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Yemen's Past and Perspectives are in Africa, not a fictitious 'Arab' world

In the years ahead, Yemen may have another chance of progress and radiation. This will happen only if the Yemenites assess better their non-Arabic history and identity. Yemen should join other Eastern African countries in an economic, political, and cultural union, closing the door to the fictitious Arab world.

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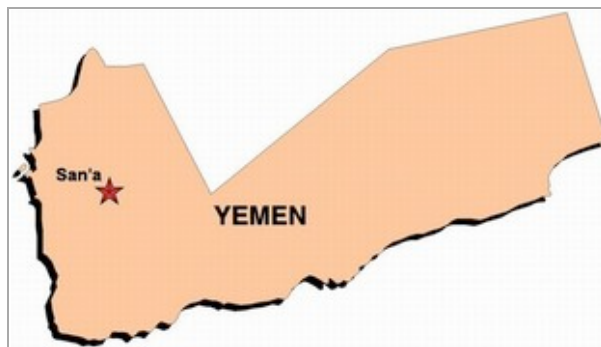
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Yemen's Past and Perspectives are in Africa, not a fictitious 'Arab' world

By Prof. Dr. Muhammad Shamsaddin Megalommatiss

Accessing Yemen's historical importance and possible future role – past traits predestine future's potentialities

It is certainly an auspicious event to see more of Yemen's progressive intellectuals joining forces to face the various challenges of the future and to express their ideas about the possible ways the country will catch up with the developed countries within our global world. The weight they may exercise within the future politics of the country will certainly determine the speed of the development, and the extent of the good news anybody truly wishes to hear from the Great Old Land of the Hadhramawti Frankincense and the Sabaean Wisdom. On this way towards fast recovery, there is a need for criticism, when one needs an analysis of what went wrong, but there is also a necessity for an overall synthesis and better perception of the great historical past.



Enlarge Image

Geographical and Historical Determinism

Throughout world history, few factors have been so determining as the geography of a land, and the basic traits of civilization that a people developed at a certain historical moments. Egypt and Meroe in today's Sudan have been the Nile valley countries, flat and delineated by the propinquity of the desert. Babylonia was the flat land between two rivers (Mesopotamia, Beyn un Nahreyn); Assyria was the land of Transtigrítane, combining the vast Mesopotamian plains and the surrounding mountains. Persia was the land of the plateau at the east of Zagros series of mountains, and the Hittites felt at home at the Anatolian plateau of Cappadocia that is demarcated by the Taurus and the Pontus series of mountains. Greece is the land of small plains among isolated mounts, and of little islands. In Lebanon the phenomenon is very striking; at the coast, the Phoenicians of Tyros, Sidon, Arad, Byblos, and other cities – states were turned to long navigations and open seafaring, whereas 50 km inland Aramaeans at the Bekaa valley, as well as further on in Damascus, Haleb, Homs, were excelling in cattle-keeping, agriculture and land route trades (as far as China!), being totally disinterested in the sea!

A unique turning point called Yemen

Where does Yemen stand in the 'global' world of the ancient Middle East? Land of the mountains and the small valleys among them, area of an unprecedented Wadi-phenomenon at Hadramawt, focal point of land routes and desert routes of trade, territory encompassing long and rich coastal strips, turned to various seas, to the Red Sea and to the Indian Ocean as we call these seas now, Yemen has long been the most African part of Asia, or... the Asiatic part of Africa!

Undoubtedly, Yemen linked India with Egypt, East Africa with Assyria, Persia with Sudan, Rome with China, all ways - land, desert and sea - involved. But whenever a certain expansion of the many, various and diversified Yemenite peoples, tribes and states took place in the past, it was manifested in Africa. This is probably due to physical delimitations, the Oman coastal strip being too limited a place for expansion, the Hedjaz coastal strip being an uninviting place, the greatest part of the peninsula being desert (Rub' al Khali), and other lands being simply ... too far! What is closest to Yemen is either the high seas or Africa...

Notwithstanding the great achievements of the Sabaean kingdom dating back to the beginning of the first pre-Christian millennium, which can be admired by modern visitors in several places of the Yemenite North, and were hinted at within the Biblical texts (Books of Kings) by ancient narrators, the first historical mention of the kingdom of Sabaa goes back to the middle of the 8th century BCE. It is a reference to tribute and gifts presented to the Assyrian emperor Tiglat-Pileser (Tukulti – apil – Esharra) III (745 – 727) by Sabaa, as well as by Arabs of the Hedjaz, and other countries. Despite the Assyrian and the Babylonian expansion in the East and the North of the peninsula (Yathribu was the summer residence of the Babylonian Nabonid Kings in the 6th century BCE), Sabaa was too far for the Sargonid Assyrian empire and the Nabonid Babylonian royal pretensions.

Assurbanipal (669 – 625) ruled from Central Iran to Upper Egypt, and from the eastern coast of the Persian Gulf to the western coast of Turkey, but Yemen escaped his dominion by simply paying tribute. Cambyses, the Achaemenid Shah of Iran, in the second half of the 6th century, was ruling from Napata of Kush (today's Karima in Sudan) to Central Asia, but again Yemen was spared! Alexander the Great, at the end of the 4th century, invaded all the lands between Macedonia and India, but Pentapotamia (Pundjab), not Yemen, seemed closer to either Pella (his first capital) or Babylon (his ultimately chosen capital)!

During all these long centuries, the peoples and the tribes of ancient Yemen could not be kept united under the scepter of a descendant of the famous Queen Balqis. Yet, writing was introduced as early as the 6th century BCE, or to put it better, it was invented! It would be essential at this point to stress the originality of the event! At a moment the Assyrian – Babylonian cuneiform ('al kitabeh al mesmariyeh' in Arabic), syllabogrammatic Writing (the term means that the cuneiform characters were of syllabic phonetic value) was diffused in Iran (introduction of the old Persian Achaemenid cuneiform writing system that was in use for about 300 to 400 years), and the Phoenician and the Aramaic alphabetic writings were diffused throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East (more precisely among Greeks, Israelites, Romans, and Persians), the different peoples of Ancient Yemen, instead of adopting a foreign writing system, developed their own syllabogrammatic writing, no less than 1200 years before the arrival of Islam!

Through a historical overview of almost 1400 years of Yemenite pre-Islamic history (based on Assyrian - Babylonian, Yemenite, Persian, Ancient Greek, Latin and Aramaic sources), we can get a clear diagram of several basic cultural characteristics. The geographical divisions of the land of Yemen, many mountains and plains, various coastal strips, all oriented differently to the outer world, were probably the reason of the political disunion that mostly characterized Yemen. Of course, this was repeated throughout Islamic times, but it would be wrong for us to perceive disunion in terms of enmity, fratricide or civil wars. We should rather see the various ancient Yemenite states in terms of specific task assignments. The war of Sabaa and Himyar against Qataban (around 115 BCE) is rather due to Sabaeans and Himyarite reactions to the Qatabanic performance in respect of preserving the Yemenite thalassocracy and the complete navigation control throughout the Red Sea at a moment of rise of Ptolemaic Egyptian seafaring and sea trade in which Aramaeans seem definitely involved. The different Yemenite states, Sabaa, Awsan, Hadramawt, Main, Timna, Qataban, Raydhan and Himyar, were often in agreement with regard to the role each one had to play in its own domain with regard to a generally conceived Yemenite interest. However, reunification considerations we attest only as late as the end of the 2nd century CE, and it is the Himyarites, who seem to be more conscious in this regard.

Yemenite expansion in Africa, in terms of population, language and scripture

Despite the lack of unity, or perhaps due to this phenomenon, many waves of Yemenites have reportedly crossed the Bab el Mandeb straits, and settled either in the African Red Sea shore opposite the Yemenite coast, or further in the African inland.

What the famous Abyssinian legend and the great epic text Kebra Negast (the Glory of the Kings) narrate is rather an extension to the Biblical and the Quranic texts' references to the legendary Queen of Sheba – Balqis – Makeda, and to her contacts with Solomon, the King of Israel. But it reflects perfectly well the reality of the millennium-long, repeated Yemenite waves of Asiatic immigrants to the Horn of Africa area. Menelik, as son to Solomon and Balqis – Makeda, is an abstraction made for poetic reasons within the text, and it concerns all the numerous Yemenites, who repeatedly and in successive waves expressed their predilection for Africa.

It is not only literary sources and archaeological evidence that testify to this event; full epigraphic and linguistic support is offered for this assertion, since the ancient Abyssinian language and scripture (dating

back to the early Christian era) have derived from the earlier attested ancient Yemenite semitic dialect and syllabogrammatic writing. Gueze, as is called the ancient Abyssinian language, is very important to Christianity, as one of the languages and the scriptures of the Evangiles and the New Testament – along with Aramaic - Syriac, Greek, Coptic, Latin, Armenian and Georgian. Gueze is the ancestral linguistic form of modern Abyssinian languages like Tigrinia, Tigre and Amharic (Amarinia) that are widely spoken in Eritrea and Abyssinia.

The name itself of Abyssinia ('-b-sh-t, Abashat) is mentioned in Ancient Yemenite texts and epigraphic documentation as the name of a ... Yemenite tribe! This tribe, or at least a sizeable part of it, migrated to Africa and transferred there its name that lasts until now, as ultimate proof of the Yemenite origin of a large part of the populations of Abyssinia and Eritrea.

'Returning' the compliment, Gueze – that was never lost, since it still is the religious language and scripture of the Christians of Ethiopia and Eritrea – helped a lot in the deciphering of the ancient Yemenite epigraphic monuments. It was as useful as Coptic to Champollion deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics. Without Coptic, Champollion would have failed; without Gueze the likes of Conti Rossini and Rhodokanakes would have failed too.

Abyssinia and/or Ethiopia?

In this regard, it is essential to stress the point that the use of the name 'Ethiopia' by the 19th and 20th century royal authorities of Abyssinia is completely false, and does not stand any serious scholarly and academic argumentation. Ethiopia is NOT Abyssinia; Ethiopia in Ancient Greek means 'the country of the black-face people' (Aithiops), and from the first moment it was in use (possibly already in the 2nd millennium BCE in the Mycenaean language of Linear B writing 'ai-ti-o-qo') it meant the country and the people next to the southern border of Egypt, which is Sudan (the various forms of state organization that existed there, namely the Kerma state at the middle of the 2nd millennium, Kush at the first half of the 1st millennium, and Meroe at the 2nd half of the first millennium BCE, as well as during the first four centuries of the 1st millennium CE). Ethiopia in Ancient Greek meant Sudan, and the famous work 'Aithiopika' of Heliodorus refers to 'the Table of the Sun' and other monuments of Meroe, today nearby Bagrawiyah /Atbara in Sudan).

It is certain that the use of the term 'Ethiopia' by Axumite Abyssinia (the first Christian state in Africa) bears a kind of historical justification, since it hints at the victory of the Axumite Negus (King) Ezana over Meroe, and at the annexation of Meroe (around 370 CE) to Axum. It refers to the Biblical verse that Aithiopia will extend its hand to the Lord, and by this 'argument' the Axumite diplomacy was justifying during the middle ages the christening of Abyssinia! However, one must bear in mind that what stands in the Greek text as Aithiopia corresponds to 'Kush' in the Hebrew Biblical text, and Kush is never Aithiopia!

The modern use of the term is all due to colonial powers' infiltration and policies aiming at disabling Sudan from attempting to establish a coherent national history. If there is one country to be called today 'Ethiopia', it's rather Sudan (again in Arabic, Bilad as-Sudan it means what was meant in Greek, the land of the black-face people), NOT Abyssinia.

All this may look 'far' from Yemen, but today's Yemenites must bear in mind that King Ezana of Axum, by speaking Gueze, was truly speaking a Yemenite dialect, and was writing Yemenite-like characters.

Yemenite presence and suzerainty over the Horn of Africa area, according to the text of the Periplus of the Red Sea (Periplus Maris Erythraei) – 1st century CE.

This very important text that brought about an unbelievable quantity of modern academic publications, and fascinated numerous scholars and research fellows all over the world was written by an Egyptian merchant and sailor of Alexandria, who lived in the 2nd half of the 1st century CE, during the reign of Malichus II of the small Aramaic kingdom of Rekem / Petra, or – to put it in Western terms – during the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero. The anonymous author left us with a uniquely rich text, although relatively brief (its 66 paragraphs can be accommodated in about 24 pages in English), which is full of information about the meteorological conditions, the commercial details, the navigational habitudes, the political and the geographical situation in all the area around the then called Red Sea, namely the entire area of the Indian Ocean, from the East Africa coast to Indochina and Indonesia, plus what we call today the Red Sea (in the Antiquity: 'Arabic Gulf') and Persian Gulf.

Being a kind of 'Instructions to Seafarers', the text drives the reader from the area of Arsinoe (Suez) and Berenice (Ras Banas) in Egypt, to the location of Rhapta (Pemba and Zanzibar islands, and Dar es

Salam in Tanzania); further on, following the then usual navigation lines, the text drives the reader again from the area of Arsinoe (Suez), through the western Sinai coast and the coast of Hedjaz, to Yemen, Oman, and further on the entire round trip in the Persian Gulf area, then through the coast of Pakistan and the Delta of Indus river to the western coast of India, and to Palaisimundu / Taprobane / Sri Lanka, and further on to the eastern coast of India, to Indochina and China, with all the topographical references becoming very scarce and vague beyond the Ganges delta area.

Sailing south along the East African coast, the author of the Periplus of the Red Sea mentions successive harbours and ports of call: Myos Hormos (al Ghardaq or Hurghada) and Berenice in Egypt, then Ptolemais Theron (Suakin) in Sudan, Adulis (nearby Massawa) and Avalites (Assab) in Eritrea, then - in the Northern Somali coast - Malao, Mundu, Mosyllon, Neoptolemaeus, Tabatege, Cape Elephas, Cape Aromaton (the 'Cape of the Perfumes' was the ancient Greek name for Cape Guardafui, the promontory at the very end of the Horn of Africa), only to continue throughout the Eastern Somali coast through Tabai, Opone, Apocopa, Aigialos, Sarapion pastureland, Nicon pastureland, the Pyralaon Islands and Dioryhos ('straits'), Menouthias and Rhapta, the furthestmost port of call in the south, the last place known to the author of the text.

It is essential to note that the political administration of the entire East African coast is very clear to the mind of the anonymous author. The Roman Empire - through its Praefectus Aegypti - controls the Egyptian ports of call Arsinoe, Myos Hormos and Berenice, as well as Ptolemais Theron (Suakin) in Sudan. The impression is given that this was a Ptolemaic colony serving the hunting purposes of Ptolemaic Egypt. Although a strong inland kingdom, Meroe did not exercise a control over the Red Sea coast.

It is impressive that the Sudanese Nile state was at times in conflict with Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt regarding areas of the Dodekaschoenus or the Triakontaschoenus (both being at the south of Syene / Aswan, the former being 12 schoenoi long, and the latter being 30 schoenoi long, reaching the area of the Second Cataract and Wadi Halfa) that are in a distance of 1300 - 1600 km from Bagrawiyah, the area of the Meroitic capital where dozens of pyramids are still preserved until today, but did not bother to control the Red Sea coast that is much closer to Meroe, Mussawarat as Sufra, Wad ben Naqa, Basa and Naqa, the main centers of Meroitic power nearby the Nile and/or in the vast Butana area between the Blue Nile, the Nile and its main affluent river Atbara (250 to 300 km)!

In the immediate south of Meroe and Ptolemais Theron ('Ptolemais of the Hunting'), in the area of today's Eritrea and Abyssinia, the situation is quite reverse. According to the Periplus of the Red Sea, Zoscales of Axum (today in Abyssinia) rules not only in the mountainous Abyssinian inland but also in the coast, where two harbours and ports of call are mentioned: Adulis (nearby Massawa) and Avalites (Assab). Adulis was probably by that time the largest commercial center in the entire Red Sea from Suez to Bab el Mandeb, and belonged to the Axumite King Zoscales, who was fluent in Greek, and could be reached in his palace at Axumites (Axum) after an eight days travel inland from Adulis through Koloe.

Proceeding further to the south, the author of the text names seventeen toponyms but only two political entities; from the point where the control of the Abyssinian king Zoscales ends starts 'the Other Berberia', which corresponds to the Northern Somalia up to the Horn of Africa. In this regard, it is useful to bear in mind that 'Berberia' is called by the author of the Periplus of the Red Sea the area in the south of Berenice (end of the Egyptian Red Sea coast), and in the north of Adulis (beginning of the Axumitic Red Sea coast), which corresponds to the area around Ptolemais Theron, today's Sudanese Red Sea coast. All toponyms from Malao to Cape Aromaton (Cape of Perfumes) belong to 'the Other Berberia'. One should also stress in this regard that Berberia as toponym should not be confused with the adjective 'barbaric'.

Beyond Akroterion Aromaton (Horn of Africa), from Tabai and Opone down to Rhapta, the entire land is called Azania; the appellation encompasses today's eastern coast of Somalia, as well as the coast of Kenya and Tanzania. Azania is the oldest name used collectively for this entire area (approx. 3000 km long!), and the only collective appellation throughout history. Of course, one may refer to the Ancient Egyptian term 'Punt', target-area of the homonymous pharaonic expedition undertaken by Nehesi, the admiral to Pharaoh Hatshepsout. But that term signified a small kingdom the extent of which we cannot perceive accurately through the hieroglyphic text of the Deir al Bahari mortuary temple of Hatshepsout (Thebes - West, Luqsor). The term Punt however presents similarities to the later Ancient Greek term 'Opone', since -t and -e are respectively Egyptian and Greek endings of feminine names and/or toponyms.

What makes a striking impression is the explicit reference of the author of the Periplus of the Red Sea to

the fact that the entire vast area of Azania, according to an ancient law, belonged to the (Yemenite) ruler ('tyrannos') of Mofar, and that the earliest state formation that was developed here was due to Yemenites of the Mofar and Muza region. Because of this, the text states the rights accorded to the merchants of Muza by the Yemenite king ('basileus'). More than just political control and commercial presence, the text (precisely in paragraph 16) testifies to high level Yemenite colonial practices:

"Furthermore, they (Yemenites from Muza and Mofar) send here (Azania, East Africa coast) merchant fleet manned by Yemenite captains and sailors, who thanks to their mixed marriages with indigenous women, as well as to their familiarization with the entire area, know very well the local dialect and the traditions".

In addition, the text offers valuable information about the trade exchanged between Yemen and its African colony, Azania. Yemenites were exporting military artifacts and other crafts to the African coast of Azania, and they were also sending wheat and wine as gifts to the local tribal leaders (paragraph 17) in a diplomatic effort to keep their colonial rule stabilized and unchallenged.

Who were the Yemenites who controlled Eastern Africa?

Except the aforementioned excerpts, the Periplus of the Red Sea refers to Yemen itself, while describing the second navigational line, from Arsinoe (Suez) alongside the Sinai and the Hedjaz coasts. Since there was no other significant port of call except Leuke Kome (at the northern part of the peninsula's coast), and the fish – eating barbaric inhabitants of the Hedjaz coast were always a threat, ships were rather sailing in some distance from the coast. They were reaching again the civilized world only at Muza. This is the most important port of call at the eastern shore of the Red Sea. Mentioned already for its extensive trade with Avalites (Assab) at the opposite coast of Eritrea (in paragraph 7), Muza is presented within its entire Yemenite environment in paragraphs 21 – 25 of the text of Periplus of the Red Sea. Muza is identified with the famous al Mokha of the Islamic times. Muza is described as harbour to Save, the capital of the Mafar province, an inland city at three days' trip distance, where Holoibos rules. The author of the text goes on adding that after another nine days inland trip one reaches Safar, the capital of king Haribael, who joined under his scepter the two "nations" ('ethni' in Greek) of Sabaeans ('Sabaeitai') and Himyarites ('Homeritai').

The Periplus of the Red Sea presents extensive details about Yemen, and it may be an interesting reading of general culture for Europeans and other people all over the world. But for the Yemenites, the Periplus of the Red Sea consists in a kind of National Covenant that testifies to a moment of great expansion and major achievements. Although written by a non-Yemenite, the text bears witness to the first colonial era in the area of the Indian Ocean, to the commercial, maritime, cultural, scientific and technical prowess of the ancient Yemenites.

Studying more carefully and analyzing in depth the aforementioned excerpts, we are able to understand where a great awaits expects Yemen, where the country must focus, where the best possibilities for Yemenite development can be found. The area of the Horn of Africa has always been of particular importance; it must not be conceived in terms of geographical narrowness, and limited to the unfortunate Somali fragmentation.

The Horn of Africa area is a very large part of Eastern Africa, plus Yemen: a vast area that evolves around the historical Cape of the Perfumes. From Sudan to Mozambique, and from Abyssinia to Madagascar, a great number of interacting partners encompass Eritrea, Djibouti, Yemen, Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania as well. By now, lack of development, poverty, multi-division, as well as diseases tend to be endemic. If we see the entire area within a wider spectrum, we will find it oscillating between South Africa, India and the oil-rich but economically uni-dimensional Gulf states. But there is no need for anyone to accept a 'fate'; actually, the only fate for all of us is that there is no fate. Why should Mozambique become an economic dependence of South Africa? Why should Yemen rely on the Gulf States? And why should India be left as the only ideal place for outsourcing information technology?

The Countries of the Horn of Africa consist of a large market of 240 million people with a GDP smaller than that of 10 million in Greece (just US\$ 220 billion)! At this level of poverty and under-development, a quantitative approach does not matter. It makes no difference that Sudan with almost double the population of Yemen has more than three times the GDP of Yemen. The proof for this evaluation is already given by the recent political developments; the fact that Sudan is 'richer' than Yemen did not ensure a sense of national unity for the largest African country.

Among the ten countries that evolve around the Horn of Africa, Yemen, Sudan, Eritrea, Abyssinia, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique and Madagascar, the real leader will make the

difference at the qualitative level. This involves mainly a regional vision for regional peace, concord, progress, development, knowledge and prosperity. A vision that can emanate from Yemen, that would bring forth a fresh common perspective for the entire regional population, and that would match the great historical past with modern ideals and practices.

The cultural exchanges that took place in Azania 2000 years ago, as testified by the Periplus of the Red Sea, show the way towards a multi-cultural Union of the Horn of Africa Countries.



By [Prof. Dr. Muhammad Shamsaddin Megalommatis](#)

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