been called Melukhkha apparently; Eathiopia, Iethyophagi, Berber, Aromatic land, Habasha (Abyssinia), Zanzi, Azania, land of Zaylac, and Barri-Cajam. None of these have never been recognized by the Somalis as their national name.

The name Zaylac relates to a historical port on the northern coast, and the term ‘aroma’ refers to a historical product, but the rest of the names refer to the skin colour of north east African populations, so they are foreign coined nicknames. Although they confused the history of the region, they didn’t affect the feeling of the Somalis on their real national identity.

But the most interesting of such names is Punt which the ancient Egyptians had once been calling Somalia. Again we don’t know if the name was employed by only Egyptians for the country, or if it was actually national or regional name for it. However, our concern here is not its root but its precise location. But before we discuss about that location, let us check some other ideas on it.

II. Reviewing Opposite Arguments on the Location of Punt

As the racial origin of ancient Egyptians had long been debated and searched from the Southern Pacific to southern Europe prior mid 1800’s, similarly the location of the ancient land of Punt, with which the Egyptians loved to deal and even identified themselves with, had also been a subject of debate among the scholars during that period. Champollion’s decipherment of hieroglyphs in the 1822, which led solving the riddle on Egyptian origin, had also introduced the

knowledge about the existence of historical Land of Punt and resultant investigation in the supposed places.

Although Champollion himself suggested that, on the basis of physical anthropology, Punt should have existed in the Horn of Africa, nevertheless the search on the location of Punt took nearly half a century looking for it from Syria and Yemen to Zimbabwe.

Eventually, from around the turn of the century onwards, many leading Egyptologists and other historians have recognized Punt in Northern Somalia through textual, anthropological, archaeological, ecological, and geographical accounts.²⁵

But as it is usual that one may speculate about the location of that kind of important, but mysterious land, the precise location of Punt or its regional borders have occasionally been debated by some scholars, usually on inadequate ground. However, two arguments that have been made during the last two decades are quite different and it is necessary to deal with them here. Although the primary source of the first one is not available for this article, we will utilize an abstraction of it by a secondary source.

In the first argument, it is assumed that Punt was somewhere in Eastern Sudan, an area about 200 KM north of Khartoum. To make contacts with Puntites, it is added, the Egyptian travelers might have sailed along the Nile river, not by Red Sea, and then, at a point from the river, took an overland route to Punt.

The myrrh trees that were loaded onto Hatshepsut's ships might show that they have been intended to replant in her temple at Deir-el-Bahri, "so that the Egyptians could produce their own aromatics from them ... given the fact that such plants might well have died during the more difficult voyage northwards along the Red Sea coast",²⁶ it is argued.

Traditionally, it has been believed that the Egyptians were travelling by Red Sea from the ancient ports Marsa Gawassis or Quseir. Contrary to the argument, new findings have affirmed the validity of that assumption. A well preserved remains of large ships and harbor installations such as "ship's timbers, anchors, coils of ancient rope, and the rigging of seagoing ships that date from the reigns of several Pharaonic dynasties" are excavated from the port Marsa Gawassis.²⁷

Additionally, a major expedition was sent from that port, which is close to the western end of Red Sea, by Pharaoh [Amenemhat IV] about 3,800 years ago.²⁸ Kathryn Bard, a Boston University distinguished Egyptologist, led the excavations and has subsequently announced: "We have made a wonderful find there. It was really amazing - 40 cargo boxes from the ship, and some were inscribed with the name of that very king, the name of the scribe, and the inscribed words, 'wonderful things from Punt'."²⁹

Among many other evidences, the findings from this port in general and the relics of the expedition in particular, eliminate the possibility of a route along the Nile to Punt. One cannot see any reason to entertain that assumption anymore.

The second argument is based on a case study of two mummified baboons that were taken from Punt to Egypt which are now held by British museum in London. The study has been conducted by two other scientists: Nathaniel Dominy, an ecologist, and Gillian Moritz, a specialist in a mass spectrometer in the Dominy's laboratory. The ecologist has sheared a few hairs from the baboons for the lab specialist to work on, for a purpose of using "baboons as a lens to solve the Punt problem". Describing it as "a complicated bit of chemistry", David Perlman, Chronicle Science Editor, who has appreciated the study explains:

"Despite their age, those hairs still contained trace molecules of the water the animals drank when alive ... every oxygen atom is made up of three different stable isotopes - their atomic masses - and the ratio between two of them, oxygen-18, varies significantly in the rainfall and humidity from one part of the world to another, even from different parts of a continent."

He continues: "Moritz used ... ratios in the hairs of each mummified baboon, and compared them with the ratios in all five species of baboons living in varied parts of Africa today."

By this, the researchers have come to believe that the habitat for the type of the baboons in question lie on both sides of the border between the Ethiopian-Axum and Eritrean-Asmara regions, which shows that it is "the place to look for punt." Moritz said.³⁰

The view might remind us of one opinion expressed by some scholars in which they look for the origins of the queen of Sheba from the very same region. Uncertainty, however, is expressed within this assumption for the land. Notwithstanding her findings from Marsa Gawassis, Bard proposes that Punt may have also existed in a similar confronting baboon area of eastern Sudan.

Judging from what it is given, it is doubtful if one can be convinced that there are now more answers than questions. Former Egyptologists have taken into account the type of ecology for Puntite baboons taken to Egypt. They have found that their ecology belongs to the rocky hills along the coast of RaasCaseyr-Jabuuti (Cape Guardafui-Djibouti) region³¹ which was known by Egyptians and Greco-Romans as the Aromatic land.³²

Does this mean that reconciliation between the two findings is required? Since the Sudanese area is not initially considered into the study does this indicate that the baboon question is yet to be exhausted? On the other hand, the hair of the baboon is not the only Puntite substance that has chemically been examined. The most important item, frankincense, for Egypt has also been examined and proven to be the variety that is grown in Somalia, and not any other place in Africa.³³

If Punt was in northwestern interior region of the Horn of Africa, why had the Egyptians required traveling thorough uneasy journey to a relatively remote inland while they could meet their demands on the Eritrean coast? Even if the most of the interactions had been occurring on that coast, why had these ambitiously-organized voyages been limited to unpromising destination while they could reach out the nearby Aromatic Land, the real field of their primary demands; or why is not possible that they could pick up a sort of these demands from the former during some of their returns from the Aromatic Land, northern Somalia?

Why could they sail over the most difficult part of the Red Sea (today's Red Sea) but they could not do so over the more possibly Pacific remaining part of it (today's Gulf of Aden) on the Aromatic coast? In another word, which one was easier for them to take the overland route to Asmara-Axum area or to continue the voyage to places like Zailac (Zeila), Berbera, or Xiis which produce superior aromatic resins? In fact, while it was not even a concern previously, the new findings prove that their maritime technology could enable them to sail to farther places such as Raas Casey for the best and the biggest kind of these products.³⁴

Feeling the hasty nature of the statement and its lack of adequate strength to cause departing from the widely accepted idea of looking for Punt from Somalia, Raphael Njoku has newly noted:

“Further studies are needed to conclusively affirm this new finding on Punt’s location. Until then, the previous inconclusive but strong evidence is still relevant and worthy of consideration.”³⁵

Other researchers who have also published their work recently do not find a reason to look for Punt in a place other than Somalia.³⁶

Dr. Njoku, a world-class writer, a history professor, and the director of the international studies program at Idaho State University, also asserts the historical importance of Somalia’s trading links with the ancient leading civilizations and the nature of its exports through the trading city-states along its coast, well known through archaeology and Greco-Roman records. As such, he reminds us: “the coastal city-states produced and traded significant amounts of the precious goods that were associated with the people of Punt.”³⁷

The scholar must be right. One finding isolated from many others cannot change the course. It is noteworthy to remind also that the historiography on the Horn of Africa suffers a lot with snagging or selective approach in the studies which results an absence of authentic identity, or what Legesse Asmarom describes as an “erroneous conclusion” by a selected “narration”.³⁸ And David O’Conner notes as a requirement of “substantial shifts in intellectual attitudes” for better understanding of the history of “less well-known cultures of north-east Africa.”³⁹

As mentioned above, scholars have previously calculated and based their findings for the location of Punt on the types of the products; trading history of the region; the distance and requirements of the expedition to the land; and some archeological, environmental, linguistic, and cultural accounts. The types of the commodities, particularly the plants, have been the subject of the special interest as they were objects of special interest for the Egyptians.

In this study, on the basis of new observations, and intimate review over the previous accounts, it is almost secure to declare conclusively that Punt has existed in northern Somalia and to stay on the view for that in the former studies.

The aim of the remaining parts of the paper is to show how this is not a premature conclusion.

Part II forthcoming.

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