



History of Zayla: A Somali Port Under Theoretical Offence

Part I

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Abstract:

Zaylac or Zayla⁴ is apparently objective of what is recently called “a deal” between the Hargeysa-based ‘Somaliland’ administration of northwestern Somalia and the government of Ethiopia. This is not only because in the Ethiopian government’s rhetorical approach for the issue, a myth of historical maritime right over the regional coast is asserted but also lingering academic speculations suggest that Zaylac’s Islamic influence was minimal before the 13th century, potentially influenced by Abyssinian presence in the 10th-12th centuries. However, this speculation contradicts with the historical records. Although the work for this strange claim is even increasing, it has not been questioned. By comparing historical evidence with contemporary commentary, this article critically examines the nature of this speculation and its apparent political ramifications.

Introduction

As widely accepted the history of Zaylac date back to the first half of the first century CE under the name Avalite or Awalite.¹ It could even exist long before that because of also its ancient Egyptian name, Port of Isis, which was recorded by the Roman geographer, Pliny the elder (d. 79 CE). Avalite is identified with the Zaylac’s ancient Somali name, Awtal > Awdal, which means island or bay.² Some early Muslim scholars such as ibn Hawqal around 950 and al ‘Umari in 1345 also described it as *jazeera* i.e., island or bay.³ Bayso, an ancient Somali tribe round the Lake Abaya, in the south-central Ethiopia, may also retain the name for they call their island on the lake Odolo or Owdolo.⁴

What is, however, interested here is the references to Zaylac in the early Muslim records. Through these records, the article has explored developments of Islamization at Zaylac and the resultant Muslim Somali state of Awdal.¹ Comparatively, it summarizes also the political situation of Abyssinia in the same period. The Medieval Abyssinia is seen as synonym of post-Aksumite, southern Christian entities such as that of the Amhara dynasty from 1270.⁵ Amhara was also responsible for the medieval Somali-Abyssinian contacts. In this article, ‘Abyssinia’ is thus meant mostly for that dynasty. On the other hand, the name ‘Ḥabasha’ is reserved for the entire Horn of Africa as Arabs used for it – with the two terms belong to the same Arabic etymology.

Accounts of early Islamization

The first-recorded Muslim Somali ancestors were rising in Zaylac around 750 or before. According to the lineage of their genealogical and geographical *nisbah* (relation), their descendants split up from that time at Zaylac.⁶ Besides the lineage traditions, the rise of this community, Jabarti Zayla‘i, around that time can be evidenced by the death of one Muḥammad ‘Abdir-Ramaan al-Jabarti from the 9th century as shown by gravestone inscription found in Mu‘alla cemetery of Makka (Mecca).⁷ However, details for their eventual expansion came out from the mid-12th century to 1325. Their presence in places including Zaylac, Sanaag, Nugaal, Awfat, and Bali was recorded for that period.⁸ Recent archaeological investigations also revealed that by the 750 or earlier there were Muslims, apparently from Zaylac, in the pre-Islamic town of Hoobat or Ḥarla, between Harar and Dirirdhabe.⁹ This was also the time in which four Muslim individuals were buried in Maqdisho (Mogadisho) according to their inscribed gravestones.¹⁰

These accounts are interestingly coincided with information provided by al-Mas‘udi who reported that the Muslims conquered the island of Qanbalu (Pemba), north of the Zanzibar island, in 750, or possibly later. The historian stated that Qanbalu was under rule of a Muslim dynasty at the time of his visit in it in 915 where these Muslims were speaking in Zanjiya or Bantu. He added that the gold mines of Sufala (Mozambique) have already been known to the Muslims.¹¹ The creation of the first-known towns in the Lamu archipelago by camel-herding pastoralists in 800 or before,¹² may have been boosted by trading with these earlier Muslim movements across the region.

¹ Awdal and ‘Adal are totally two different names. Apparently, Shawan communities confused the two names one another in the 14th centuries. Zaylac lent its ancient name to the medieval Islamic empire of Awdal. Ad-Dimashqi c. 1320 named Zaylac and its region Awtal. The term is from the root ‘awt, hawt’: an area covered or surrounded by thicket, hills or water. ‘Adal in the SW of Afar is one of the three historical entities of theirs with the other two are Dankala across the coast and Dube‘a in the west. ‘Adal was a part or an ally of Awdal.

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Researchers observed that the ancient people of the northern Swahili were Cushitic or Somali who were later joined by Arabs and Bantu where the pastoralists were mostly the ruling class in the region.¹³ The legacy of this later mix, thus, include the Baajun community, the tradition of Swahili-speaking Segeju, and the linguistic relic of Tunni and Madalle in the Tana-Galana region.¹⁴

It is clear that around these times the Mid-Eastern traders were dealing with peoples of the Horn of Africa. Al-Jaahiz around 865 noted that the Muslim boats were sailing at least the eastern coast of Somalia.¹⁵ Al-Ya'qubi reported around that time that the Arabs were regularly coming into the entire Horn for business.¹⁶ Besides the traditional animal and plant products, slaves, and precious stones, other highly interested items included the gold mines of northern Sudan, and the amber of Somalia, mainly in the eastern coast. The Somali amber, with that of Shihr in the opposite coast of Yemen, was described as the best in the world.¹⁷ References to trade or places of Somalia were thus noted by the other geographers of that time such as ibn Khurdābah,¹⁸ and al-Khwarizmi around 840.¹⁹

Al-Ya'qubi, around 880, was also the first-known geographer who recorded the name Zaylac.²⁰ The new name suggests involvement of Muslims in the city. During the early period of the Islamization, the names of the ancient towns were changed. For example, Berbera port is identified with ancient Malao in the Greco-Romans records. But in the same records, entire Somalia was called Berbera and the Muslims eventually continued to do so. However, ibn Rustah who completed his work in 902 first used the name for the port, followed by ibn Ḥawqal.²¹ Similarly, the name Maqdisho emerged in the mid-1100s while the town was previously known as Xamar and Maduna. Of these pre-Islamic names, only Xaafun survived.

An account in Awdali annals regarding 897-1289 supports presence of Muslims in Zaylac at that time. The document reports that a Muslim principality led by Makhzumi descendants began to rule Shawa by 897. Age-old Makhzumis are also found in Maqdisho and Sanaag. This suggests that the Makhzumis split at Zaylac and eventually Shawan Makhzumis advanced from there as did by the Shawan Jabartis. In 915, al-Mas'udi confirmed that the population of Zaylac included Muslims.²²

In one story, whose geographical details are not in order, captain Ismail-waih and his co-sailors told ibn Shahriyaar around 940 that a coastal town apparently in eastern Somalia accepted the Islam by 920s.²³ This is also the time in which al-Iṣṭakhri noted Muslim presence in Boosaaso-Laasqoray area, where after some years ibn Ḥawqal noted that the area was ruled by a kingdom.²⁴ Further, al-Maqdasi counted Zaylac in 985 as one of the states of his greater Islamic empire.²⁵

Looked at in another way, thanks to research projects recently conducted by two European institutions, limited archaeological works show that the archaeology can corroborate with the records. Besides the case of Ḥarla, other new preliminary findings attest presence of Islam and international trade in Berbera area. During the 11th-12th centuries, honoring feasts for Muslim ancestors were held in a veneration site of eight kms to the east of Berbera.²⁶ Usually, the dates of such veneration is far later than the date of the death of the revered people.

Mistranslation of historical regional names

The history of the Horn of Africa has already been confused by reducing the meaning of the ancient regional name ‘*Aethiopia*’ to that of Abyssinia and the modern-day one, Ethiopia.²⁷ So, by that reduction, Somali trade activities, groups, and places including Zaylac and Berbera were branded as ‘Ethiopian’ in modern records.²⁸ Moreover, contrary to the above-described background of Zaylac, the historical sovereignty of the port has continually been distorted by alteration of the al-Mas‘udi’s account.²⁹ Al-Mas‘udi traveled for the region twice with the last one was 915 where he, from Oman, reached Pemba, but completed his voluminous work in 943. About the Muslims in the Horn, he said: “In the coast of Ḥabasha, which is opposite of Yaman, there are many cities. These cities of Ḥabasha include Zaylac, Dahlak, and Naasi‘ [Massawa‘] in which there are Muslims under the authority of Ḥabasha.”³⁰ Here, one has to ask: which Ḥabasha?

Citing themselves one after another, a group of scholars have been entertaining for decades a view that Ḥabasha means here Aksumite Abyssinia. Some of them added that this translates that there were Christians in Zaylac so the port was under influence of Abyssinia if it was not tributary to it. In fact, none of these places was under authority of Abyssinia as the records will show here unequivocally. Ignored here is two important set of facts. The base of one set is the fact that neither al-Mas‘udi nor any other medieval writer had ever mentioned Christian presence in Zaylac, nor they confined the name ‘Ḥabasha’ to Abyssinia. From the beginning of the 9th century CE to the end of the 15th century, more than forty Muslim geographers brought out information about Somalia. All of them, but few, used the term Ḥabasha for Somalia as well as the other societies in the Horn, and even East and West Africans.³¹

For example, al-Mas‘udi himself used *Ḥabasha* for entire Somalia including the region of Jubba-Galana. In his many statements on the region, he made clear that the furthest southern area of Somalia was part of his Ḥabasha as well as Zanj where he mixed up Somali and Bantu aspects together.³² He apparently collected his information in Pemba for he does not appear that he landed on the Somali coast.

Not only that but he named our Indian Ocean “the Sea of Ḥabasha” and designated “Gulf of Berber” for what we call today Gulf of Aden. His designations are similar to those of ibn Rustah who named Somalia Berbera, Ḥabasha, and Zanj and beyond it, said that the land is not known.³³

The statements of ibn Ḥawqal, who depended on al-İřtakhri for some of his accounts, were also unmistakable. After he mentioned the Christian Abyssinians and other societies in the region, he wrote “And on the coast of their region, there is gravity point named Zaylac, a port for a passage to Ḥijaaz and Yaman.”³⁴ While this statement is doing nothing with Christian Abyssinia, it is translated as Zaylac was in possession of Abyssinia or it served her as a port.³⁵ Ibn Ḥawqal’s additional accounts, however, further disprove the claim.

He went on to explain that the Ḥabasha is a vast land without a known border but including arid terrains which terminates on Zanj. Like other geographers, he frequently showed, even in his map, that this Zanj was the northeastern coast of Somalia and it was opposite of Yaman and Oman. Unlike al-Mas‘udi, he did not know about southern coast of Somalia and beyond. In addition, he used ‘Sea of Persian’ for the water body from the Iran-Iraq coast to that of northern Somalia. Are we then supposed to assume that the eastern deserts of Somalia were controlled by East Africans, and the present-day Arab Sea and Gulf of Aden were conquered by the Iranians at his time? The geographer only tells us that Zaylac was a port of a region in his greater Ḥabasha.³⁶

Similarly, al-İdrisi in 1154, after he mentioned the neighbors of Abyssinians, he listed the towns along the northern coast of Somalia and few interior ones. Within that, he noted: “And the Ḥabasha entirely breed the camels for using them as a source of sustenance and means of transportation. For them, the camels are the greatest treasury they have.” Were the Abyssinians herding camels? Certainly, his Ḥabasha was mainly the lowlands and the northern Shawa which he associated with the lowlands, not with Amhara of whom he did not mention.³⁷ After several decades, ibn Majd al-Mosili, like al-Mas‘udi, took the name further to the south as he noted: “the large city of Maqdisho belongs to Zanj and Ḥabasha”.³⁸

That kind of combination was usual since the names Berbera, Ḥabasha, and Zanj were interchangeably used for Somalia.² Al-Ḥamawī attempted before 1223 to end this confusing and overlapping triple identity on Somalia as he defined Berbera as a nation between Zanj and Ḥabasha. But, while he stated that Zaylac was not part of Ḥabasha, he was not sure the border between Zanj and Berbera, and his Berbera included the Afars.³⁹ However, al-Siraafi in 950s already described Berbera and Ḥabasha as totally two different countries with also employing Zanj for Somalia.⁴⁰ Further, ibn al-Mujaawir who was contemporary with al-Ḥamawī, distinctively recorded the Somalis as Baraabira, the Afars as Danaakila, and other Muslims from the Horn as Ḥabuush. In fact, al-Mujaawir is the only writer who ethnically divided the then Muslim societies in the Horn into the way we group them today. Uniqueness of his details were due to his own observation of these communities as residents of Aden where he found a considerable Somali business community from different regions of their country.⁴¹

These occasional distinctions show that, though the Muslims almost knew the difference between Somalia and the Christian Ḥabasha, they allowed themselves in confusion by indifferently using the name ‘Ḥabasha’ for Somalia. They failed to free their mental picture on the Horn from recalling and generalizing the Ḥabasha of Abraha in the mid-6th century and Nagaash in 610s. As such, they made-up non-existent Ḥabasha empire across the Horn in which the Islam was the only new change. Then, the way that this historical vagueness is interpreted or exploited in the modern “selective representation”⁴² of the historiography on the Horn becomes a mask on the face of the Somali history and other societies in the region.

In another current opinion, it is presupposed that one item in recent archaeological findings can support the idea of Abyssinian political influence. A jug, allegedly from eastern Tigray around the 6th century, has been unearthed in a site 22 km east of Berbera port.⁴³ Then it is hastily suggested that the item lends support to the already distorted statement of al-Mas‘udi on Zaylac. But, again, this jug is not sufficient to materialize the claim. In fact, Cosmas Indicopleustes, a Greek-Egyptian scholar, observed around 525 that the northern Somalis were exporting many products to the Eritrean port of Adula.⁴⁴ The Somalis could then import the jug from Adula. They also could obtain it through the Afars who were using Zaylac as a port and their land connects Zaylac area to Tigray.

² The term Zanj or Zinj was first used for Somalia by Claudius Ptolemy at 150 CE and Cosmas Indicopleustes in 547. The Muslim geographers of the 9th-15th centuries also continually employed the name for Somalia. Al-Mas‘udi’s second name for East Africa was Zanj. The name was more popularized for East Africa by the more knowledge provided by al-Idrisi and the great contribution of the rising southern Somali cities (Maqdisho, Marka and Barawe) to the creation of Swahili civilization and peopling Islamically that region (Hussein, Said, *Soomaaliya Dal iyo Dad: Taariikhdi Hore* (Bosaso: Bosaso Printing, 2009, 116-17). Most probably the term is from a Persian root which means ‘black’. It does not appear that zanj is the same word as azania. The two names were simultaneously used for the same region of Somalia, from Xaafun to Tana-Galana region.

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Moreover, numerous wares from other nations such as Roma, Arabia, Persia, India, Egypt, and China were also found in the same area. Why Abyssinia is then singled out for political influence on the area?

Was there a post-Aksumite viable state in Abyssinia?

The other set of the ignored accounts lies with the history of Abyssinia itself. It is obvious that Aksum made political developments and marked presence at Adula port. But was she always controlling it? Attempting to do more justice in interpretations of the historical course in the region, Yohanness Okbazgh says she was not. As it is well known, Aksum state disintegrated in the 7th century after it was continually plagued by internal and external incursions throughout its history. Only the Christianity, not the state, was survived by separate societies from southern Eritrea to the Last region toward southeast of Aksum.⁴⁵ The coast had been controlled by the Afar-Saho and Buja or Beja with the latter was also controlling western Eritrea.⁴⁶ Even for Aksum's good times, historians observed in its records that its history was continually characterized by "unrest and rebellion among its peoples", "anarchy and separation" where the kings could not feel safe beyond the limits of Aksum city.⁴⁷

If that was the case of king 'Ezana of the 4th century and his successors, it was still the same as 610s. At that time, the Muslim refugees who were hosted and protected by the Aksumite *nagaash*, described how the just king have lost his kingdom to insurgents and was still struggling to defend their attacks from his base. So, as they deeply worried about the future of the host for their own future, they closely followed the developments before they went back to Hijaaz.⁴⁸ It was probably this unrest that led Aksum to the final collapse. Al-Khwarizmi in the mid-830s, and ibn Rustah at the end of that century, both named the capital of Habasha 'Germi'. But after few years al-Ya'qubi and then Mas'udi noted that its capital was called Ka'bar.⁴⁹

If that Habasha was Abyssinia, this suggests that Aksum was not capital anymore and these new places were temporary settlements for one entity or another. How Aksum and its successors could then reconcile between two contradicting experiences: conducting constant destructive raids against its people and neighbors and carrying out effective trade at Adula? It appears that some Semitic-speaking communities were, unlike Aksum, peacefully interacting with their lowland neighbors whose country included Adula. Likewise, the Somalis who were sending their products to Adula were not necessarily dealing with Aksumite hands.

During the tenth century and after, Abyssinia was still in a political disaster and remained obscure until 1270. On the one hand, Aksum's downfall was evidenced and the period has been called the "Dark Ages" of Abyssinia.⁵⁰ On the other hand, that reality is disregarded when the tendency of the Abyssinianization of the Horn is to be exercised.⁵¹

Although Aksum embraced the Christianity from the 4th century, there is no tangible evidence for influencing its neighbors before 1270 with exception of Agaw population in Wallo. With that, Somalia was not even a neighbor. Before or at the time of Masudi's account, Aksum was invaded by a neighboring nation who were probably the Cushitic-speaking people of Agaw.⁵² The king was killed and the country was devastated. Ibn Hawqal noted in 950s that a female leader of the conquerors was ruling Ḥabasha in his time and many years before that.⁵³

Unnamed Egyptian author of the 10th century also reported that one of the regions of Ḥabasha was under control of a woman at least before 970. The story is also found in Coptic Egyptian account recorded in the mid-11th century but refers to the 10th century. The account mentions a letter sent by anonymous Abyssinian king to king George of Christian Nubian for request of help. The Abyssinian king reported that his country, with its churches, was conquered and destroyed by a foreign queen who also massacred its people including the bishops and priests. The report adds that the last six patriarchs of Alexandria did not send pastors to Abyssinia to lead the religion of Abyssinia, according to the tradition.⁵⁴ Here, a term of six patriarchs is a long period which may cover parts of the 9th century. For example, the term of the patriarch Phelotheos who received the Abyssinian letter was 979-1003.⁵⁵ Usually, the patriarchs occupy the office for many years.

The communication between Abyssinia and the Egyptian church for sending pastors were restored at the end of the 11th century and were continued until the beginning of the 13th century according to three Coptic notes regarding that period.⁵⁶ In this era, Abyssinia was ruled by Christianized Agaw government, known as Zagwe dynasty. The emergence of a new régime and the restoration of Coptic-Abyssinian contacts, may be construed as improving political situation. But, in the period of Zagwe dynasty there were still signs for continuation of the enduring unrest as Richard Greenfield reminds us: "Roha ... was the capital and ... have been a walled city – walled against whom? We have little or no idea of the extent of the ruler's authority beyond those walls".⁵⁷

In addition, the Awdali document of the 1290 states that the Amharas invaded in 1128 the land of Warjaḥ or Wargah where the latter defeated the former. This is the first time the name Amhara was recorded.⁵⁸ Abyssinian document for the Awdal-Amhara conflict of 1327-1332, located Warjaḥ as a Muslim Awdali tribe in the northern Shawa,⁵⁹ where they are still found.⁶⁰

The information of Amhara invasion and defeat carry some overlooked significant points: the emerging Amhara nation, who arose from a fusion between Abyssinian and Agaw communities, completed the process of Amharizing the eastern part of the historical Agaw; that Amharized Agawland approximately consisted of what now became the region of Wallo; an attempt of further expansion toward the south brought them to encounter Warjaḥ in the area of the difficult highland

of Manz; in that highland, there was still non-Christianized Agaw community; the Amharas could not pursue any further southward movements after the defeat.

While the document continued to record political incidents in Awdal, its next mentions of Amhara just relates to events that occurred in 1279 and 1283. This was shortly after Amhara dynasty was founded in Wallo in 1270. These interrelated situations, therefore, strongly suggest that the Amhara was not significant in Awdali concerns as long as it could not disturb the neighboring Muslim communities.

Further Islamization and statehood in Zaylac and its region

Comparatively, it is almost obvious that Somalia was in better situation in terms of security, economy, and sociopolitical developments than that of Abyssinia. In the tenth century, the Muslims were still minority in number but that does not mean that they were not part of the power. The fact that the process of the Islamization was moving steadily and peacefully explains that their role was safe and effective. After initial peaceful approach by intermarriage and economic initiatives through trade expansion, the then Muslims advanced their cause through more Islamization of the indigenous population, establishment of Islamic institutions, and promotion of principled nationhood. Somalia was thus one of the regions around the Muslim world in which the Islamization took up the most successful approach and efficient outcome in terms of social cohesion. Despite the fact that the country was receiving diverse Muslim immigrants with different political and religious convictions, this problem was always under control and was finally eliminated.⁶¹ In all accounts, Zaylac was the source and the center of the medieval Somali civilization.

Paradoxically, mis-transliteration of the term Ḥabasha is maintained by a supposition that Zaylac disappeared from the Muslim records in the 11th-12th centuries because it may be remained under Abyssinian control and, thus, it was not tangibly Islamized before the 13th century.⁶² At least one article even went totally against the recorded history of Zaylac and its region.⁶³ However, Zaylac did not disappear as absolute disprove of this opinion is again provided by the records. First, the 11th-12th centuries count the least number of geographers per century during the 9th-15th centuries. The era of Iraq-based many geographers was over. Al-Biruni (d. 1050) and Abdallah al-Bakri al-Andalusi (d. 1094) represent their century. Al-Bakri recorded Zaylac and Berbera.⁶⁴

Two other Andalusians, al-Idrisi (d. 1166) and abu-Ḥaamid al-Qarnaṭi (d. 1169), took that role for their century. While al-Idrisi attests that Zaylac was a commercial hub, al-Qarnaṭi stated that the population of Zaylac was fully Islamized.⁶⁵ Similarly, ibn Samura (d. 1187) was not only the first-known writer who recorded the name Maqdisho but he also listed scholars from the Zaylac region

and Maqdisho who settled in Yemen for advanced Islamic studies.⁶⁶ Archaeologically, Hoobat, as agent of Zaylac, further became important Islamic center and socioeconomically influenced the highlands from the northern Shawa to Hadiya during that century.⁶⁷ We have already mentioned that there was a similar situation in Berbera area from the 11th century. The majority of the Somali population was apparently Muslim as most of the Somali ancestors in that period have Muslim names.

It was the era of the rise of the Awdal empire as the largest and most influential power in the Horn. As Awdal and Awfat cannot be considered as two different entities, Awfat and Waḥal in eastern Shawa successively became temporary capitals of the state from unknown time to 1413. The records regarding from the 13th century onwards, show that the Muslim Shawa was a sovereign state whose ruling house, Walasma‘ Jabarti, originated from Zaylac. Ibn Said particularly described the Awfat city as the royal capital of the state.⁶⁸ But since these rulers relate to the Zayla‘i Muslim community of the 700s and there were Islamic entities in Shawa, Zaylac, and Sanaag in the 900s, the foundations of the state must go back to that period.⁶⁹

In fact, the 12th century was the beginning of an era of unprecedented two-way migration for Somalia. Waves of external Muslims, mostly Yemenis and Iranians, entered the country from that century on. Somali Diaspora also began to appear in Yemen,⁷⁰ Egypt,⁷¹ Syria,⁷² Maghrib,⁷³ Maldives, and India⁷⁴ – as scholars and students for advanced Islamic studies and, in the case of Yemen, as businessmen. There are more than one hundred distinguished scholars from the Somali origin who were recorded in the biographical compendiums of Yemen and Egypt during the 14th-15th centuries. Their *nisbah* shows that they migrated from all the then major centers of the country such as Zaylac and its interior, the lost city of Badda in Nugaal area in the east,³ and Maqdisho. Their original nationality has been disguised by the then internationalized but now less-known *nisbahs* such as Jabarti, Zayaali‘a, Maqaadisha, and Baraabira natively, and Ḥabasha geographically. They greatly contributed to the social developments and judiciary systems of Yemen and Egypt. That is why the works of al-Idrisi (1154), ibn Samura (1170s), al-Ḥamawi (1223), ibn al-Mujaawir (1229), ibn Said (1270s), and al-Janadi (1325) provided some new internal data on Somalia.

³ Of the three ruined towns in Garowe area (Hussein, 2021), I suggested that the best candidate for Badda is Xundhurgaal which occupies an area of one km². While I did not rule out Xananley as a candidate, I proposed that its size is about 500 m². The reason was that I didn’t count some of its structures of which I thought that they are cairns, which are numerous in the area. In a later visit, I observed that they were residential houses, not cairns. So, it also covers one km². This size with its many big buildings, can make it a good candidate for Badda. I also realized that Xananley is 500 meters apart from Xabgaal against my earlier suggestion of 800 meters. The case of Xabgaal is then a riddle: numerous small structures with thick walls and unidentifiable doors. Though it has its own well, Xabgaal may then be a strangely structured cemetery of Xananley, while still it contains recognizable regular tombs.

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Furthermore, the opinion that al-Idrisi may have not recorded Zaylac because his term is ‘Zaalagh’ and that may not mean Zaylac زلع, is also an attempt to boost a pointless argumentation. This is simply understandable, common ascription error. For example, the geographer wrote Zaalagh زالع three times and Zaalac زالع two times, so not only Zaalagh. He has khafuni for Xaafun, and Sihr for Shihr.⁷⁵ Al-mas‘di has Jafuni for Xaafun.⁷⁶ On the same conditions, al‘Umari transcribed Zalj for Zanj, Zafarta for Saḥarta, Seho for Saho, and Aḥsurm for Aksum.⁷⁷ Al-Idrisi has also many geographical errors. He took Pemba for Socotra; and he sometimes placed Maduna (Maqdisho) and Marka near Qarfuna (Guardafui). He must have been writing his huge work hurriedly. In addition, if Zaalagh or Zaalac is not Zaylac, where is Zaylac then? Zaylac, the most important city in the Horn and East Africa before Maqdisho arose from ancient settlement, could not miss an inclusion of Idrisi’s work.

The Regionwide situation of the Islam before 1270

Generally, the Islam in the Horn continued to prosper during those centuries. It can be detected that there had been a trade-facilitated Muslim-Non-Muslim harmonization from Mombasa to Massawa‘ which was partly observed by de Vere Allen.⁷⁸ The situation was only changed after Yakunnu-Amlak founded the Amhara dynasty in 1270, whose crusading leaders eventually pursued an expansion and building an empire which resulted in the bloody Awdal-Amhara conflict that lasted until 1577. For instance, at least from the 9th century to the late medieval centuries, the entire Eritrea with exception of Afarland was mostly controlled by Beja who began to be Islamized from 800s, but mostly from the 900s. Beja, an ancient Cushitic-speaking people from the Egyptian border to Eritrea and from the Red Sea to the Nile, consisted of four loosely federated kingdoms – Naqis (the largest one), Baqlin, Jaarin and Qat‘a – as documented by al-Ya‘qubi. Parts of these tribes inhabited in the northern and western Eritrea from immemorial time. Massawa‘, near Adula, was the capital of Jaarin and Qat‘a, two strong kingdoms, from the 9th century or before.⁷⁹

Considerable Muslim communities had also been flourishing in eastern districts of Tigray including the immediate east of Maqale, the current capital of Tigray, at least from 972 onwards. These communities vanished at the period of the rise of the Amharic dynasty, as investigators recently observed.⁸⁰ The Muslims were similarly numerous in Wallo before the Amhara rise. A letter sent to Egypt by Amhara king, probably Yakunnu-Amlak, the king claimed that the Muslims in his country could form an army of one hundred thousand men.⁸¹ It is not clear whether these Muslims were only those in Wallo or they included those in Tigray but the number shows that they were sizable. However, the same king, whose purpose was to obtain a Coptic bishop from Egypt, was hostile to the same Muslims. One of his succeeding sons wrote to the Egyptian authorities that his father was the enemy of the Muslims while he is not.⁸² Additionally, it is almost certain that the Ḥabuush of al-Mujaawir in Aden were these Muslims in the northern part of the Horn.

The destruction of the Muslims in the Abyssinian controlled area was expressed by Qalqashandi 1411,⁸³ Taghri-birdi 1423,⁸⁴ and Maqrizi 1438.⁸⁵ Qalqashandi particularly noted that the Muslim power remained only in Awdal and the coastal Eritrea. Zara‘ Ya‘qob (1434-1468), one of the most warrior Amhara kings, however, complained that Awdal led Muslim forces from Maqdisho to Massawa‘ against his kingdom.⁸⁶ Within that prevalent situation, trade between Awdal and Amhara was impossible, as it will be shown in the part 2 of this article.

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¹⁰ Hussein, “Ruined Towns in Nugaal,” 261.

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²⁰ al-Ya‘qubi, *Kitaab al-Buldaan*, 319; Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitaab Šuuratul-ard*, 49.

²¹ Aḥmad ibn Rustah, al-A‘laaq an-Nafiisah, ed.: De Geoeje ((Leiden: Brill, 1892), 88.

²² Al-Mas‘udi, *Muruuj*, vol.1: 93-94, vol. 2: 339, 340.

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²⁴ Hussein, *Ruined Towns*, 262-63.

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³⁰ al-Mas‘udi, *Muruuj*, vol. 1: 340.

³¹ See, example, for W. Africa: ibn Khurdābeh, *Masaalik*, 230-31; and for E. Africa: al-Mas‘udi, *Muruuj*, v. 2: 330.

³² al-Mas‘udi, *Muruuj*, vol. 1: 70-95, vol. 2: 329-340.

³³ Ibn Rustah, al-A‘laaq an-Nafiisah, 83-88.

³⁴ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitaab Šuuratul-ard*, 61.

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