

The Barbari-Habeshi crewmen and merchants – Uncovering an African maritime tradition in the Indian Ocean World

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ABSTRACT

Ancient Axum was a maritime trading empire based in present day Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea in the Horn of Africa from 400BCE to around 940CE and for a while the empire even extended across the Red Sea to Yemen.

Historians have tended to neglect the story of free African movement across the Indian Ocean. However, a multidisciplinary approach to the evidence of Africans in Asia, demonstrates that the following the arrival of Islam in the Horn of Africa in the 8th century the legacy of Axumite maritime trading was passed successively to the states of Shoa, Ifat and Adal. This maritime tradition gave rise to Muslim African communities known as Habeshis or Habshis in the Indo-Pacific region from the Red Sea to the Straits of Malacca and possibly beyond into the South China Sea.

Through images and archives this paper traces the growing presence of Habeshi communities in the Indo-Pacific world from the 8th to the 17th centuries and demonstrates how they were part of the mechanism that turned the Indian Ocean into an “Islamic lake” before the arrival of the Europeans and how these Habeshi’s adapted to the European naval presence and ventured further into the Asia-Pacific region. The paper suggests that the Habeshi were also responsible for the spread of live poritis coral exploitation from their homelands to the East African littoral and across the Indian Ocean. The last point is still being researched in Southeast Asia.

Key words: Axum, Habeshi, Habshi, migration

INTRODUCTION

By way of a background this paper briefly revisits the history of the ancient African state of Axum, connecting the state geographically with recent marine and terrestrial archaeological finds across the Indian Ocean World (IOW) including the Red Sea. The paper proceeds chronologically and geographically to evidence the people known with the IOW as *Habeshi/Habshi* and *Barbari* and finally as Abyssinians before discussing the findings in the conclusion.

THE AXUMITES

Greek geography in the form of the Periplus of the Erythræan Sea of the 1st century CE dictates that “Ethiopia” or the “land of the Blacks” was to the south of Egypt. The highland Empire of Axum was mainly in present-day Eritrea and the North of Ethiopia. The Red Sea port of Adulis (Zula) in the Kingdom of D’m̄t (or Damot) served as the main port for the Axumites. At its might between the 3rd and 7th centuries CE the Axumite Empire included much of the Horn of Africa and coastal Yemen. Across the Arabian Sea, 4th century Axumite coins were found at Mangalore (Karnataka) in India and the Axumites appear to have traded at Mātota (Sri Lanka) during the fifth century CE (De Silva Jayasuriya, 2008a). Archaeological 5th and 6th century finds of Ayla-Axum Amphorae connect Aqaba (Jordan) and Zafar (Yemen) to Axum. These amphorae have also been found at the Black Assarca wreck site between the Dahlak Islands and other Red Sea sites. These amphorae which were

for the export of wine from the Eastern Mediterranean and their underwater occurrence connects them to terrestrial sites at Zula and Matara in Eritrea, outlining the route to the Axumite capital at Aksum just across the border in Ethiopia. Pederson has noted that the Assarca Islands closely fit the descriptions made in the made in the 1st century C.E. Periplus of the Erythraean Sea of the sandy islands called Alalaei (Pedersen, 2008).

THE HABESHI

The coastal people in present-day Eritrea appropriated the term *Habashat* from the highland peoples of Aksum. The Arabs initially called these people *Al-ahbash* derived from the Ge'ez *Habaśā*. This term was rendered as *Habash/Habesha* in Arabic and is also the root of the English exonym Abyssinia (Smidt, 2001).

According to Islamic tradition the prophet Mohammed was born in 569/570CE when the Hejaz was invaded by an army from Yemen which included an elephant. Yemen was a vessel of Axum at the time. During his lifetime the prophet and his followers sought refuge across the Red Sea within the Christian Axumite empire. Consequentially Islam recognised the Axumites as “People of the Book” subject to their own special laws under sharia law as protected persons when living in Islamic lands.

The rise of the Arab Caliphate by 640CE to cover the entire Arabian Peninsula and Egypt led to Arab control of the Maritime Trade Route. The Christian Kingdoms on the Nile and Abyssinia were now on the borders of the expanding caliphate. There are two early mosques in Africa, one is the Mosque of Amr ibn al-as at Fustat (Egypt). The second and possibly older mosque is that at Zeila (Somalia). This Mosque of the two Mihrabs or *Masjid Al Qiblatayn* (or *Labo-Qibla* Mosque) is unique as one of its Mihrabs faces Mecca (north) in the form of all subsequent mosques in the world, while the other faces Jerusalem (northwest). The mosque was constructed of coral rag or *poritis* in a red-earth (or mud) mortar with an indication of a white lime coating. There is also a mausoleum to a Sheikh Ibrahim who is traditionally considered the founder of the city. Other ruins are found on nearby Saad Din Island and these are also made of coral rag (Fauvelle-Aymar et al., 2011). Coral is exploited from two sources as a building material. The first is live hard coral, usually of the genus *poritis* found on shallow reefs that is wrenched from the reef and carved within days, then left to harden in the sun. The second source is fossilised coral quarried on land and used as a building stone. Lime is made by calcining coral through firing, and this was often used as a mortar and to “paint” buildings giving them a gleaming white surface (Killick, 2009). Old coral may be wrenched from the sea and broken-up as aggregate for the production of lime. The effects of this form of mining includes loss of reef protection and general reef destruction that may take several decades to recover. The production of lime also requires firewood, often in the form of mangrove and coconut wood, which also leads to ecological degradation (Dulvi et al, 1995).

THE BARBARI

The 1st century C.E. Periplus of the Erythraean Sea mentions four ports further South of Adulis; Avalites, Malao, Mundus and Mosylon. The earliest mention of *Barbaria* (or *Barberoi*) is in the Greek work by Cosmas Indicopleustas written between 547 and 549CE. This *Barbaria* is associated with frankincense and cassia (De Vere Allen, 1993). At this period the area known as *Barbaria* included the coast of Djibouti and Somalia (or Somaliland).

As Axum went into a slow decline, the Dahlak Islands became a centre of piracy. In 702-3CE “*Habeshi* pirates” attacked Jeddah. The Arabs sent a retaliatory naval force that took the islands and the islands eventually became an independent sultanate (Insoll, 2001). Coincidentally Islam arrived in the late seventh to eight centuries at the Kingdom of Adal with its capital at Zeila and expanded along the Somali coast. The first Chinese mention of *Bo-ba-li* (i.e., Barbari) also occurs around this time when the Chinese soldier Du Huan, captured by the Arabs in Central Asia returned to China by ship from a port called *Mua-lin* in Northeast Africa in 761CE (Smidt, 2001). This place on the African coast had a population of Christians, Muslims and another local religion (de Vere Allen, 1993). Further afield the first wooden mosque was constructed at Shanga in Kenya (De Vere Allen, 1993) and evidence of Islam in the South China Sea is testified by the find of a carved coral (*poritis*) stele at Tengqiao, Hainan Island dated around the 8th century.¹ In 878CE Chinese rebels sacked the city of Guangzhou and massacred the foreign community ending the direct trading link between the Red Sea and South China Sea. Instead, Arab, Persian and Indian vessels exchanged their goods in Southeast Asia (Facey and Rice, 1979). At around the same time the pastoral Oobja (or Beja) expanded from the Eastern Desert to occupy present day Eritrea. The traders probably moved to off-shore islands and ports further south such as Zeila which became important for the Abyssinians.

Of particular interest in the tenth century is the Sultanate of Dahlak and the settlement of Dahlak Khebir which was at the cultural intersection of Africa and Southwest Asia, but also on an important trade route between Europe and South Asia. At Fustat on the banks of the Nile Chinese ceramics are most common from the tenth century and are also found at a number of Red Sea sites including two possible *qingbai* pieces observed at Dahlak Kebir (Insoll, 2001). *Qingbai* of this period have also been found at Sharma in Yemen (Rougeulle, 2015). The Kingdom of Adal (or Awdal) with its capital at Zeila was of growing importance and Egyptian coins have been found inland at Borama (Clifford, 1936). The recently excavated inland site of Harlaa in Ethiopia has been dated from the mid-sixth to the fifteenth centuries. While most structures are built from locally sourced limestone, the mihrab of the mosque was constructed of travertine. The choice of material and the architectural similarity with the Mosque of the Two Mihrabs on Dahlak Kabir has been noted by the excavation team. Shell bangles produced at Harlaa were found to be manufactured similarly to those recorded from the sixth to twelfth centuries at Mantai in Sri Lanka (Insoll *et al*, 2021). In East Africa Islamic influences led to the subsequent rise of the Swahili culture and city states and in this period we see a change in material use at East Africa, from *poritis* in mud mortar (i.e., coral rag) to numerous coral structures with elaboratively carved *poritis* (De Vere Allen, 1993). The excavated mosque at Shanga on Manda Island was reconstructed in coral rag around the 10th-11th Centuries (Sutton, 1990). A large pillar tomb at Gedi, has an Arabic inscription corresponding to 1339 C.E. The tomb, like the other three large ones, and the numerous houses and mosques were constructed of Coral rag, with lime plaster. In this site the coral rag is from a local terrestrial source (Kirkman, 1975)

Somali oral tradition states that a man called Yusuf bin Ahmed Al Kawneyn and known honorifically as Sheikh Abu Barakat Al Barbari was born in Zeila in the Kingdom of Adal. This sheikh is attributed to have converted the first Somali clans to Islam, suggesting that the inhabitants of Zeila had some sort of “client relationship” with the Somali of the ancient Dir clan. There are shrines to him at Aw Barkhadle near Hergeisa and at Qoranyale near Borama in Northwest Somalia near the Ethiopian border. This same sheikh is claimed in Maldivian folklore to have converted the

¹ Observed at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum 2018. Collection of Guangdong Museum.

Maldivians to Islam in 1153AD (Forbes and Ali, 1980). There is a shrine to the same sheikh at Beruwala in Sri Lanka and the Muslim families of Beruwala in Sri Lanka claim kinship with Muslim communities at Mannar in Northern Sri Lanka. At least one Sri Lankan historian has suggested that the name Mannar may originate in the Arabic *manarah*, meaning tower, minaret or lighthouse. The area is marked by African baobab trees (*Adansonia Digitata*) (Hussein, 2013).

At some point in the same period a preacher called Shaikh Najib travelled through the Maldivian islands converting more people to Islam. He died at Kurendhoo Island (Fadiffolu Atoll) and was known as the *Habshigefanu* or “Worthy Abyssinian” (Forbes and Ali, 1980). For the first time we have two terms *Barbari* and *Habshi* occurring in the Maldives. Both are associated with the arrival of Africans who converted Maldivians at around the same time that the port city of Mogadishu was founded (Insoll, 2003). The term *Babaru* remains as exonym for Africans in the Maldives (De Silva Jayasuriya 2008b).

Zhau Rugua the Superintendent of Customs at Quanzhou in Fujian Province in his 1225CE work on the Chinese and Arab trade entitled *Zhu-fan-zhi* (or Description of Barbarous People) mentions a place called *Pi-p'a-lo* which is said to “contain four cities”. The description suggests that his place is somewhere in Northeast Africa (Hirth and Rockhill, 1911). Rugua explained that Arabs transported Arabian frankincense by sea to a place called San-fo-ts'i, possibly on the Northeast coast of Sumatra (Facey and Rice, 1979).

The Venetian traveller Marco Polo never visited Africa, but after his Asian travels between 1271 and 1295CE he wrote a very detailed account of the Abyssinian Kingdom, mentioning its Jewish, Christian and Muslim population with facial markings (known in Amharic as *nikisat*). Polo also mentions a battle at Aden between the Abyssinians and the Arabs, and that the Abyssinians imported elephants from India (Waugh and Bellonci, 1984).

Battuta visited the Horn of Africa around 1332CE and identified the chief city of the Barbara people as Zeila. In this period the Arab geographers distinguish the people of Barbara (or *Barbari*) as separate to the *Habeshi* or Abyssinians. These *Barbari* of Battuta were Sunni Muslims of the *Shafi'i* school of Sunni Islam who occupied the coast of the Horn of Africa from Zeila. The *Barbari* appear to have formed the ruling class of the port of Mogadishu (Gibb, 1962). Battuta visited the Maldives in 1343CE (Gibb and Beckingham, 1994). Battuta noted that Maldivians anoint themselves with musk from Mogadishu and commented that sheep were imported from Mogadishu. He also noted both enslaved and free Africans and a chief called Abd Al-Aziz Al-Makdashawi (i.e., from Mogadishu) (Forbes and Ali, 1980). At some point after 1343CE Ibn Battuta embarked on a ship near Bharuch, Gujarat for Goa. His vessel was oared by fifty Abyssinians and it seems he sailed on another vessel with Abyssinians to the pepper-exporting port of Honnavar (Karnataka). Battuta also mentioned Abyssinians arriving by ship at Calicut. (Pankhurst, 2003). Battuta mentions that the most important port of Sri Lanka was Colombo, where a Muslim ruler called Jalasti a “Wazir [prince] of the sea” had a militia of five hundred Abyssinians under him (Gibb and Beckingham, 1994). In the locality of Kalpitiya at Puttalam in Sri Lanka there is an old Muslim community who were known as *puttalam buruwa*. A distinct species of Ass that may be related to the Wild Ass (*Equus africanus*) of Northeast Africa is found here (Hussein, 2013). *Buruwa* may be a reference to Barawa in Somalia.

In 1393CE Dahlak Khebir sent several elephants to the Sultan in Egypt (Insoll, 2001). Presumably the elephants came from Sri Lanka (Hussein, 2013).

ABYSSINIANS

By 1400CE the Dahlak islands became a tributary of the Abyssinians and as a result the people of the Eritrean coast become indistinguishable from the Abyssinians under the Arab exonym of *Habshi* which covered all Northeast Africans. Sadly, most modern scholars have translated the exonym strictly to Abyssinians or Ethiopians. Africans as *Habeshi* appear increasingly in Indian references from the fifteenth century. In 1453 “some Abyssinian [*Habeshi*] officers” were put to death in Southern Maharashtra (Chauhan, 1995). At Bengal a short-lived *Habeshi* dynasty governed from 1487 to 1493CE (Robbins and McLeod, 2006). An important *Habeshi* Dynasty was established on the Western coast of India in the late fifteenth when Malik Ahmed (1490-1508) the founder of the Nizam Shahi Dynasty at Ahmednagar installed the *Habeshi* admiral Sidi Yakut at the fortress of Janjira island at the entrance of a wide creek south of present-day Bombay in 1490CE. The *Habeshi* gained control of the mainland from Korlai in the North to Danda on the Savitri River in the South and was known as Habsan or Habshan (Chauhan, 1995).

By the sixteenth century Adal controlled the cities of Zeila and Berbera. Harlaa was abandoned and its place was taken by Harar which was part of the Adal Sultanate (Insoll *et al*, 2021). Two new powers were to enter the politics of the entire Western Basin of the Indian Ocean. First the Portuguese arrived. In 1514 Afonso de Albuquerque set his intentions on taking the “chief port” of the state of Habsan in India (Chauhan, 1995). Then the Turks arrived from Egypt and conquered the Dahlak Islands in 1517, placing the islands and the adjacent mainland under the rule of the Pasha of Suakin (Sudan) as the Turkish province of Habesh. In the same year the Portuguese attacked Zeila. In 1520 the Turks took Zeila and garrisoned it. In 1528 the Portuguese attacked Zeila again. In 1541 the Portuguese attempted to land an army at Zula and march into Abyssinia. But the Portuguese attempts to control the Red Sea were unsuccessful and in 1557 Massawa and the Dahlak Islands came firmly under Turkish occupation (Insoll, 2001). To consolidate their hold of Northwest India near the islands of Bombay, the Portuguese had to fight Abyssinians in the armies and navies of the Indian rulers as well as take the Abyssinian bases. Between 1567 and 1571 the Abyssinians of Janjira transformed their base into a granite fortress (Chauhan, 1995). *Habeshi* in India were also engaged in trade. “Three Abyssinians” came to sell provisions to Portuguese ships” at Goa in 1533 (Chauhan, 1995), and Bava Gor founded Gujarat’s agate trade (Basu, 2003). Incidentally, analysis of three agate beads from Harlaa, that indicated that two were from Gujarat (Insoll *et al*, 2021). Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1563-1611) mentions that “...the country of Abexines, where upon the coast of Mossambique [i.e the East coast of Africa] unto the Red Sea is commonly called the coast of Abex, and divers men of Prester Johns land do send men of that country, some being slaves and others free, into India, which they serve for Saylor in the Portingalles shippes, that traffique from place to place”. He describes Muslim *Abexiins* and “the *Abexiins* that are Chrsitians have on their faces 4. Burnt markes”. Interestingly he also explains that the *Abexiins* were hired on low wages and travelled with their wives under Portuguese captains but possibly with Arab boatswains. Perhaps most interesting, is Linschoten’s remark that “these *Abexins* and Arabians such as are free doe serve in al India for saylers and sea faring men, with such merchants as saile from Goa to China, Japon, Bengala, Mallaca, Ormus and all the Oriental coast” Linschoten explains that after arriving in India the Portuguese sailors are “ashamed to live in that order and thinke it is a great discredite unto them” (Burnell, 2005). Linschoten’s descriptions relate to the time between 1583 and 1588. Incidentally, it appears that fossil coral rag was used in the building material at St. Paul’s Church between 1560 and 1590 and within the Santiago gate at Melaka (Malaysia) and the Portuguese

encountered the quarrying of coral for stone and lime around 1609 at Hormuz and in the Straits of Malacca (Khoo, 1997).

By 1630 Zeila had become a dependency of Mocha but it was still an important city with “over six-hundred houses of stone or mud and thatch, each with a cistern” as reported by the Turkish Evliya Celibi in 1671 (Insoll, 1997). The port had by now become a major exporter of enslaved Africans. By 1670 the Portuguese were active in the Indian Ocean slave trade. Increasingly, enslaved Africans came from Mozambique Island and other areas of East Africa (Boxer, 1997). The Abyssinians in India now known to the Europeans by their autonym *Siddi* had become players in the territorial ambitions of the Europeans on the one hand, and the Marathas on the other. Eventually the Siddis sided with the English and Portuguese against the Marathas. However in 1690 the Siddis actually occupied Bombay and the British had to sue for peace (Chauhan, 1995). A source describes “*Abyssins*” at Siam (Pankhurst, 2003).

CONCLUSION

With much gratitude to the historian Richard Pankhurst and the archaeologists Ralph Pedersen and Timothy Insoll we now have a chronology of an African maritime tradition that begins from at least the 1st century C.E. with the Axumites whose location on the African side of the Southern Red Sea enabled their inclusion in the Maritime Trade Route from Egypt to South Asia. After adopting Christianity in the mid-4th century Axumite links with the Eastern Roman Empire increased alongside their expansion into the Southern Arabian Peninsula, making them a trans-continental African Empire. The Ge’ez-speaking Axumites produced their own coins and had their own script by the 5th century and it is this script that is found at the Hoq cave on Socotra Island. These inscriptions are alongside those in Greek, South Arabian, Bactrian and Indian scripts dated between the 1st century B.C.E. and the 16th century C.E. attesting to the importance of Socotra in the Maritime Trade Route. Ge’ez is today a liturgical language (like Latin) of the Ethiopian Church and is not spoken, however its closest living languages are Tigrayit in Eritrea and Tigrinya spoken in Ethiopia’s Tigray Region. Christian Axumite strategic control of the Gulf of Aden on the Maritime Trade Route between Asia and Asia lasted into the eight Century. By this time the Axumite descendants were known as *Habeshi* and the Red Sea coast was under Muslim rule.

Archaeology supports the importance of the Dhalak Islands in the early eight-century, mirrored by the arrival of Muslim traders and crewmen with carved *poritis* gravestones at Hainan Island, China. According to Wolbert Smidt, Du Huan used the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden route to return to China. John Miksic notes that the Chinese ceramic assemblage at Lubok Tua (Sumatra) resembles that of Fustat (Egypt) rather than that of Siraf (Iran) and he notes that Egyptian-Syrian glass sherds dominate in the 12th century at Lubok Tua demonstrating that this was a two-way trade route.

Prior to his death, James de Vere Allen the historian of East African coastal history, penned his *Swahili Origins*. Over thirty years ago De Vere Allen suggested that the loss of Dahlak resulted in “a number of non-Muslim merchants having been dislodged from there and moved to Zayla and Berbera, whose share of the Ethiopian trade temporarily swelled as consequence” (de Vere Allen, 1993). This paper proposes that these *Habeshi* traders continued their trading links from the African side of the Gulf of Aden (or Babaria), which can be traced inland to such places as Harlaa, Harar, and that the Red Sea arm of the Maritime Trade Route predominated from the mid-10th to 14th centuries as Siraf (Iran) and Sohar (Oman) went into decline. This matches traditional histories of

Northeast Africans in the Maldives and Sri Lanka and explains the spread of Sunni Islam. John Miksic suggests that the first Chinese traders of this period arrived in Southeast Asia on Muslim ships. But we have no idea who crewed these vessels (Miksic, 2013). The Muslim ethnic group who call themselves Utsat on Hainan Island are Cham speakers. Given that the Cham Kingdom was in Southern Vietnam, the likelihood remains that Northeast Africans were among the crew and missionaries on Arab-Persian or Indian vessels who introduced Islam. Is it possible that *poritis* headstone carving and construction technology arrived on the trade route? If so when did this happen? The February 2012 attack by Islamic extremists at the National Museum in Malé damaged almost the entire pre-Islamic collection including about 30 Buddhist sculptures dated from the 6th-12th centuries, of which only three pieces can be repaired. Some of these sculptures were made of coral and others of limestone (Bajas, 2012). Destruction of pre-Islamic sites and reuse of coral has been a constant activity in the atolls which are devoid of alternate stone.

Marco Polo probably encountered Africans in the thirteenth century, but since there were Africans in Venice this was of little consequence at the time. Ibn Battuta writing in the fourteenth century formulates a stronger argument for a medieval *Barbari-Habashi* maritime narrative in the Indian Ocean. Indian sources chronicle the growth of medieval *Habeshi* naval power along Western coast of India and Linschoten confirms their presence in the sixteenth century as free crewmen on Portuguese vessels traveling as far as Nagasaki, demonstrating the adaptability of these Africans to new technology.

After the 16th century the memory of free Northeast Africans coming to Asia disappeared. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the Portuguese consolidation at Mozambique Island initiated a new source of enslaved Africans destined for Asia, while adding to increase in the Indian Ocean slave trade. Secondly, Africans in the Indian subcontinent took on the autonym of *Sidi* or *Siddi* and it came to be a Royal Navy term for any crewman of African ancestry recruited in the Indian Ocean until 1934. Slavery conspired with colonialism to globally demote African history and overlook the evidence that suggests that Northeast Africans were agents in the introduction of Islam into the Indo-Pacific region. After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the steamships travelling between Europe and Asia facilitated a coaling and took on Somali crewmen, usually through agents in Aden. Thereby continuing the African maritime tradition from the age of sail into the age of steam.

The role of these Africans explains the spread of cultural attributes that exist today in the form of the spread of Shafi'i Islam, which is the predominant school in the Horn of Africa, but not in the Persian Gulf. The spread of the African board-game Mankala through the Indo-Pacific region may also reflect the sphere of African influence.

There remain many questions, which are being answered by marine and terrestrial archaeology in Eritrea and Ethiopia. There is on-going study of the spread and context of coral construction throughout the IOW. Sites such as Maydh, and numerous inland sites await the archaeologist in Northern Somalia. Political insecurities and religious sensitivities coupled with climate change are challenges to further investigations.

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