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POTENTIAL CONTACT BETWEEN THE CENTRAL VALLEY OF THE NILE AND THE RIVER NIGER
AREA IN ANCIENT LIBYA IN THE FIRST SEVEN CENTURIES A.D.

by

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The part of Africa between the middle Niger basin and the central valley of the Nile, lying on either side of the latitude of Khartoum (fifteen degrees north), from Sansanding in the west to Khartoum in the east, runs across modern Mali, Niger, Chad and Sudan, including the northern parts of Upper Volta and Nigeria. Today, it is a region of little rainfall. Impinging on the Sudan savannah in the south, it lies predominantly in the Sahel and the desert to the north. There are indications, however, that, early in the first millenium A.D., it received more rainfall and such locations as Kumbi the metropolis of the ancient kingdom of Ghana, Timbuctoo and the Chad basin lay well within the Sudan savannah. As far north as Tibesti, the vegetation was luxuriant enough for camel herding and possibly for supporting other large animals, such as donkeys, horses and cattle.¹ And so, the present Saharan part up to the latitude of Tibesti, Tenere and Air would have been Sahelian. The discussion below will deal with that open region then covered by grass and shrubs which made contact easier than it is today.

In the open grassland sprang up the ancient kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, Songhai and Kanem. The first and the last seem to have come into existence between the first and the seventh centuries A.D. Ghana enjoyed trading contacts and perhaps exercised some political influence as far as the Atlantic coast.² Kanem, from its Chad basin, would have traded as far as Darfur in Sudan. In Sudan itself, there was the kingdom of Cush with Meroe (and sometimes Napata) as its metropolis. Cush lasted for a thousand years (650 B.C.-A.D. 350) with varying degrees of prosperity. Throughout the period of its existence, Cush maintained trading and cultural contacts with Kordofan and Darfur to the west and, to the east, with the kingdom of Axum (modern Aksum in Ethiopia) which eventually destroyed it in A.D. 350.

Besides the openness of the Sudan savannah, there are natural lines of communication along perennial and seasonal water courses, particularly in the eastern sector between the river Nile and lake Chad. The Wadi el Milk runs from the region of Zankor in Kordofan to join the Nile near Debba on the Dongola Reach. Zankor is within easy reach of El Fasher in Darfur. The Wadi Howar rises in Tama (ancient Temeh)³ in Darfur, crosses the Derib el Arbain route which links Asyut in Egypt to Ain Farah in Darfur through the oasis of Kharga, goes towards Wadi Gaab and disappears in the desert. The latter empties itself into the Nile at Kerma also on the Dongola. Again, Ennedi in the north-west of Darfur is connected with Tibesti by routes passing through oases of Selima and Merga.⁴ Similar communication lines existed between Darfur and the Chad which were still in use in A.D. 1240 when King Dunama of Kanem claimed he was in control of all trade routes between his kingdom and Duwy (Adu on the island of Sai in the Nile).

1. For the vegetation of the Timbuctoo region about 425-400 B.C. which was clearly Sudan savannah, see the Greek historian Herodotus, II. 32. 6-7. On Kumbi, G.T. Stride and C. Ifeka (1969), Peoples and Empires of West Africa, Nelson, p.40; and for Tibesti, B.D. Shaw 'The camel in ancient North Africa and the Sahara: history, biology, and human economy', Bulletin de l'institut fondamental d'Afrique noire, series B, Dakar (=IFAN), 41.4 (Oct. 1979), p.706; but in particular, A.E. Close, 'Radio-carbon dates from northern Africa', The Journal of African History (=JAH), 21.2 (1980), p.152.
2. Cf. Carthaginian trade in gold (Herodotus, iv.196) possibly at the mouth of river Senegal.
3. A.J. Arkell (1961), A history of the Sudan, London, pp.43, 81, 175 and 178.
4. A.J. Arkell (1961), p.192.

As indicated above, the horse, donkey and camel are known to have been in use in Kanem, Tibesti and other parts of the Sahara by the first century A.D. Shaw has shown that the donkey is as adaptable as the camel to desert conditions.⁵ And so, even in a desert situation, contact would still have been possible.

For clarity and convenience, the rest of the discussion will be taken in three parts, zone by zone: the Adulis-Axum-Cush, Cush-Darfur and Darfur-Chad-Jenne Jenno-Ghana. The scanty (and nature of the) evidence available will make it difficult to keep rigidly within the first seven centuries A.D. A broad overview in time and space will sometimes be necessary to establish the existence of inter- and intra-regional contact relevant to this period.

Adulis-Axum-Cush

The city of Axum, the metropolis of the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia, was situated in the northern part of the Abyssinian highlands in what is now the province of Tigre, one hundred and twenty miles from the Red Sea port of Adulis (Masawa). Though Axum is not mentioned in Graeco-Roman sources until the first century A.D., Egyptian Greek explorers and merchants had started visiting the kingdom through the new sea port of Adulis soon after the death of Alexander the Great (323 B.C.) in the time of Ptolemy II and III.⁶ According to the account of the anonymous author of the Periplus of the Erythraean (Red) Sea, all the ivory from beyond the Nile was at this time brought from Sennar via Coloe (Kohaito) and Axum to Adulis, and was exported from there to parts of the Roman Empire.⁷ Adulis became an important commercial centre with a large trade in slaves, gold, ivory, tortoise shell, animal hides, rhinoceros horns and other products of Ethiopia, Cush and central Africa. In return, Axum and Cush got luxury goods such as Egyptian clothes, ladies' robes, coloured cloaks, double-fringed linen mantles, articles made of glass and murrhine, brass and copper which local craftsmen used for the manufacture of ornaments, cooking utensils, women's bracelets, spears, axes, swords, drinking cups and coins. From India came iron, cotton materials of fine quality, cloth dyes and other ornaments.⁸ Gold and silver plates, military cloaks and coats of skin were specially directed to the royal courts. It is to be expected that, following trade, diplomatic relations would have been established between Axum and Meroe.

Unfortunately, relations between Axum and Cush were not always friendly. From the second century, the former began to expand westwards at the expense of the latter. Four Axumite inscriptions tell the story of the expansion from the second to the fourth century. One of them relating to the third century tells of Axumite expansion to territories between Axum and Meroe, including the Black Noba in the region of Sennar and the gold-producing districts to the south-west of Axum. The aim of the expansion was clearly the control of the gold mines and caravan routes to Meroe and beyond. The great push by Axum coincided with the revolts and civil strifes which engulfed the Roman Empire in that century, resulting in the secession of the small kingdom of Palmyra. Indeed, some

5. B.D. Shaw (1980), p.706.

6. L.A. Thompson, 'East Africa and the Graeco-Roman World (to A.D. 641)', in Africa in Classical Antiquity, eds. L.A. Thompson and J. Ferguson, I.U.P. (1969), p.56.

7. C. Müller, Geographi Graeci Minores (=GGM), I, p.261.

8. GGM, I, pp.261-263.

pro-Palmyran mercenaries from Axum were captured by Roman forces in Egypt in 274. The expansion followed the decline of Cush which had lost the 'Island of Moroe' to the Black Noba.⁹ Early in the fourth century the king of Axum sent an expedition against the Noba.¹⁰ The final objective was the capture of Cush. In 350, King Ezana realized this ambition. He was then able to proclaim his sovereignty, not only over the 'Island of Meroe', but also over the entire kingdom of Cush.¹¹ The dispossessed princes were consequently forced to flee westwards to Darfur. More will be said on this below.

Cush-Kordofan-Darfur-Ennedi

Identical rock paintings found in the valley of the Nile, Ennedi, Tibesti and Fezzan indicate early contacts dating back to the Mesolithic age among the hunters in the eastern half of what is now the Sahara desert.¹² Petrographic analysis of potsherds from widely separated sites such as Khashm el Girba on the Ethiopian-Sudan border, Khartoum, Debba, Wadi Halfa, Wanyanga in Chad, Amekni and Meniet in Ahaggar reveals a similarity that points to the continuation of such interactions during the Neolithic period.¹³

Perhaps the earliest documentary evidence for trade between Cush and Darfur comes from inscriptions¹⁴ on the tombs of Egyptian kings of the sixth dynasty (2423-2242 B.C.). In their time, especially under Mernere and Pepi II, caravan leaders made several journeys southwestwards to the kingdom of Yam and the land of Temeh which Arkell (1961, p.43) identifies with Darfur and Tama respectively. One of such leaders was Harkhuf. Harkhuf spent eight months on one of the several journeys he made. It seems he took the caravan route, Derib el Arbain, from Asyut through the oasis of Kharga towards El Fasher. But the return journey is more important to us. On one occasion, Harkhuf came back via Irtet, Mekher and Tereres; and on another, he was conducted homewards by an escort from Yam through the territory of Irtet, Setu Wawat. He would have been taken along the Wadi Howar and Wadi el Gaab to Kerma, then through the Nubian people, the Wawat, between the second and third cataracts to Elephantine where he could embark on boats downstream. The escort from Yam demonstrates the existence of regular contact between Tama, Darfur and Ennedi on the one hand and Cush on the other through what may have been one of the many natural communication routes which must have remained in use until the era of motor roads and railways. Seven hundred years later, another Egyptian king, Tuthmosis IV (1425-1405 B.C.) raided the territories of the Irm, Gwrss and Trk, names which strongly suggest Darfur.¹⁵ Egyptian kings of the twenty-fifth dynasty (725-660 B.C.), who originated from Cush, will have consolidated trade with that region which they may have annexed to Cush.

9. L.A. Thompson (1969), pp.57ff.

10. W. Dittenberger, Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae (=OGIS) 199.

11. OGIS, 200.

12. P. Huard and Petit, 'Les Chasseurs - graveurs du Hoggar', Libyca (Anthropologiques, Préhistoriques et Ethnographiques), xxiii (1975), p.165.

13. T.R. Hays and F.A. Hassan, 'Mineralogical analysis of "Sudanese Neolithics" ceramics', Libyca (Anthr., Preh., Ethn.), xxii (1974), pp.157-164.

14. J.M. Breasted (1906), Ancient Records of Egypt, Chicago, pp.316-318, 333-335.

15. A.J. Arkell (1961), p.61.

Harkhuf came back with three hundred donkeys laden with frankincense, ebony, leopard skins, slaves, gold and ivory. These commodities are strikingly similar to those which constituted the main traffic between Cush and Axum between 300 B.C. and A.D. 350 discussed above. In the face of this evidence, it is tempting to assert that traders of Cush and Axum were only carrying on the trade that had existed with central Africa as far as Darfur and Ennedi for more than two thousand years. What Harkhuf gave in exchange is not known. However, from what the kings of Axum, Cush and indeed African princes of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries were to receive in similar situations, it may be assumed that he gave mainly luxury goods such as those mentioned above.

Perhaps the most momentous event in this zone was the conquest of the kingdom of Cush in A.D. 350 by King Ezana of Axum. As shown above, the princes of Cush had to flee westwards to Kordofan and Darfur. Arkell has also shown that the name 'Cush' ceased to be used except in these two areas.¹⁶ The Nubian-speaking peoples of Kagiddi or Sheikota of southern Jebel Meidob, the Kaj of northern Kordofan and the Kajjar or Birgid of central Darfur seem to be immigrants from Cush and their names (Kash or Kaj) seem a survival of the word Kush. A graffito in Greek character and the old Nubian language from Awdum in northern Kordofan show that the name Cush was still used there in the Christian period, fifth to eighth centuries A.D. The Kagiddi have a tradition of having migrated from the east under the leadership of a queen who is buried in a large mound near Jebel Kabeiya at the southeastern corner of Jebel Meidob.¹⁷ It is further suggested by Meek, Arkell, Oliver and Fagan, though disputed by Posnansky, that the Tumagera, who founded several kingdoms in Tibesti and Kanem in the territory west of Darfur, were the scions of the Meroitic royal family; and that due to them also was the rise of divine kingdoms along the great east-west road across Africa.¹⁸

Darfur-Chad-Jenne Jenno-Ghana

Traditions of an eastern origin of Bayajidda, the conqueror of Kanem by A.D. 700 and subsequently of Hausaland, seem to give credence to the said contact between Darfur and the Chad basin as well as the area west of it. According to one of them, Bayajidda is said to have been a refugee from Baghdad. He settled for a time in Kanem where he got married to the daughter of the ruler, the Mai. To escape the treachery of his father-in-law, he had to flee westwards to Gaya where a community of blacksmiths forged him a sword with which he proceeded to slay the snake, 'Sarki', which had not allowed the people to draw water except on Friday.¹⁹ It is known that the Kanuri on Lake Chad were an admixture of the Zaghawa and their predecessors, the So. According to Urboy, Trimmingham and Levtzion, the Zaghawa were nomads who came to Kanem from the desert,²⁰ perhaps from the Darfur-Ennedi region where some of them were still to be found as late as A.D. 1500. They conquered the So who had themselves subdued the people

16. A.J. Arkell, 'An old Nubian inscription from Kordofan', American Journal of Archaeology, LV (1951), pp.353-354.

17. A.J. Arkell (1961), p.174 is closely followed here.

18. C.K. Meek (1931), A Sudanese Kingdom, London, passim. A.J. Arkell (1961), pp.177 and 192; R. Oliver and B.M. Fagan (1975), Africa in the Iron Age, O.U.P., passim; M. Posnansky's review of Oliver and Fagan (1975) in JAH, 21.2 (1980), p.629.

19. Stride and Ifeka (1969), p.86.

20. N. Levtzion (1971), Ancient Ghana and Mali, Methuen, London, pp.7-8; Y. Urvoy (1949), Histoire de l'empire du Bornou, Dakar, pp.17ff, J.S. Trimmingham (1962), A History of Islam in West Africa, London, pp.106, 110-111.

they found there. The word, 'So' seems a derivation from 'Shu' or 'Show', the Egyptian sun god, who was sometimes given the epithet 'lord without limit', and with him the king of Cush was associated.²¹ Was it a refugee prince of Cush bearing the title Show or So who proceeded from Darfur to subjugate the inhabitants of the Chad basin? The hypothesis is very attractive but must await proof. Be that as it may, by A.D. 700, the Zaghawa had imposed their rule on the So and the government was, like that of Cush, headed by a divine ruler.

From the realm of conjecture inherent in oral tradition, we may retrace our steps to consider what evidence may be gleaned from archaeology. The focus here will be the kingdom of Ghana and the inundated region of the Niger delta above Timbuctoo. In the inland Niger delta was a settlement at Jenne Jenou. Excavations on the site by McIntosh have shown that it received the first settlers about the third century B.C.²² The discovery of iron at the basal level of the site indicates that between the first century B.C. and the first century A.D. iron technology reached the town, possible via a western route from Dahr Ticht in Mauretania where, perhaps the earliest Libyco-Berber iron users had appeared between the seventh and the fourth centuries B.C.²³ If the nearest source of iron ore, as suggested by McIntosh,²⁴ is Benedougou (Bonkoukou), trade in iron between the two regions is likely to date back to soon after the foundation of Jenne Jenou. Copper found in the earliest Phase III deposits is dated fifth century A.D. The three nearest sources of copper ore known are in the Sahara at Akjoujt in Mauretania, Niore in Mali and in Air.²⁵ Even if copper was not smelted in Jenne Jenou by the fifth century A.D., there is evidence for the existence of pre-Islamic copper industry at Maradet in Air.²⁶ Other copper furnaces of the sixth century existed in the district of Sekkiret near Azelig in the Niger Republic.²⁷ What emerges from the above is strong evidence for interregional trade in iron and copper from Mauretania in the west to the Niger Republic in the east. Similar traffic in iron must have existed between Chad and Meroe from where iron smelting in domed and shaft furnaces is believed to have spread to parts of west and central Africa.²⁸

The ancient kingdom of Ghana played an important role in the trade in metals, especially gold. The rise of Ghana has been put in the third century A.D. By the eighth century, its metropolis, Kumbi, had grown into a thriving commercial centre. Situated in the Senegal-Niger divide, it was well placed to take advantage of the north-south and the east-west currents of trade, new ideas and cultural contacts emanating from the great civilizations to the north and east. Kumbi appears to have derived its early importance from its control of the trade in gold from its source in the mines of Wangara in the upper course of the river Niger in Guinea and possibly from Asanti in modern Ghana. Kumbi would have

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21. A.J. Arkell (1961), p.176.
 22. R.J. McIntosh and S.K. McIntosh, 'The inland Niger delta before the empire of Mali: evidence from Jenne Jenou', JAH, 22.1 (1981), p.1.
 23. P.J. Munson and C.A. Munson, 'Nouveaux chars à boeufs rupestres du Dhar Ticht', Notes africaines, ccxxii (1969), pp.62-63.
 24. McIntosh (1981), p.19.
 25. Mauny, 'Tableau géographique de l'Ouest Africain au Moyen Age', Mémoire de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire, 61 (1961), p.307.
 26. M. Posnansky and R.J. McIntosh, 'New radiocarbon dates for northern and western Africa', JAH, 17 (1976), p.183.
 27. D. Calvocoressi and N. David, 'Radiocarbon and thermoluminescence dates for West Africa', JAH, 20.1 (1979), p.9.
 28. D. Williams, 'African Iron and the Classical World', in Africa in Classical Antiquity, I.V.P. (1969), pp.74 ff.

extended its trading activities to the Atlantic²⁹ in the west and beyond Timbuctoo in the east.

As indicated above, Kumbi was not as dry at that time as it is today. It had enough rainfall to enable it to grow enough food to feed its people and the trading communities in its midst. In regard to Jenne Jenou, the annual inundation and the consequent fertility may be compared to those of the Babylonian Tigris and Euphrates basins and the Egyptian Nile valley. Like the two, it no doubt produced enough food for local consumption and export. The region is linked by perennial waterways with the great Niger Bend between Timbuctoo and Gao which was (and still is) the contact point of traders from the north across the Sahara and from the east and west along the great highway.

The rise of the kingdoms of Ghana, Kanem, Cush and Axum, as well as other smaller well organized and warlike communities which may have existed in the Sahara in Tibesti, in Air, in Ennedi and Darfur, almost certainly created a great demand for iron, copper, tin and gold. Hence the diffusion of the technology of metal smelting all over the region. It is not for us here to probe the source of this knowledge. Whether iron smelting came from the east through Egypt or Axum and then through Cush to the Sudan or from the north and north-west across the Sahara or even from the west by sea, suffice it to say that iron technology created a community of interest across the Sudan and became a stimulus to intercourse.

Conclusion

In sum, there are strong indications that trading contacts existed all the way from the Atlantic seaboard to the port of Adulis (Masawa) on the Red Sea. The main highway went mostly through the Sudan savannah. It is not known if individuals braved the whole journey from east to west. However, it is clear that trade was carried on in relays across Africa. Certain articles in universal demand such as ivory, iron, gold and copper were exchanged all the way. Princes of the kingdoms of Axum, Cush, Kanem and Ghana promoted the trade in these commodities.

29. See footnote 2, page 1.