

Call for a new perspective

Despite over 6,000 extant Sabaeen inscriptions documented on the southern Arabian peninsula (Breton 1999), there are no epigraphic data from South Arabian sites that mention, even in the most cursory manner, the existence of colonies or vassal polities in the northern Horn of Africa during the first millennium BC. Pre-Aksumite inscriptions from the northern Horn of Africa provide limited detail of sociopolitical formations and record only fragmentary references to personal names and places. Lengthy textual description of any sort is absent. The inscriptions mention royal titles similar to those found in ancient South Arabia, list the names of probable deities closely similar to some in ancient South Arabian pantheon, record possible clan or lineage names and provide possible names of ceremonial objects such as incense burners. Some inscriptions make reference to the polity of D`mt (Daamat).¹⁷ The inscriptions from sites such as Addi Galamo (Caquot & Drewes 1955) and Enda [PAGE OF IMAGES] Chergos (Schneider 1961) mentioning Daamat and pre-Aksumite rulers include the South Arabian royal/religious titles of MKRB (mukarrib) and MLK (malik) and make reference to connections with the Sabaeen polity, as evident in the phrase 'MKRB of Daamat and Saba' (See Contenson 1981: 353-354).¹⁸ While these inscriptions have been used to support the South Arabian colonist migration model for the origins of pre-Aksumite complex society, it is necessary to consider a couple of questions. Why must pre-Aksumite use of the terms MKRB and MLK in describing Daamat's leaders and the linking of Daamat with Saba' necessarily imply a South Arabian mode of authority? Do such general terms, used within relatively unspecific contexts, provide definitive South Arabian signatures of identity on the pre-Aksumite landscape? Similar challenging questions have been posited indirectly before in a critique of the South Arabian colonist migration model (Isaac & Felder 1988), but no compelling alternative suggestion for an explanatory framework has been offered.

The author contends that we should consider whether the use of such terms might suggest the appropriation, manipulation, and elaboration of South Arabian symbols of authority by the pre-Aksumite elite to legitimate rule by stressing their relationship to the wider cultural and economic network of the southern Red Sea. The deliberate use of the term MKRB, and the reference to Daamat in conjunction with Saba' in the phrase 'MKRB of Daamat and Saba' is, perhaps, not unlike that employed by other Red Sea polities, such as the South Arabian kingdom of Himyar. As Jean-Francois Breton has pointed out (Breton 1999: 178), the Himyarites, although removed both spatially and temporally from the Sabaeen state, appropriated Sabaeen titles for purposes of prestige and legitimisation. Pre-Aksumite use of South Arabian

royal/religious titles need not necessarily suggest that pre-Aksumite leaders viewed Saba' as a patron state or political and cultural model. Rather, South Arabian titles may have been appropriated because their use served to further differentiate a leader from subjects and rival elites through connection to the exotic and to a perceived wider economic prosperity. The use of foreign-inspired titles may have served to reinforce claims to esoteric knowledge of distant peoples, landscapes, technologies and sources of wealth.¹⁹ The use of the written Sabaean language by Himyarite political and religious leaders and by other peoples of the southern Arabian peninsula suggests a widespread recognition of the prestige associated with ancient Sabaean script. Alfred Beeston, for example, has stressed that Himyarites may have used Sabaean (Sabaic), 'as a prestige language for inscriptional purposes, in somewhat the same way that the Nabataeans and Palmyrenes used Aramaic for their inscriptions, though they probably spoke Arabic themselves' (Beeston 1988: 100). Beeston's basic point is important and generally applicable to the context of the northern Horn of Africa in the first millennium BC. We need not assume that pre-Aksumite communities used a South Arabian language as the daily vernacular. Indeed, pre-Aksumite inscriptions are used in very limited and formalised ways and are largely restricted to elite political titles and religious terms. There is a general absence of epigraphic information concerning administrative function, trade, accounting or other more mundane, but essential, aspects of pre-Aksumite society. Writing in South Arabian-like script should not imply ipso facto wide-scale pre-Aksumite adoption of a South Arabian language, nor should it necessarily imply the existence of Sabaean migrations, colonisation and/or direct acculturation.

As with the focus on a small number of fragmentary inscriptions, much attention has been paid to similarities in monumental architecture between South Arabian and pre-Aksumite ceremonial centres. In particular, the temple and large Grat Be`al Gebri structure at the pre-Aksumite site of Yeha, in Tigray, has been compared to South Arabian forms.²⁰ The Yeha temple is a rectangular structure whose existing remains measure 18.5 by 15 m in area and more than 11 m in height. The building is constructed of ashlar masonry of large rectangular sandstone blocks fitted without mortar. The outer faces and corners of the structure's walls are finely dressed. The walls sit on a seven-stepped podium base. A carved frieze of ibexes that is now incorporated into a more recent adjacent building was likely an element of the ancient temple. Denticulate plaques and South Arabian inscriptions found at the site may have also once decorated the walls. The monumental Grat Be`al Gebri structure at Yeha possesses a number of large monolithic pillars of massive square-sectioned form. This structure seems directly associated with the temple, but its function is

unclear. Although the overall plan of the temple structure is distinct in important ways from South Arabian examples, the temple's stepped base, ashlar masonry and rectangular form are similar to temple structures in YEmen. In particular, Yeha's monolithic pillars resemble those of monumental temple known as the Awwam temple near Marib. Similar pillars have been documented at the pre-Aksumite sites of Kaskase (Dainelli & Marinelli 1912) and Hawlti Melazo (de Contenson 1963), suggesting that Yeha's monumental architectural forms are not unique in the northern Horn of Africa.

Here's a short excerpt from "The Tihamah Coastal Plain of South-West Arabia in its Regional context c. 6000 BC - AD 600" by Nadia Durrani (Society for Arabian Studies Monographs No. 4), p.116-7.

^^^Same series of publications and the first

I used [brackets] around my comments, and left out italics and superscript for simplicit. The excerpt is regarding pre-Aksumite inscriptions:

Quote

Over 200 epigraphic texts, dated to the pre-Aksumite period, are distributed throughout the known pre-Aksumite sites (Bernand et al. 1991a). Most of the pre-Aksumite inscriptions consist of a few words or letters and only a handful of the monumental inscriptions exceed more than two or three lines in length. Inscriptions occur on monuments, ashlar blocks, rock surfaces, pottery, metal plaques, statues, and votive altars. Potsherds inscribed with ESA letters are poorly represented in pre-Aksumite contexts and are only known from Matara (Bernand et al. 1991).

The pre-Aksumite epigraphic corpus has been divided into two groups, labelled Group I and Group II (Drewes 1962). The former consists of 15 monumental inscriptions, written in pure Sabaic (Anfray 1990), albeit with a few unique elements of vocabulary (Irvine 1978). About 200 Group II inscriptions have been published, of which about 45 are monumental inscriptions, and about 150 are represented by rock-graffiti (Bernand et al. 1991a; 1991b). Some of the latter are drafted in a form of 'monumental cursive', while others are in an unclear 'derivative' script that seems to be related to this cursive script (Drewes 1962). Group II inscriptions are written in a language that contains major innovative features in grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and onomastics (Irvine 1971, 1978). Despite the linguistic differences,

epigraphers have argued that the Group II monumental texts are related to Sabaic, while the poorly understood (Schneider 1978) 'derivative' Group II cursive texts are also thought to owe their origin to Sabaic (Irvine 1978). [An odd conclusion, IMO, since Ge'ez is definitely not descended from Old South Arabian, and Anfray connected the "peculiarities" of Group II with Ge'ez]

Group I inscriptions are only known from Yeha, Matara, Gobochele and Enda Chergos (Irvine 1978). They comprise family names, place names and names of deities (de Contenson 1980). The deities mentioned in the Group I inscriptions - i.e. Athtar, Almaqah, Hawbas, Dhat Himyam and Dhat Badan - belong to the South Arabian pantheon (de Contenson 1981). The family names mentioned in Group I inscriptions are Semitic and some of the named individuals are argued to have originated in the Sabaeen area (Schneider 1976). For example, the authors of two texts from Matara claim to come from Marib and Hadaqan (24km north of Sana'a) (de Contenson 1980; Robin 1995), while two inscriptions from Yeha and Melazo record that the stone-masons originate from Marib (Muller 1990).

A few Sabaeen names, together with possible non-Semitic names (e.g. wdgly, ssrwm) (Irvine 1978), occur in Group II inscriptions. Deities belonging to the South West Arabian pantheon plus otherwise unknown - possibly local - deities appear in Group II texts. Such 'local' deities include Yf'm (Littmann 1913), Sdgn and Nsbthw (Drewes and Schneider 1970). All 13 royal pre-Aksumite inscriptions are written in monumental ESA, in the language characteristic of Group II inscriptions (Schneider 1976). They record kings with names and titulature unknown from Saba (Schneider 1978, 51; Bernand et al. 1991a). The royal inscriptions are drafted in the palaeographic styles A and B; most are in Type B, and five have been specifically defined as Type B1 (Bernand et al. 1991).⁹ [Type A is the oldest style of ESA]

The content of the royal inscriptions has been used to reconstruct the pre-Aksumite political organisation (de Contenson, 1981), as discussed in Section 6.8.3. In brief, they refer to the d'mt kingdom (transliterated as D'iamat), and indicate that the local monarch was 'king of D'iamat'. Three inscriptions expressly identify him as the 'maitre des Sabaeans' (Schneider 1976). The D'iamat kingdom is only attested in the Group II pre-Aksumite inscriptions, and is unknown from the ESA corpus from South West Arabia (Irvine 1978) or from the Ethiopian inscriptions dated to the Aksumite period (Bernand et al. 1991a). Of the four pre-Aksumite rulers known to date, the earliest was W'rn Hywt, who only bore the title mlkn (king). He was succeeded by three leaders Rd'm, Rbh and Lmm, who use the paramount South

West Arabian title, mukarrib (Schneider 1976c). This may have been a hereditary monarchy since the fourth dynasty (Lmm) is referred to as the son of Rbh. The last two leaders both bore the title "King Sr'n of the tribe of Yg'd [Ag'azi] mukarrib of D'iamat and of Saba' (Schneider 1973; de Contenson 1981). An inscription asserts that mukarrib Rbh descended from a Sabaeen tribe (de Contenson 1981). The sovereign Lmm is also mentioned with Sumu'alay, which was a dynastic name of the Sabaeen mukarribite (Schneider 1965a; Von Wissmann 1976; de Contenson 1981; Kitchen 1994; Robin 1995).

FATTOVICH, Prof. Rodolfo

The Pre-Aksumite Period in Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea Reconsidered

The culture history of Tigray (northern Ethiopia) and Eritrea during the 1st millennium BC was characterized by a strong South Arabian (mainly Sabaeen) influence, due to intense contacts between the opposite shores of the southern Red Sea. The result was the emergence of an early state modeled on the Sabaeen one in the region. In this paper some new considerations about the dynamics of these contacts, the origins and development of the >Ethio-Sabaeen= state, and the relationship of this state with the later Kingdom of Aksum (late 1st millennium BC-1st millennium AD) will be presented in the light of recent fieldwork in Yemen, Eritrea and Tigray.

At present, we can distinguish three phases of development of these contacts: 1) progressive inclusion of the Eritrea plateau in the South Arabian area of influence in the late 3rd-early 1st millennia BC; 2) rise of a pre-Aksumite state in Eritrea, and progressive inclusion of Tigray into this state in the mid-1st millennium BC; 3) collapse of the pre-Aksumite state and rise of the Kingdom of Aksum in Tigray in the late 1st millennium BC.

The emergence of the Afro-Arabian interchange circuit (2nd-early 1st millennia BC)

The northern Horn of Africa was included into a network of exchanges and contacts with Southern Arabia since the 3rd millennium BC. Potsherds similar to Bronze Age ones in South Arabia occur in assemblages of the Gash Group (ca 2700-

1400 BC) in the Gash Delta (Kassala). In the mid-2nd millennium BC, a new pattern of interregional contacts and exchanges emerged along the coastal regions of the southern Red Sea, in Eritrea and Arabia (Tihama Cultural Complex). The main sites of this complex (Adulis in the Eritrean Sahel, Sihi in the Saudi Tihama, Wadi Urq= in the Yemeni Tihama, and Subr near Aden) share enough pottery features to be considered regional variants of one cultural complex. In the late 2nd-early 1st millennia BC the eastern plateau in central Eritrea was included in the area of influence of the Tihama complex, as some ceramics from the lower strata at Matara (Akkele Guzay) and Yeha (Tigray) are comparable to those from Subr. The range of contacts of the Ona Group A (late 2nd-early 1st millennia BC) in the Hamasien plateau (Eritrea) cannot be established on the available evidence. Similarities in pottery style may point to contacts with Nubia, eastern Sudan, and perhaps southern Arabia.

The >Ethio-Sabaeen State= (ca. 700-400 BC)

Rock inscriptions at the edge of the plateau in Qohaito suggest that South Arabs (maybe traders) penetrated into the plateau beginning in the 9th century BC. The dynamics of this penetration are still unclear. Most likely, individuals or small groups settled on the plateau and mixed with the local people, originating an Afro-Arabian elite in conformity with the later Swahili model in East Africa. The Ona people of Hamasien and northern Akkele Guzay may have had a relevant role in this process as the Ona pottery formed a consistent component of the pre-Aksumite ceramics. In the 7th century BC the Afro-Arabian complex society (-ties) in Eritrea were included in the area of influence of the Sabaeen state, and a new state arose on the plateau.

Sabaeen cultural features were adopted by the local elite in conformity with the same model of cultural contact we can observe in the Nubian Kingdom of Kush. The present evidence points to an expansion of the so-called >Ethio-Sabaeen= state along a straight and narrow transect from Qohaito in Eritrea to the Takkazze river in Tigray, and this expansion was probably marked by the foundation of ceremonial centers such as Kaskase and Yeha

The collapse of the >Ethio-Sabaeen= state and the rise of Aksum

Archaeological and epigraphic evidence suggest that the >Ethio-Sabaeen= state collapsed in Tigray in the 4th-3rd centuries BC, although most likely an Afro-

Arabian urban (state?) society survived in the Akkele Guzzay. At this time, a new polity emerged at Aksum in central Tigray (Proto-Aksumite Period). The Proto-Aksumite polity distinguished itself from the former Ethio-Sabaeen one, focusing ideologically on platforms with stele and pit-graves for the funerary cult of the elite rather than on monumental cult temples of the gods. The remains of a monumental building, constructed in a technique reminiscent of Ethio-Sabaeen architecture at Ona Nagast may suggest that some symbols of the earlier state were maintained in Proto-Aksumite times. At present, the Proto-Aksumite culture can be ascribed to an indigenous tradition of Tigray, maybe related to the cultural traditions of the western lowlands. Actually, the style and symbolism of the funerary stelae suggest a possible link with the late prehistoric cultures in the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands. Finally, in the early 1st millennium BC the Aksumite kingdom progressively expanded to the east and included Eritrea and Yemen into the area of political control of Aksum.

Further reading

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Quote

KEALL, Dr. Edward J.

Contact across the Red Sea (between Arabia and Africa) in the 2nd millennium BC: circumstantial evidence from the archaeological site of al-Midamman, Tihama coast of Yemen, and Dahlak Kabir Island, Eritrea

Based on excavations along the Red Sea coast of Yemen, this paper explores the possibility that people had the ability to cross the sea in the 3rd - 2nd millennia BC. It is inconceivable that fishermen living along the Red Sea coast did not know about the seasonality of the winds. Whether others had both the will and the skill to make journeys into deep waters, is an entirely different matter. While the material record for al-Midamman is unique, circumstantial evidence points to connections between Yemen and the Horn of Africa. It is hypothesised that this **did not involve the mass movement of people, with their cultural baggage complete**. But it is suggested that **people on both sides of the Red Sea may have had a common ancestry, and their cultural expressions emerge from that common background.**

The earliest cultural record from al-Midamman is an ephemeral presence defined by the surface recovery of stone projectile points and scrapers belonging to a Neolithic culture, say, from before 4000 BC. The first substantial and monumental phase of the site starts in the 3rd millennium BC. It involved the setting up of **giant stone markers**. Certain slender pillars were once set up with infants buried beneath them, yet without grave goods; an isolated stone marked the grave of an adult male. Hypothetically, these burials pre-date the setting up of giant stones, an act dated roughly to 2400-1800 BC by the cache of copper-alloy tools and a core of obsidian found buried beneath one of the megaliths.

All of the stone used had to be imported from at least 50 km away. A later phase of the activity involved recycling the stone. Yet there is no evidence that this was a destructive act. Rather, it appears to suggest reverence for the past. The most impressive use of the stone was to create monumental buildings. Two rectilinear structures were built with foundations and walls of stone, and partition walls of mudbrick. A third stone building is likely slightly more recent in date, and may be an open-air shrine enclosure. Shallowly carved decorations date earlier than the 8th century BC.

Re-used stone was also employed in a cemetery. The pottery grave goods

consist of whole vessels, of a kind known from the domestic settlement. This ephemeral settlement has furnished a rich record of pottery, obsidian, grind stones, and masses of fish bone. A commonality of artifact in all of the settings is, in fact, the most remarkable of the recent discoveries. Grind stones, for instance, were found in the context of the megaliths as well as in the domestic settlement, and set deliberately onto burnt stone, perhaps as field markers. Gold beads have been recovered from both the stone enclosure and the site of the standing stones.

The idea of different phases of the occupation has always been present in the eyes of the excavators. The idea of newcomers supplanting the old ways has always been a possibility. **The most recent work has demonstrated this to be untenable.** Finding only the same kind of pottery in both the domestic, the funerary and commemorative areas implies that the same people were involved throughout the site's life. Yet clearly their cultural habits did evolve.

Despite the fact that the inhabitants appear to have been obsessed with stone, there are no inscriptions carved in stone; no sacrificial offering trays of stone; no stone incense burners; no three dimensional sculptures of either animals or humans, in stone. All of these would be appropriate for a culture linked to Sabaeen realm in its broad sense. But there are no statue-menhirs either, which would have made a plausible link to the people Zarins sees as reflecting a Bronze Age elite on the plateau.

From al-Midamman there is one bull's head in relief from a pottery vessel; two human figurines in pottery; incense burners of pottery; and an example of alphabetic letters scratched into a pottery vessel. But pottery items are very rare within the corpus of finds, representing four out of 4000 recorded (and diagnostic) fragments. As for the pottery itself, it is far superior to anything from classic South Arabia. Though hand-built, it is well produced from good quality clay. It is often burnished and decorated with punctate designs that call to mind Fattovich's Afro-Arabian cultural complex theories regarding the punctate incised pottery from Kassala in the Gash delta of southeastern Sudan. And upper Nile-area specialists will no doubt think of so-called wavy-line punctate pottery associated with the C-Group people. Yet, the one striking absence, which cannot be overlooked, is that Kassala does not have the same kind of obsidian record as al-Midamman where there is a clearly definable assemblage of obsidian microliths. It arrives **fully developed**

as a lithic tradition, and it does not evolve out of the Arabian bi-facial tradition. Numerous *antecedents* can be found in East Africa. Our expedition has also observed obsidian of exactly the same technological tradition on the island of Dahlak Kabir, offshore from the Eritrean mainland. Other circumstantial evidence also points to possible links between the island and the coast of Yemen. In the Islamic cemetery of the 11th and 12th centuries, one tombstone is carved from a pillar of basalt that is foreign to the island and is likely recovered from a Bronze Age context.

I hasten to argue that we may not find a single, common template into which all of these cultures fit. We are not looking at a systematic expansion, with a socially cohesive, even politically based, organization. So different expressions may have been adopted by different groups, as they came into contact with others. At least four obstacles need to be removed before the Afro-Arabian connection becomes plausible. Our best analogy for the copper-alloy tools is drawn from Syria. I would counter here by saying that our knowledge of the copper-bronze industry from both Yemen and the Horn of Africa is so poor that the absence of parallels for our tools may not be significant.

The second problem is that we find obsidian with the same technology as from al-Midamman, both in the Wadi al-Jubah, in the interior of Yemen, and in the Hadramawt, and on Dahlak Kabir island. But in the last example we have found no related pottery. From Sabir, al-Hamid, and al-Kashawba there is generically similar pottery but no obsidian. Perhaps we may explain this as a difference of time. At al-Midamman there seem to have been both obsidian and pottery in use at all times.

Another difficulty is that we have scratched stone decorations that can be paralleled in the Jawf. Conveniently, Audouin has suggested that these carvings in the Jawf could easily be dated to the late 2nd millennium BC rather than the early 1st millennium BC as previously suggested. What is the connection between our two areas? None, if we look at political realities.

My current hypothesis is that during the late 3rd millennium BC, in response to a drying climate, people were on the move. Some settled on Dahlak island. The people who settled in al-Midamman **crossed the Red Sea and settled in the Tihama** where they found a window of opportunity for life as result of the **massive flooding that was emanating from the highlands**, from a landscape out of control. When checks and balances were

put in place in the highlands, as part of the landscape stabilisation for which Yemen became synonymous, the people at the coast were forced to move on. Groups may have found their way into the Jawf, and the Hadramawt. They retained some of their specific lithic technology, but generally otherwise became integrated with the rest of the South Arabian populations.

Further reading

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Regarding the "Queen" of Sheba in particular, Rodolfo Fattovich notes in "The 'pre-Aksumite' state in northern Ethiopia and Eritrea reconsidered," p.73 (short version of article above)

Quote

The earliest monumental inscriptions record queens who were accorded very high status, and who were possibly equal to kings. Queens do not seem to have played such an important role in South Arabia, but high status queens are numerous in the ancient and traditional kingdoms of sub-Saharan Africa, such as in the Nubian kingdom of Kush.²²