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The Swahili Corridor revisited

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Kitāb Gharā'ib al-funūn wa-mulaḥ al-'uyūn. An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe: The Book of Curiosities. Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science. Texts and Studies, volume 87, Edited and Translated by Yossef Rapoport and Emilie Savage-Smith. xii + 698pp and numerous colour illustrations, Brill: Leiden & Boston, 2014. ISBN 978-90-04-25564-7 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-25699-6 (e-book). Euro 245.00.

Sharma. Un entrepôt de commerce medieval sur la côte du Ḥaḍramawt (Yémen, ca 980-1180). Edited by Axelle Rougeulle. xxii + 559 pages; illustrated throughout in colour and black & white. French text throughout. *British Foundation for the Study of Arabia Monographs (formerly Society for Arabian Studies Monographs) 17.* 2015. ISBN 9781784911942 (printed book), ISBN 9781784911959 (e-book). £19.00.

The idea of the Swahili corridor has become familiar to those working along the East African coast. In its original conception (Horton 1987), it was the idea that indigenous Swahili merchants sailed along the coast, from Mozambique to Somalia, using the monsoon winds, thus establishing a degree of cultural unity along this coastal zone, visible both linguistically and in the material culture, especially locally produced ceramics, termed Tana/TIW. While early writers on the Swahili Coast pointed to connections with the Gulf (Chittick 1977), the hypothesis was mooted that the Swahili also connected with the coast of southern Arabia, and thus the Red Sea, and ultimately the Mediterranean world. High-value precious commodities, such as ivory, gold and crystal found their way into Europe from the Fatimid period (late tenth century) onwards, from as far afield as Southern Africa.

Thirty years ago, there was only sporadic evidence to support this hypothesis. A limited number of Fatimid gold coins, as well as imitations of Fatimid dinars have been found (Horton et al 1986), but apart from a little glass (Chittick 1984: 164) there were no recognizable Red Sea or Egyptian ceramics until the thirteenth century and the arrival of the ubiquitous black-on-yellow glazed wares made near to Aden, while even the most recent studies of glass beads point to the Gulf or Indian origin, rather than Egyptian (Wood *et al.* 2016). Other disappointing pieces of evidence are the recently published Geniza documents for the India trade (Goitein & Friedman 2008: 413, 453, 456, 535), where reference to East Africa are few, as were commodities such as ivory that might reasonably have traded from the African coast, but apparently not by Jewish merchants.

The publication of these two volumes, one of an important Fatimid-period manuscript, and the other a report on a meticulously excavated site in southern Arabia, provides a welcome opportunity to reassess the Swahili corridor model, and in particular Fatimid and post-Fatimid connections to East Africa and beyond into southern Africa.

The *Kitāb Gharā'ib al-funūn wa-mulaḥ al-'uyūn*, or 'The Book of Curiosities of the Sciences

and *Marvels for the Eyes*, is a highly illustrated Arabic manuscript, acquired by the Bodleian Library (MS Arab. c. 90) in 2002. This volume represents its full publication, translation commentary and reproduction of the colorful illustrations. Known by the short title *Book of Curiosities* it is a compilation of astronomical, historical and geographic knowledge, from the ninth to the eleventh centuries. The manuscript itself is a copy dating to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, of an original work compiled in Egypt between 1020-1050. Its importance to Africanists is therefore as an Egyptian view of the Indian Ocean and in particular of the East Africa coast during the Fatimid period.

The volume is divided into two parts – ten chapters on celestial and astrological knowledge, followed by twenty-five chapters that concern history and geography. There are also five chapters on monstrous animals and wondrous plants, including the mythical WaqWaq plant. The maps include three of the great seas (Mediterranean, Caspian and the Indian Ocean), maps of the Nile (unfortunately fragmentary), Tigris, Oxus and Indus rivers and of Sicily, Cyprus, with town plans of al-Mahdiyah and Tinnis.

The two world maps contain some new material. One, the circular map (fig 2.4, MS Arab c.90. fols27b28a) adds little to the well-known world maps of al-Idrīsī, and the authors argue convincingly that it is a slightly later addition to the book and likely derivative from Idrīsī. This shows the African coast, with four rivers flowing from mountains of the interior, with the land divided into Berbera, al-Zanj, Sufālah, al-Wāqwāq (twice). Opposite al-Wāqwāq is shown Jazīrat al-Qumr (the island of Madagascar) with smaller islands between Qumr and mainland (? Comoros). Sarandīb (Sri Lanka) is shown opposite Sufalah. The Indian Ocean is shown open-ended with these African locations lying opposite India and China.

The rectangular map (MS Arab c.90. fols23b24a figs 2.1-2.4) is unlike any other medieval map in its layout. It shows the Indian Ocean as open to the south, with the semi-mythical island Jazīrat al-jawhar (Island of the Jewel) at its end. The run of places down the African coast are: Arḍ al-Ḥabashah (Ethiopia) Arḍ al-Barbar (Berbera), the crocodile comes from it (the Qārūrah Lake) to the lands of the Zanj, a river from the Qārūrah Lake, Arḍ al-Zanj (Land of the Zanj), Arḍ al-Zānaj, end of the desert along the sea. The inclusion of al-Zānaj on the African side is of interest, as this follows Idrīsī, who places al-Zābaj / Djawaga islands, opposite the Zanj coast, with a description that identifies the Comoros (Jaubert 1975, 59). Al-Zābaj, is also equated with the island of Java, and is an early example of the confusion between the eastern and western sides of the Indian Ocean, whose roots may lie in the Austronesian settlement of Madagascar.

The representation of the Indian Ocean (MS Arab c.90. fols29b30a, fig. 2.5) differs from these world maps, and is shown as a flattened oval, entirely surrounded by land, very similar to the enclosed Mediterranean map. In this 'Braudelian' conception of the Indian Ocean, the map maker has taken liberties with geography, by splitting the Indian Ocean into two halves the left side representing Arabia and East Africa and the right-side China and India. In the enclosed sea are shown numerous islands, some of which are East African. This map is of particular interest to Africanists, as it provides the earliest itineraries and detailed place-names of the East African coast, as far as Mozambique, and as such represents Egyptian knowledge of the region in the mid eleventh century, otherwise recorded by Idrīsī in the twelfth century (Trimingham 1975).

The African islands are particularly prominent; the text runs, ‘the island of Unjuwa, there are ? anchorages around it, it has a town called A-k-h; an island of the Zanj; islands of the Zanj; Jazīrat Qanbalū. Here Unjuwa is clearly Unguja, the Swahili name for Zanzibar, and the vocalisation of A-k-h gives Ukuu, thus Unguja Ukuu, the well-known eighth-eleventh century site in southern Zanzibar (Juma 2004). The number of anchorages around the island is corrupt, although the editors did provide a reading of 16 on their earlier website. The other named island of Qanbalu has no description, but is most likely Pemba. One is then tempted to suggest the unnamed island of the Zanj is Mafia and the islands of the Zanj are the Lamu archipelago.

The other information about East Africa in the form of itineraries, that list places encountered as the ship sails along the northern Somali coast, round the Horn of Africa and down the Swahili coast. Two such itineraries can be recognised, one on the left-hand side of the map and a second on the top of the map. After the labels, island of Sofala and lands of the Zanj, the first list reads:

Māyīṭ (Mait), village
 Hiiṣ (Heis), village
 Ma⟨. . .⟩a, village
 A⟨. . .⟩, village
 ‘-w-x-r-h, village
 Damyūn, village
 ⟨. . .⟩ṭ-b-h, village
 ⟨. . .⟩x-h qar⟨yah⟩, village
 a-l-x-ḥ-x-h, village
 The mouth of the ravines; mountains
 a-l-K-r-d-y, village
 M-l-n-d-s (Malindi or Manda), village
 M-k-f-a (Mtwapa) qa⟨ryah⟩, village
 A-l-w
 khawr ⟨. . . (Bay of . . .)

Most of these place names are obscure. Mait and Heis are both located on the northern Somali coast. Damyan is located in a navigational treatise of 1511, just north of Saif al-Tawil (‘the long beach’, approximately 7 degrees north, Tibbetts 1971: 426, but also mentioned in the Periplus), and may be near Ras el-Cheil; there is a small village there called el-Danane. The name M-l-n-d-s has often caused confusion and is normally vocalised as Mulanda, which could be either Manda or Malindi, M-k-f-a is probably Mtwapa, and it seems that the itinerary ends in a bay, possibly near Tanga.

More detail is then provided at the top of the map for the second route down the African coast This begins further west at Berbera and runs along the Somali coast.

Berbera

it is said that there are other bays and whenever a ship enters them, it is lost;
al-Qandalā (Candala), a mountain
Ra 's Ḥarīra (?Ra 's al-Khanzīra) a mountain
fortress in A-n-kh-a-n, mountains
s-j-y-b, a mountain
al-ḥārah, a mountain
Abd 'd-s, a mountain in the sea
al-Jardafūn, a large mountain (Guardafui)
Ra 's Ḥāfūn, a mountain

At this point the sailors enter the encompassing sea:

The traveller encounters here the land of the Zanj at the curve of the Encompassing Sea. Whoever wants to go there is thrown back by the waves, but whoever seeks the land of the Zanj, the sea waves come from behind and assist him (p 445).

South of Ras Hafun a further eleven places are given:

A mountain in the sea called Ra 's Fīl (Ras Filuk)
The Lands of the Zanj
The bay of Mīkhānah (?Mtwapa)
Lunjuwah, an island (Unguja/Zanzibar)
Manfiya, an island (Mafia)
Kilwalah, an island (Kilwa)
Island of ⟨. . .⟩d-l-h
Q-d-x-h, a bay
Khawr al-amīr (The bay of the amir)
K-l-n-k-w, a stronghold
Sūsmār (Crocodile), an island

This list provides the earliest references to Kilwa that is otherwise first noted c.1224, by Yakut (Chittick 1974, 246), two hundred years later as well as Mtwapa and Mafia island. South of Kilwa, the five places remain unidentified and their ancient names have probably been lost. The Island of ⟨. . .⟩d-l-h may be one of the Kerimba islands, and the bay of the amir may be Sofala bay. The crocodile island is intriguing, and may refer to the Bazaruto archipelago to the east of Vilanculos, and today protected by a national park, noted for its lagoons supporting significant crocodile populations. Adjacent to these islands is the eighth - tenth trading site of Chibuene, and the terminus of the route into the southern Africa interior. As the lists seems to be coherent, it provides *a priori* evidence for eleventh-century voyaging, from the Red Sea, down the African coast as far as southern Mozambique.

The *Sharma* volume offers a different perspective. The site of Sharma lies on the southern coast of Arabia almost opposite Cape Guardafui, and around 580km east of Aden. It is located around a west-facing bay, with a fine sandy beach, dominated by a flat hill around 30m above the surrounding plain, that was defended by a citadel and a fort. In the low-lying area behind the beach around 100 structures were mapped, a single mosque (rebuilt three times), water cisterns and an enclosing town wall. The Islamic occupation (there are

some earlier unrelated pre-Islamic levels) dates from around 980 (it is first mentioned by al-Muqaddasi in 985) when it is surmised that the town is founded by emigrés from the Gulf port of Siraf, after the earthquake there of 977, until its attack and abandonment in 1180, during the Ayyubids' campaign along the Hadramaut. It is therefore exactly contemporary with the *Book of Curiosities*, although the nearby port of al-Shihr is marked. What has been designated as the 'Sharma horizon' is a snapshot of eleventh century Western Indian Ocean trade.

The importance of Sharma for Africanists is in the remarkable collection of East African found throughout the assemblages. Overall it comprises 16.2% of all the unglazed pottery (which is itself around 91% of the total ceramic assemblage), and over the period of occupation varies between 21.5% (c. 1000 CE) and 14% (c. 1150 CE). Individual counts are not provided, so it is assumed that these ceramics were fairly evenly distributed across the site, rather than being found in a specific 'African quarter'. All the vessels lie within the range of Tana / TIW ceramics, and around 50% are restricted neck jars. There are a small number of shell-dentate decorated bowls, that are reminiscent of Dembeni-phase ceramics from the Comoros (Wright 1984), but are also found rarely on the coast, at Unguju Ukuu, Shanga and Manda. Two examples of triangular decoration were found in the earliest levels, in the late tenth century. The majority of decorated jars formed part of the 'developed Tana tradition' where the triangles had evolved into diagonal incised lines, criss-cross lines and backward 'Z's. A proportion of these jars have punctates below the incised lines. A variety of forms are found, closely following the recorded sequence at Shanga (Horton 1996) with high necked jars and holemouth jars appearing in the mid eleventh century. The bead rim punctate wares (c. 1075-1125) and carinated wares closely parallel pottery from both the Zanzibar region and the Lamu archipelago. It is the high proportion of red-slip and graphited red-slip wares that gives the best clue to the main source of these ceramics. While these are common in Dembeni-phase ceramics from the Comoros, they are also found on Zanzibar and Pemba. Exact parallels for the very fine-lined graphite hatched decoration on the interior of red-slipped bowls (fig. 182, 14-18) comes from the site of Mtambwe Mkuu, from sealed tenth-century pit deposits, dating that fits precisely that of Sharma.

The interpretation of this puzzling assemblage remains controversial, and suggests that Africans were living in Sharma. A trade in African slaves is mentioned (Goitein & Friedman 2008: 454), but it seems odd that slaves would be using (and importing) such high status pottery. Another clue from the archaeology is the ceramic longevity – that the type sequence at Sharma exactly matches that from East Africa, suggesting sustained ceramic importation over some 200 years, with regular shipments. The range of wares reflect a wide area of the coast, but it is also possible to suggest that virtually all come from Pemba island, where all the types represented and only the fine graphite lined wares. It is likely that there was an African merchant community resident in Sharma, in contact with East Africa, most likely Pemba, and who were receiving familiar pots from home on a regular basis.

Hints of what might have been traded emerge from the volume. 124 pieces of gum or resin were analysed, of which around half were East African copal. This derives from the *Hymenaea verrucosa* tree, distributed along the coast as well as on Madagascar. The copal was either tapped from the living tree, or dug out of coral beds where it formed in fossilised layers. Radiocarbon dating is able to distinguish between the two sources, but was not done

on this assemblage. Copal is used as a basis for incense and was detected on a near contemporary incense burner at Unguja Ukuu (Crowther *et al.* 2015). Another possible ancient use is as an alternative to gum dammer, used to caulk sewn boats. Food may also have been reaching Sharma, as quantities of Sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) were recovered in a tenth century phase as well as some millet (*Panicoideae*). Intriguing small artefacts of African origin include worked pumice, chlorite schist (from Madagascar) and aragonite (fig 253, not identified as such). Four rock crystal beads were recorded, but no waste crystal often found on East African sites (Horton *et al.* 2017).

Another possible clue about the activity of the African community were 355 fragments of what the excavators called 'jars with traces of fingers' but published from Shanga as *terracotta vessels* (Horton 1996: 335), but also widely distributed along the coast, and undoubtedly of African origin. They are unfired and crudely made vessels, and the Sharma team propose that they might have been used by slaves. Their form is similar to large jars employed in medieval sugar production (Wartburg 1983), and they may have been to collect the molasses. Is it possible that the triangular lids (fig 188, 1-4), the tubular hole (fig 186.2), or the cylindrical Egyptian vessels (fig. 184, 1-3, 4) are the traditional sugar-loaf moulds? The southern Arabian coast is too arid to grow sugar cane, but the African coast certainly is. Idrisi noted sugar cane as one of the products of the Comoros (Freeman-Grenville 1962: 21). Sugar has to be processed shortly after cutting, but as in the eighteenth-century sugar industry, needed to be reprocessed to purify it.

While in Arabia, Sharma represents an extension of the Swahili corridor where it linked to the Red Sea, the Gulf and India. It is easy to see why, as travelling down the African coast required the north-east monsoon, while sailing out of the Gulf of Aden towards India required the south west monsoon. The Arabian coast formed a natural entrepôt, and Sharma, with its fortified community acted as a storehouse for African goods to be collected by the incoming Indian trade. Indeed, it is tempting to see citadel as a secure area for the storage of precious items such as ivory, crystal and gold, as well as possibly slaves. The proposal that the settlement was founded from Siraf may be a reflection of changed circumstances, as the Abbasid caliphate declined, while the Mediterranean world re-emerged as the dominant economic engine of the Middle Ages. These two volumes have moved the discussion forward in a significant way, throwing new light on Africa's external relations during this period of expanding globalisation.

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