

The Ancient Kingdom of Punt and its Factor in Egyptian History

By Said M-Shidad Hussein

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Part II

111. On the Commodities

History of the Trade Contacts

The Puntite factor in the history of ancient Egypt had existed since the pre-dynastic period, the turn of fourth century millennium BCE. But the definite data about trading missions sent to Punt cover nearly fifteen centuries of 2590-1150 BCE, which contain the greatest periods in the history of dynastic Egypt.

The known information about Punt began with Pharaoh Khufu 2589-2566 BCE, the builder of great pyramids in Giza, near Cairo. His son owned a slave from Punt. It ended with Pharaoh Ramses III, 1182-1151 BCE. Probably as an attempt at spiritual rehabilitation of irrevocably declining Egypt by boosting ritual services and by showing that the old glory is still at hand, Ramses III sent an ambitious mission to Punt around 1167 BCE which returned with fresh incense. This was almost the last expedition to Punt.

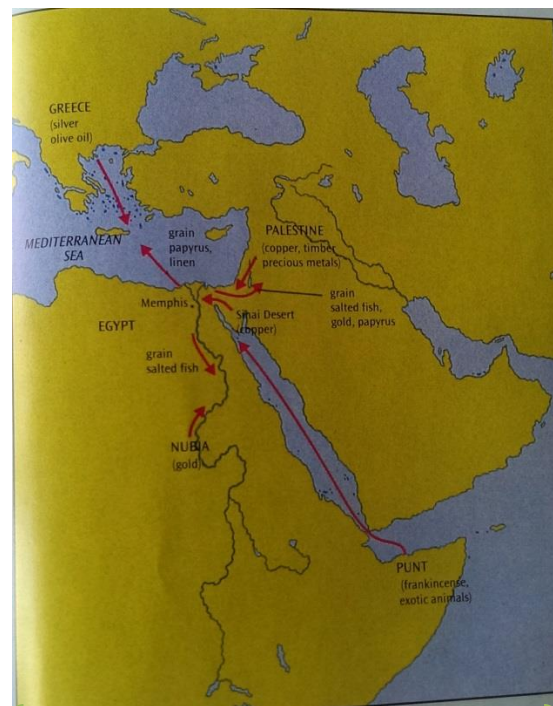


Fig. 2 Somalo-Egyptian contacts with other trade routes of Egypt, (After Rosemary Reese 2006, *The Ancient Egyptians, teaching*)

Although the excavations always come up with new information, generally there are about twenty known naval expeditions to Punt.

In addition to the national name of Ta Punt (Punt Land) the Egyptians gave the land ideological names such as Ta Neter (Land of God), and land of Gods or Ancestors; as well as material names like Kheto-Anti (terraces of incense trees) and land of gold. Besides their individual names, they called products collectively 'wonderful things from Punt'.

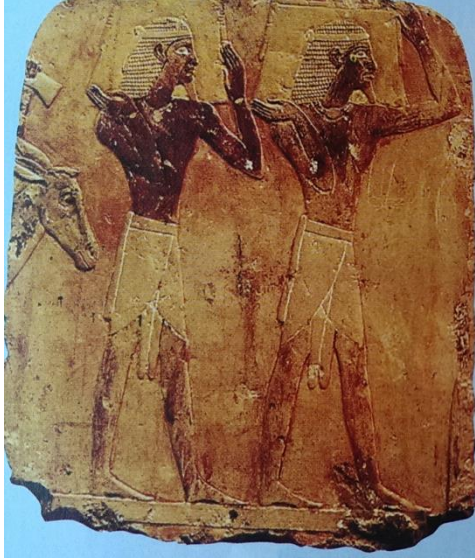
One of the earliest and most detailed imports from Punt was brought by a mission sent by Pharaoh Sahure (2490-76 BCE) of the new Kingdom. Incense was the main part of the Cargo brought back by the mission which consists of 80,000 aromatic units, 6,000 gold and silver units, and a lot of ebony woods, with first Puntite Pictures.

Unlike the pictures of various other nations, the representations of Puntites or Somalis in this early period were depicted on the monuments in sharp resemblances to the Egyptians themselves. Punt was described as land of gold and aromatics, god and ancestors of Hhur (falcon) Kings.¹

During the first intermediate period, just shortly prior to the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, the purpose of the missions was still the same as the earlier era. A leader in the Red Sea area called Henu built ships for a naval mission to Punt by an order of the Luxor-based pharaoh Mentuhotep (2125-12). The expedition returned with cargo that consisted mainly incense. Throughout the era of the Middle Kingdom, 2040-1780 BCE, expeditions were almost taking place on a regular course. The contacts might have sometimes been interrupted by internal crises or foreign disturbances.²

However, the greatest and most detailed maritime expedition was dispatched by Queen Hatshepsut of the New Kingdom around 1,490 BCE. The mission, whose destination is reckoned to be at Caluula, near Raas Casey or Cape of Spices (Guardafui),³ brought back:

“all the goodly fragrant woods of God’s Land (Land of Punt) heaps of myrrh resin, fresh myrrh trees, ebony, pure ivory, green gold of Emu, cinnamon wood, khyst wood, ihmut incense, souter incense, eye cosmetic, apes and monkeys, dogs, skins of southern panther.”⁴



Figs. 3 & 4, right: men carrying gifts from King & Queen of Punt to Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt; left: King Perho and Queen Ati of Punt receiving diplomatic note from Queen Hatshepsut (after Rees, 2006).

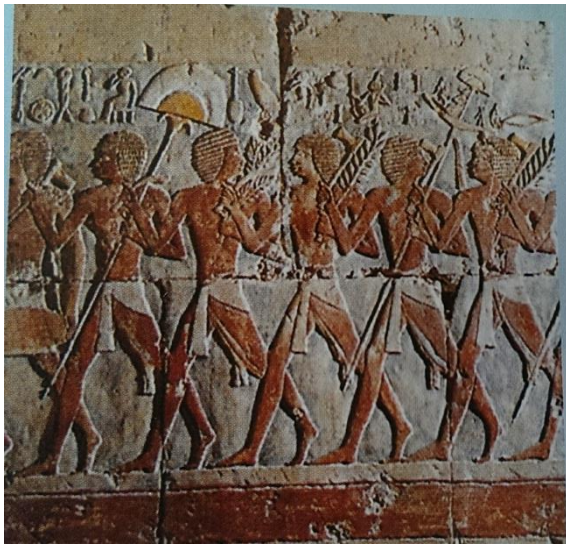


Fig. 5 Egyptian soldiers carrying plants from Punt, (after Rees, 2006).

With these contexts, there is no disagreement among the scholars that the Egyptians were primarily traveling to Punt for incense followed by the gold, which had also been obtained from other sources. Given the fact that nothing affected the everyday lives of Egyptians more than the ideology generally and that they call Punt 'land of God', it's clear that the need for Puntite plants and animals was primarily religious and not commercial.

And that is why they had made efforts to obtain every possible thing even if it is found in Egypt such as cattle and dogs, or in a closer country like the ebony woods, and the demand was sustained for a long time at a heavy cost. Unlike the woods from Near East and ebony from Sudan which were used as a timber, the woods from Punt were used for making incense and perfumes, or as sacred objects. They consisted of ebony and certain sweet and fragrant woods.⁵

Primary Demand of the Egyptians and its Sources

It was known for nearly a century and half that in Africa, Somalia is the only place in which the commodity that the Egyptians had primarily demanded is found. As an essential key for understanding the location of Punt this fact is still reiterated. Analyzing the cosmetics and perfumes used by aroma-loving ancient Egyptians, Bob Brier and Hoyt Hobbs acquaint us:

“One famed incense was frankincense, a resin that seeps through the trunks of special trees that grow only in southern Arabia and Somalia. The search for frankincense explains continued expeditions to Punt, as the Egyptians called Somaliland.”⁶

After defining the exact location of the product and the expeditions, the authorities further explain, “A quantity was recovered from Tutankhamen’s tomb that still gave off a pleasant odor when burned [more than] 3,000 years later. The other famous incense was myrrh, which served as a perfume as well. A resin, like frankincense, it grew only in the same areas. Both produced fragrant fumes at parties, and both sanctified idols in temples.”

The “quantity recovered from the Tutankhamen’s tomb” is a reference to the findings from the tomb of this boy-king (1336-27), excavated in 1922 by a British archaeologist, Howard Carter, after he was digging for six years in the tombs.

The discovery of Tutankhamen or Tutankamun’s tomb is seen a special achievement in archaeological works on Egypt. For thousands of years, people from different nations were breaking into the Pharaohs’ tombs. They were stealing their treasures and artworks to sell them for money. For many years some archaeologists, such as one named Theodore Davis, were digging in the tombs, particularly those of the new Kingdom Pharaohs in the valley of Kings at Luxor, to find just one tomb that was not robbed. But the work ended with no findings.

Carter, who believed that the valley was not done yet, was even coming back with empty hands for about six years. In mid-1922, the financier of his costly work, Lord Carnarvon, wealthy British man, told him that he would not pay for any more excavations. But the archaeologist insisted that he would continue the job by his own little money. He was given one more chance.

On the morning of November 4, 1922, a young boy named Hussein Abdur-Rasul, whose assignment was to carry water to the thirsty workers within the heat of desert, accidentally swept his hand through the sand. Eventually, his fingers hit a surface of a flat, smooth piece of stone. This was a surface of a stairway of 16 steps leading down into the door of the Tutankhamun's tomb, as the only tomb not violated by the robbers, although they tried but were stopped by ancient guards.

A huge chamber with more rooms and doors had been discovered. The Egyptian government was called to watch the discovery, as required by the law. Some archaeologists from USA and Europe volunteered to help study the tomb and preserve the fragile treasures that would fill a whole museum. Besides the gold coffins holding the mummy of the King, other intact possessions buried with him include: incense, gold, throne, beds, chairs, couches, clothes, chariots, jars of food, flowers, ostrich-feather, golden mask bearing the image of the King, board game, baskets, necklaces, a huge shrine and much more.

These four figures were among the discoveries from Tutankhamun's tomb (adopted from Michael Woods and Mary B. Woods, 2008 (Minneapolis), 'The Tomb of King Tutankhamun', teaching material).



Fig. 6 board game, baskets and ceramics.



Fig. 7 ceremonial throne of the king.



Fig. 8 People watching the main discovery.

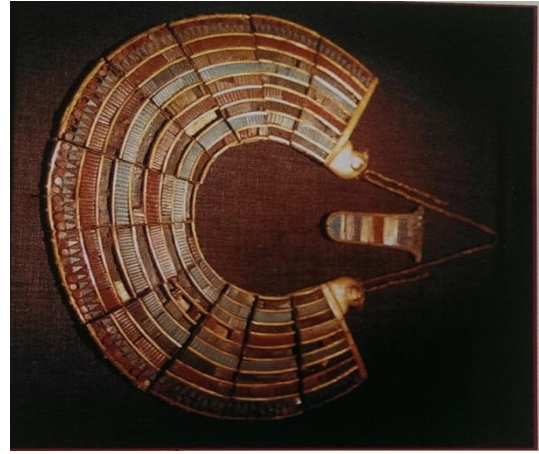


Fig. 9 necklaces.

The finding is described as one of the greatest archaeology discoveries in history due to the cost and commitment on it, and the size and value of the treasures. As a token of the cost, it is believed that the death of Lord Carnarvon after less than six months was caused by an infected mosquito bite during the days of the main discovery. **Within this wonderful discovery, there is an interesting presence of wonderful things of Punt. The air of the tomb still smelled of frankincense from Punt.**

As this is valuable information about the lives of the Pharaohs, the incense and gold are the only important raw materials in the list that were among the traditional Egyptian imports to be part of the Kings' lives. This actually explains, as mentioned above, their great efforts to receive these prized items from a remote land.

With the gold was also coming from other non-Puntite places, as already stated, their primary demand from Punt was incense. It is only clear in the era of the New Kingdom, from 3,550 BCE, that the animals were imported from Punt. It is not clear if the date of the two baboons in question, mentioned in section 11 above, was 3,800 or 3,400 years ago. If it's the earliest date, they are the first known animals within a cargo from Punt.

Major Types of Incense and their Distribution

Incense (from Latin *incendere*, to burn or kindle) has the same literal meaning as the term perfume, which is the aroma yielded by odoriferous substances with smoke when burned. The two genuine and best known types of incense are frankincense and myrrh. Both are fragment gum-resin, but there is a difference between their colors and size. The frankincense is usually

larger or elongate longer, mostly within a light yellowish-brown color and a colorless form or slight greenish tint for the purer type. Some of the myrrh is also colorless but the purer types occur in a yellowish-red or blackish-red form.

In ancient Egypt, from the fifth dynasty (2565 BCE) onwards, incense was one of the most common subjects pictured in temples and tombs, and incense and burners have been found in graves. It was mentioned in the records and shown in other illustrations.⁷

Ruling out any possibilities of being any kind of resins found in any African region other than Somalia, A. Lucas and J.H. Harris describe Tutankhamun's incense as the following.

"The incense from the tomb of Tutankhamen, which has been examined by me ... is a light yellowish-brownish color, brittle, slightly resinous-looking, burns with a smoky flame, giving off a pleasant aromatic odor and has a solubility of approximately 80% in alcohol and 20% in water and is therefore a gum-resin... and altogether it is very suggestive of frankincense that has been powdered and made into balls."⁸

The result accords well with the ancient records. There is no one single statement, so far as is known, connecting the trade or production of incense with any African region outside of Northern Somalia throughout the eight centuries (c. 200 BCE-600 CE) in which the Greco-Romans were relatively documenting about Northeast Africa.

Thus Lucas, a chemist, and other Egyptologists insist that this incense is found only in Somalia and south Arabia around the world. With this, the textual and material accounts evidenced that Punt was a remote African coast to the South of Egypt. And there is still a quantitative difference between the Somali and Arabian incense. A tradition in Arabia says that Al-khowjari of south Oman can be compared with the Meydi of Somalia as the best types of incense in the two regions.

But it is generally believed that they are not actually same for the "Somali frankincense figures in the trade of Egypt at the time of the Punt expeditions, and probably much earlier. It was different from, and often superior to, the Arabian. It is, indeed, possible that the true frankincense (*Boswellia neglecta*) was native here, and that the Arabian varieties (*Boswellia serrata*, etc.) were a later cultivation."⁹

The author of *Periplus*, an eyewitness Egyptian-Greek merchant who sailed through both Somali and Arabian coasts nearly 1,950 years ago, addressed the frankincense grown in both regions. He attested that the type produced in the Somali region of Raas Caseyr (Cape of Spices) is "in great quantity and of the best grade."¹⁰ In fact, he repeatedly called 'Far-Side

Frankincense' the Somali one to differ the Arabian one. South Arabians have themselves historically expressed superiority and appreciation of the Somalia incense (see section XII, forthcoming).

This fact means that if all places other than northeast Africa have been ruled out, by one reason or another, the northeast African regions other than Somalia should also be ruled out. It is true that a variety of frankincense is obtained from commiphora trees growing in eastern Sudan and in the adjoining area of Eritrea. But this is a lower grade of the product and it is not the type of examined frankincense which was discovered from at least the tomb of Tutankhamun. This examined frankincense is the variety that is grown in Somalia. Additionally, the Eritro-Sudanese kinds of incense are also found in Somalia but do not have a commercial trading value because the availability of better grades.

There is another way in which the resins are categorized in Somalia. The resin trees consist of two general species: Geed Qodax (thorny trees), and Geed Quwaax (sweet wood). The resins of the former are mostly edible and they are not used as incense. It contains kinds of trees with hard wood and thorny branches. Geed Quwaax trees (Boswellia?) preserve sweet water in the trunk and produce resin.¹¹ The frankincense is tapped from the trunk of Meydi, Hadi, Moxor, Daddin, etc.

A few of them like 'Dhaddin', satisfy both characteristics, geed qodax and geed quwaax. Its resin can be very sour, or very sweaty, or mixed. It is used for various purposes such as remedy or medicine by preventing an infection or drying out a discharge, or preventing snakes from the household for tradition says that they don't stay with the smoke from certain frankincense; and painting, or making an ink from a solution consisting of the product, milk or water, and charcoal powder. It seems that the prehistoric pastoralist rock paintings across the northern Somali region were made from a kind of these solutions.

As a sign for the product's historic importance in the everyday life of the Somali, the culture has developed many names for it such as: foox, faleen, beeyo, uunsi, xabag, xiji, xanjo, cananno, etc. Moreover, due to the Arab interaction, some more terms from the Arabic like Bakhur and Cadtar, are added to the list, while the etymology of the term lubaan, Somali or Arabic, is yet to be detected.

The Cinnamon

The Egyptians and later Mediterranean civilizations associated cinnamon with Somalia. In classic times, Israelites mentioned it, and Greco-Roman writers talked about the point from which it is produced or exported to their region. These civilizations used it as an incense and food flavor.

In Queen Hatshepsut's inscriptions, it was one of the wonderful things of the country of Punt. Dioscorides says that it's grown in Arabia and Somalia, but he adds that "The cinnamon has many names, from the different places where it grows. But the best sort is that which is like the cassia of Mosyllum, and this cinnamon is called Mosyllitic, as well as the cassia."¹² Mosyllum was an important trading city at somewhere near Boosaaso, in the west of Raas Caseyr.

Strabo, a Roman author around 24 BCE, described the inland of the Cape of Spices (Caluula-Raascaseyr district) as the myrrh, frankincense, and "the cinnamon country"¹³ This inland was well familiar to the Greeks in which they mentioned many places in Greek names. Pliny, another Roman Scholar (d. 79 CE) describes Mosyllum as "the port of export for cinnamon."¹⁴

The author of Periplus, the Egyptian-Greek who was contemporary with Pliny, depicts the product as specialty of Somalia locating it in same as the places of incense, and mentioning it within varying grades of quality or quantity.

He states: "the harder cinnamon" is exported from Berbera; but from Mosyllum "there are shipped ... a great quantity of cinnamon, so that this market-town requires ships of larger size"; as well as Caluula "are produced in it cinnamon: and its different varieties, gizir, asypha, arebo, magla, and moto ..."; while in Xaafuun "the greatest quantity of cinnamon is produced."¹⁵

With the many other names related to the incense, Greco-Romans call the region 'regio cinnamomifera'. But, since the cinnamon tree is not grown now in Somalia, some scholars have suggested that it was coming from India to there from which it was taken to Arabia and Egypt. They have added that the Somalis were misleading their later customers, the Greco-Romans, by hiding the sources of the product from them. But the question is, how did they manage to do that when the Greco-Romans were also traveling to India?

Since the Alexander the Great's conquest of some parts of the Indian region in 320s BCE, the Greeks were familiar with that region. Around that time, a lost Greek work, written by Ctesias of Cnidus, even described 'the wonders of India'.¹⁶ And we know that there are some other references to later journeys to India.

It is then difficult to entertain a question of continuous misleading. We can only think about one of two things: the Somalis secured a guarded contract from Indians to distribute the product from their land to the Mediterranean. Or they were producing the plant in their country from which it became extinct later. It's correct that the requisite climate does not exist now. But the environmental change factor has not been taken into account. We know that the same region of Somalia has historically been producing the dates and meyro (a date-like plant from whose fiber various beautiful mats are woven) until a few decades ago. But now they are in a condition of having become extinct.

In fact, the author of *Periplus* observed that the Indian ships were frequenting on the Somali coast and that a huge trade was taking place between the two countries where the Somalis were importing from India, and apparently Iran, the goods like copal (resin for varnishing or dyeing), *macir* (a plant root for medication); and "wheat, rice, clarified butter, sesame oil, cotton cloth, ... girdles, and honey from reed called sacchari (sugar)."¹⁷

However, an importation from India, at least partially, can't be ruled out. Its late inclusion among the Puntite exportations to Egypt might indicate the beginning of the Somalo-Indian effective trading contacts. Whether they were locally producing or procuring from India, this was another product under the Somali manipulation in the trade from African Red Sea coast to Egypt and beyond. The most fertile land for the production of incense or exportation of the cinnamon was Caluula and Raas Casyear districts (Cape of Spices). But the most important Port of the region was Mosyllum, around Boosaaso in the west. That historical role is in fact what Boosaaso does today.

As another evidence of identifying the product's historical exportation with Punt's location in northern Somalia, Wilfred Scoff, the editor of *Periplus*, concludes: "This [Mosyllum] was probably the very midst of the 'Land of Punt' where the Egyptian fleet brought cinnamon 15 centuries before."¹⁸

The Animals

The Egyptians obtained from Punt cattle, dogs, apes, monkeys, and probably cats. There is definite linguistic evidence in the animal names for the location of Punt. One famed animal-form deity is Hathor or Xathor, which is symbolized by a milch cow called Lady of Punt. This should explain why Egyptians imported some cattle among the other animals from Punt. Other important animals for the culture and religion of Egypt have in fact Somali names such as 'ay' or 'ey' (dog), 'huur' (falcon), and 'beset' (cat).

Of the eastern Cushitics, Somali is the only language that shares the term 'ay' with the Egyptian for the animal. All other eastern Cushitics name it "Karre". Similarly, the Egyptian is the only language, as far as I know, that called it ay or ayu. We don't know if this happened as a common-heritage or as a loan-word between the two languages. But we do know that the Egyptians depicted in their drawings some dogs from Punt. Thus, it is not difficult to detect why the animal was called 'ay' or 'ey' in Somali and 'ay' or 'ayu' in Egyptian. And the connection is farther clear.

In the Egyptian inscriptions, the symbol of the falcon which is called Haur (Horus in Greek form) was used to represent a king or god. The falcon Haur was thus a very important deity. In the Somali, Haur is a type of the falcons. The connection has already been noted by some Somalo-Egyptian scholars.¹⁹ Although the two cultures share a name for the animal, symbolized Haur as a deity in Egypt seems to be home-grown regard after the Puntites were assimilated in Upper Egypt.

The two languages similarly share the name 'biset' for the cat. In her booklet 'Somali Cats' of non-fiction material for juvenile education in USA, Nancy Furstinger says, "Around 3,500 years ago ancient Egyptians began welcoming wildcats into their homes as pets. These cats hunted rats and mice that feasted on grains stored on silos. Egyptians believed cats were sacred and often worshipped them in temples. Domestic cats can trace their roots back to these African wildcats."²⁰

Nancy is right. The term for a cat in the ancient Egyptian is biset or beset, the very name that the Somali calls the animal. Besides these linguistic facts, the sacredness of biset or becoming one of the main deities in Egypt indicates a link of Punt or Somali. Connections within more animals can be listed. But I think these animal-related Lexemes are enough examples in this particular case, while the linguistic factor will generally be considered in sections VII & VIII.

Said M-Shidad Hussein

Email: saidshidad@gmail.com

Notes and References

¹ Breasted, James Henry, 1924, "A History of Egypt, from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest", pp. 25-26, Charles Scribner's and sons.

² Such as the political upheavals of 2200-2040 and 1780-1670 BCE, which are known as 1st intermediate and 2nd intermediate periods respectively; and Hyksos occupation of 1670-1570 BCE. However, we have seen that prior to 2100 an ambitious mission was sent from Luxor to Punt.

³ For the question on environmental comparability of the destination with off-shore scene in Caluula, near Raas Casey, see Strabo (XVI, IV, 14) opt. cit. Wilfred Scoff, 1974, note #11, p. 86; Ali A. Hersi, 1977, pp. 50-52;

Muhammad Adul-Fattah al Hindi, Taariikhus-Somal; Edourd Naville, 1894, p. 24-25; and Maspero (New Light on Ancient Egypt, p. 77).

⁴ Edourd Naville, 1894, The Temple of Deir el-Bahri, pp. 24-5; Ali Abdirahman Hersi, 1977, "The Arab factor in Somali History: the Origins and the Development of Arab Enterprise and Cultural Influence in the Somali Peninsula", a Dissertation at University of CA, Los Angeles., p. 51.

⁵ A. Lucas and J.R. Harris, 1989 (London), Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries, p. 434.

⁶ Bob Brier and Hoyt Hobbs, 2009 (New York), p. 157.

⁷ A. Lucas and J.R. Harris, 1989, pp. 90-91.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 92-3.

⁹ Wilfred H. Scoff, 1974, Periplus of Erithraean Sea, note # 8, p. 80.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 26.

¹¹ Geed Quwaax consist of Meydi, Moxor, Dhadin, Hadi, Qaroon, Gabrarro, Muqle, Mirafur, Xamxammaa; and Xagar, Xagar-cad, Xagar-madow, Gunre, Gowlallo, Dhusundhus, iyo Dilindilqo. Geed qodxeed consist of: Cadaad, Jaleefan, Bilcil, Qurac, Qansax, Qaydar, Gumar, Sarmaan, Weesagad, Maraa, galool, Miskiin laa, Warwarrood, Sogsog, Cala kuyaal or Xankookib, Quulle and Jeerin, and again Dhadin.

¹² Wilfred H. Scoff, 1974, Periplus of Erithraean Sea, note # 10, pp. 82-3.

¹³ Ibid. note # 12, p. 86.

¹⁴ Pliny, Natural History, book VI, p. 34.

¹⁵ Wilfred H. Scoff, 1974, Periplus of Erithraean Sea, pp. 25-27.

¹⁶ Umberto Eco, 2013, The Book of Legendary Lands, tr. Alastair McEwem, Rizzoli ex Libris, p. 97.

¹⁷ Wilfred Scoff, 1974, pp. 25, 27.

¹⁸ Ibid. note # 10, p. 83.

¹⁹ Ali A. Hersi. 1977. The Arab Factor in Somali History, p. 70.

²⁰ Nancy Furstinger, Somali Cats, 2006, ABDO Publishing Company, p. 4.