

## East Africa and the Middle East relationship from the first millennium BC to about 1500 AD

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## Résumé

*Dans cet article, l'auteur tente de montrer les relations existant entre l'Afrique de l'Est et le Moyen-Orient depuis le début du premier millénaire av. J.-C. jusqu'à la moitié du deuxième millénaire ap. J.-C. Il s'appuie sur des données textuelles et archéologiques qui reflètent la fluctuation des liens culturels et économiques entre les deux régions selon les époques et les conditions politiques sur les rives de la mer Rouge et du nord de l'océan Indien. Si les informations sur le premier millénaire av. J.-C. sont relativement ténues, celles concernant les millénaires suivants sont beaucoup plus fiables. Il s'agit de récits de voyageurs originaires des mondes gréco-romain et moyen-oriental, qui ont visité l'Afrique de l'Est ou y ont vécu. Inversement, à des périodes plus récentes, on voit l'influence de l'Afrique de l'Est s'étendre au Moyen-Orient. De récentes découvertes archéologiques sur la côte de Tanzanie, mettant au jour d'anciens établissements, attestent l'existence de liens commerciaux avec le Moyen-Orient et le monde méditerranéen, corroborant ainsi les informations contenues dans les documents écrits. Ces relations entre le monde arabe et l'Afrique de l'Est ont probablement atteint leur apogée à l'époque où la culture swahili était elle-même florissante. Les populations swahili se sont identifiées à l'islam et leurs dirigeants ont cherché à renforcer leur lignée par le biais d'alliances avec des familles du Moyen-Orient. C'est grâce à ces relations, qui ont assuré la stabilité de la région et favorisé le développement du commerce, que le monde swahili a été particulièrement prospère entre 1200 et 1500 ap. J.-C. monde méditerranéen, corroborant ainsi les informations contenues dans les documents écrits. Ces relations entre le monde arabe et l'Afrique de l'Est ont probablement atteint leur apogée à l'époque où la culture swahili était elle-même florissante. Les populations swahili se sont identifiées à l'islam et leurs dirigeants ont cherché à renforcer leur lignée par le biais d'alliances avec des familles du Moyen-Orient. C'est grâce à ces relations, qui ont assuré la stabilité de la région et favorisé le développement du commerce, que le monde swahili a été particulièrement prospère entre 1200 et 1500 ap. J.-C.*

## Abstract

*This paper attempts to provide evidence for the relationship that existed between East Africa and the Middle East from about the beginning of the first millennium BC to the mid-second millennium AD. The paper brings together written and archaeological evidence showing that, in different time periods, both cultural and economic links existed between the two regions to varying degrees depending on the balance of power around the Red Sea and in the north Indian Ocean. While the evidence for the first millennium BC is still fragile, that of the period nearing the BC/AD changeover and thereafter is now quite solid and seems incontrovertible. There are reports of individuals from the Greco-Roman world and from the Middle East who claimed to have visited and lived in East Africa. Inversely, for the later periods, East African influence can be shown to have extended to the Middle East. Recent archaeological discoveries on the coast of Tanzania corroborate these written reports by uncovering ancient settlements linked by trade to the Middle East and as far north as the Mediterranean world. The period of the Swahili culture was probably the pinnacle for such links between the Arab world and East Africa. The Swahili people identified themselves with Islam and their leaders struggled to link their royal lines with families from the Middle East. The great wealth of the Swahili world between 1200 and 1500 ad was due to such links which created stability in the region and expanded commerce.*

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## Keywords

Al Jahiz, Axumites, Azania, Egypt, Greco-Roman, Iambulus, Ibn Battuta, Kansyore, Kilwa, Limbo, Masud, Meroe, Middle East, Narosura, Nile, Paanchea, Panara, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, Punt, Qunbalu, Red Sea, Rhapta, Sasanid, Sasu, Swahili, Unguja, Urewe, Zanj, Zingion

## Résumé

Dans cet article, l'auteur tente de montrer les relations existant entre l'Afrique de l'Est et le Moyen-Orient depuis le début du premier millénaire av. J.-C. jusqu'à la moitié du deuxième millénaire ap. J.-C. Il s'appuie sur des données textuelles et archéologiques qui reflètent la fluctuation des liens culturels et économiques entre les deux régions selon les époques et les conditions politiques sur les rives de la mer Rouge et du nord de l'océan Indien. Si les informations sur le premier millénaire av. J.-C. sont relativement ténues, celles concernant les millénaires suivants sont beaucoup plus fiables. Il s'agit de récits de voyageurs originaires des mondes gréco-romain et moyen-oriental, qui ont visité l'Afrique de l'Est ou y ont vécu. Inversement, à des périodes plus récentes, on voit l'influence de l'Afrique de l'Est s'étendre au Moyen-Orient. De récentes découvertes archéologiques sur la côte de Tanzanie, mettant au jour d'anciens établissements, attestent l'existence de liens commerciaux avec le Moyen-Orient et le

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### *Mots-clés*

Al Jahiz, Axumites, Azania, Égypte, Gréco-Romain, Iambulus, Ibn Battuta, Kansyore, Kilwa, Limbo, Masud, Meroe, mer Rouge, Moyen-Orient, Narosura, Nil, Paanchea, Panara, *Périple de la mer Érythrée*, Punt, Qunbalu, Rhapta, Sassanides, Sasu, Swahili, Unguja, Urewe, Zanj, Zingion

## *Introduction*

This paper attempts to outline the links that existed between the coast of East Africa and the Middle East from the remotest time known to about 1500 AD. The subsequent period is much better known because during this time Europeans expanded to the rest of the world and Omani Arabs used Zanzibar as their main capital from 1840 onwards.

Apart from anecdotic literature produced by Arab and Chinese visitors from about the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, Greco-Roman documents of the classical time also contain some information about such links. Old and recent archaeological works have thus been employed.

Five periods are covered: before the Greco-Roman era when East Africa was probably known as Punt; the Greco-Roman era when East Africa was known as Paanchea/Zingion/Azania; the Sasanian era 300-700 AD; between 700 and 1200 AD when East Africa, then called Zanj, was being integrated to the Islamic world; and lastly between 1200 and 1500 AD when East Africa is identified as Swahili. It should be noted here that Robinson (1937) was probably the first person to attempt a similar account, referring to seven historical periods. His account was unable to include archaeological data available today.

*Before The Greco-Roman era*

There are few historical documents and archaeological data for this time period suggesting that East Africa had been known to the rest of the world. The earliest known historical record is probably that of Pharaonic Egypt, suggesting that East Africa was part of the land of Punt. Although scholars have been inclined to locate Punt north of East Africa, in the area of Somalia and Ethiopia, archaeology is shedding more and more light on this problem, suggesting that East Africa was Punt or a part of Punt. Egyptians themselves noted that there was a land of God beyond Punt; Hetshepsut (1472/1 BC) claimed that she had been assigned the land of Punt, "as far as the lands of the gods, God's Land" (Kitchen 1993: 592; see Map 1).

It should be noted that while going to Punt, Egyptians sailed the Red Sea. The people of the Red Sea coast would also have used the same waters to communicate with Punt. Probably their ports would also have provided supply facilities and goods to the ships plying between Punt and Egypt. This was a stable pattern until the time of well-recorded history in the Greco-Roman period.

Probably the best recorded event towards the end of Pharaonic Egypt, of which most scholars are still sceptical (Cary and Warmington 1963: 111-124; Posnansky 1981: 547-548; Zayed 1981: 148-149), is the expedition sent by the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho (609-594 BC) to sail around Africa via East Africa. As the expedition is said to have included Phoenicians – people who are of Middle Eastern origin and known to have sailed in all waters of the ancient world – it can also be argued that the people of the Middle East knew East Africa by that time. Also, as the expedition reports the sun being to the north in southern Africa, it is obvious that these expeditions took place, for there is no way one could have invented this fact unless the persons concerned had indeed been in the southern part of Africa. The Greco-Roman scholars who were the first to doubt this information, showed their ignorance about Africa by arguing that the modern Indian Ocean – their Erythrean Sea – was a lake.<sup>1</sup>

The history of Herodotus also sheds some light on the link that probably existed between East Africa and the Middle East during the last years of the Persian conquest of Egypt. He describes how the King of Persia, Cambyses (succeeded by Darius), conquered Egypt. His rule lasted from 527 to 404 BC (Rawlinson 1964). The Persians were known to have used the Red Sea and probably the northern Indian Ocean. Of special interest are the expeditions sent to the land of the "long-living Ethiopians". While most scholars see Nubia as the land of the "long-living Ethiopians", later Greco-Roman writers including

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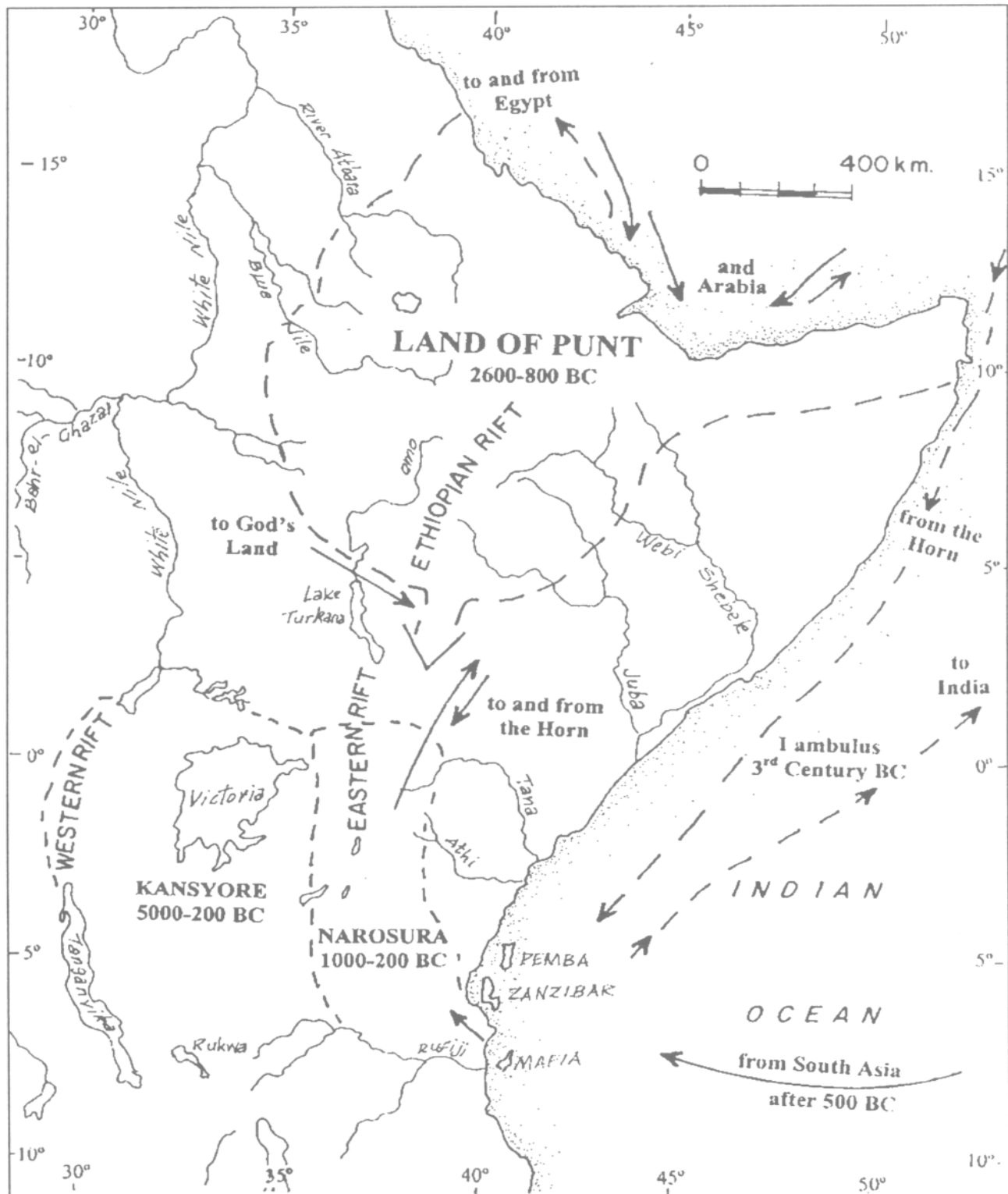
<sup>1</sup> For a conspectus, see Cary and Warmington 1963; Posnansky 1981: 547-548; Begley *et al* 1991.

Strabo (Jones 1960), Iambulus (Oldfather 1961) and Pliny (Rackham 1961), located the “long-living Ethiopians” in eastern Africa, “at the end of the earth, on the banks of Oceanus” (Jones 1960: 9).

Rock art in Tanzania of scenes of captives led by people clad in cloaks suggest visits to East Africa by people of the Middle East dating from before the end of the first millennium BC (Leakey 1983: 22). It should also be noted that the Rift Valley of East Africa has graves with semi-precious stones dating to the middle of the first millennium BC. These graves were vandalised in ancient times and archaeologists now think that the disturbance of the graves was due to re-opening of the graves for interments (Leakey 1966; Sassoon 1968; Leakey and Leakey 1950). It is a suggestive coincidence that during the same time period Herodotus reported that soldiers in the Persian expedition to the “long-living Ethiopians” vandalised graves, looking for precious materials (Rawlinson 1964: 221).

The presence in such graves of archaeological artefacts originating from the coast of East Africa – *i.e.* marine shells as well as glass beads and semi-precious stones probably from north Africa and the Middle East (Leakey 1960; Sassoon 1968; Leakey and Leakey 1950) – suggests that East Africa, well into its interior, had been in contact with the north Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Archaeology also suggests that in the early part of the first millennium BC, Asiatic domesticates – including banana, chicken and Indian cattle (*Bos indicus*) – had reached East Africa. It is also at this period that African domesticates such as millet crossed to Arabia and India (for a conspectus, see Marshall 1989; Chami 2001 a & b). Some of this exchange could have taken place via the north Indian Ocean. Sorghum, also domesticated in Africa, seems attested even earlier in the Arabian Gulf, at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Cleuziou & Costantini 1980; Cleuziou 1997).

Recent research undertaken on the island of Mafia in Tanzania has expanded that on Zanzibar (Chami 2001a) by showing that there was a Neolithic culture on the coast of East Africa, dated using the C<sub>14</sub> method, at 800-500 BC. Objects of trade found in this context include red-painted ceramics now thought to have been related to ones found in south-east Asia, as well as other pottery and glass beads from the Middle East, the Mediterranean and India. Research and analysis of these materials continues.



Map 1 – East Africa and the ancient world in the first two millennia BC

### *The Greco-Roman era*

It was noted earlier that Greco-Romans knew East Africa as Paanchea in Greek times and as Zingion or Azania in Roman times. The territory had major centers called Panara and Rhapta respectively (Cary & Warmington 1963; Casson 1989).

The evidence that the people of East Africa and the Middle East had been in contact from about 200 BC comes from several written records. A certain Iambulus, while in southern Arabia, is reported to have been captured and transported to the Horn of Africa where he was forced to sail southward following the coast of eastern Africa to the islands on the Equator where he lived for seven years. From there he then travelled to north-west India (Oldfather 1961). Another is a report by Eudoxus. On his way to the Mediterranean Sea from India, he reported that he had been driven by monsoon winds to East Africa where he discovered that one could sail around Africa (Cary & Warmington 1963). These two reports confirm that visits from the Middle East to East Africa existed before BC/AD changeover.

Also it should be noted that in the last centuries BC, Greco-Romans believed that cinnamon, one of the most prized commodities in the Mediterranean world, as well as cassia, originated from the interior of East Africa. At the BC/AD changeover, Pliny mentions that the spices were brought by *cave dwellers* of East Africa from far in the ocean (Southeast Asia?). It has also been speculated that Arabia obtained some of its spices from eastern Africa (Jones 1960; Rackham 1961; Miller 1969; Casson 1984). This could explain why Iambulus was forced to sail to East Africa: to find the source of the spices, which he himself had been looking for. Map 1 illustrates Iambulus' itinerary. It also shows the location of Neolithic cultures of East Africa in the first millennium BC, including Paanchea, Narosura and Kansyore.

The Roman era began with the Romans trying to break barriers established for centuries by Arabs in the Red Sea and in the Indian Ocean that hindered the Mediterraneans in their access to the Indian Ocean for trade. The Arabs had been making much profit by selling goods, including spices of the Indian Ocean seaboard, to the Mediterraneans for exorbitant prices. Accessibility to the Indian Ocean markets by Mediterraneans would have adversely affected the economy of the Arabs. It was in the time of the Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar, during the BC/AD changeover, when the Mediterraneans managed to enter the Indian Ocean unchallenged after destroying the Arab port of Aden in southern Arabia (Begley *et al.* 1991; Cinimo 1994).

In entering the Indian Ocean, the Romans discovered a secret kept by the Arabs for a long time: by using monsoon/trade winds, one could safely sail from the north Indian Ocean to East Africa and back, taking only a period of one year. The same could be done between southern Arabia and western India



(Begley *et al.* 1991; Casson 1984, 1989). As the Romans used the trade winds for the first time to trade in Azania, they found that the Arabs had already been in East Africa. They had been involved in trade affairs in the emporium of Rhapta (Casson 1989). How long had these Arabs of the Red Sea and its interior been trading with Azania?

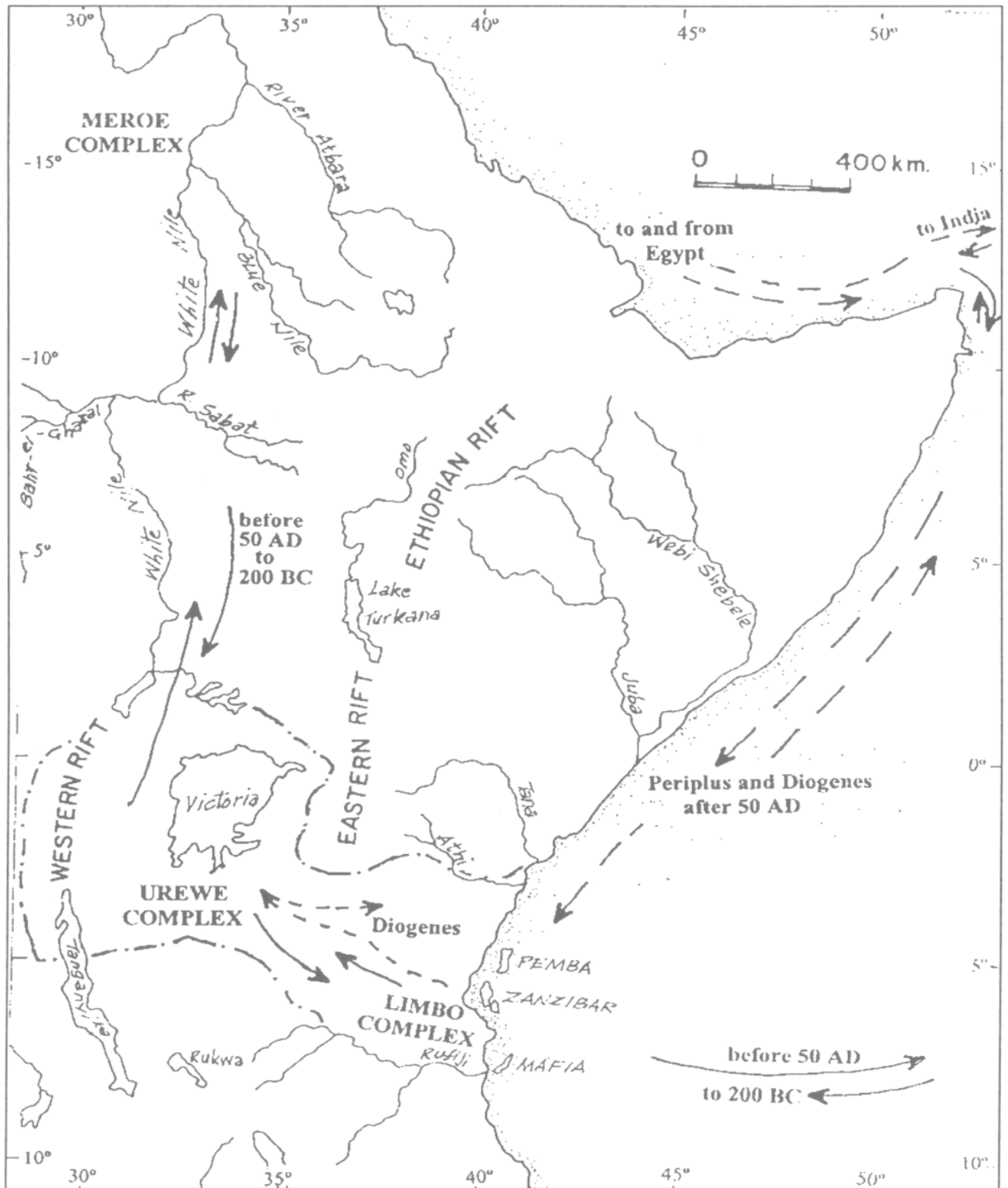
It must definitely be after 200 AD because Iambulus makes no mention of the presence of Arabs in East Africa. It was noted earlier that Strabo and Pliny reported that cinnamon and cassia were found in the interior of East Africa. It has been suggested elsewhere (Chami 1999; Miller 1969) that sometime between 200 BC and the end of the last century BC, the Meroetics had developed an interior trade route to the coast of East Africa. This route diverted the East African-Red Sea trade route to the Nile Valley. The movement of Arabs to Rhapta therefore aimed to redirect goods from there to the north Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. By the BC/AD changeover, this movement had suffocated the short-lived interior route to the Nile Valley, which may have required the Romans to enter the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Notice that when the Romans controlled the Red Sea-India and Azania route, they also checked to make sure that the interior route was not functioning. This was the purpose of Nero's expedition to the Marshes of the Nile, which reported back that the route had ceased to function and that it had shifted to the Red Sea (Welsby 1996; Chami 1999). Probably, this was also the purpose of Diogenes' visit to the source of the Nile in the last part of the first century or second century AD. He probably followed a trade route from Rhapta to the deep interior where he discovered the Mountains of the Moon (Ruwenzori), as well as the river (Kagera) from the mountains that fed into a lake (Nyanza/Victoria) which was the source of Nile (Huntingford 1980).

The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Casson 1989) reports that the Arabs who were found trading in the town of Rhapta could speak the local language and had intermarried with the Rhaptonoids. Pliny, during the BC/AD changeover, had reported that the people of the Red Sea had been intermarrying with the *cave dwellers* of East Africa. These reports suggest that the East Africans were not only trading with the Arabs but that they also had cultural links with them.

It is obvious that the Romans also wanted to control Rhapta as they did for other emporiums elsewhere in the north. Consequently, the Arabs found their trade monopoly at Rhapta threatened. They had to find justifications for their struggle to maintain the status quo. Hence the following remark:

“The region is under the rule of the governor of Mapharitis, since by some ancient right it is subject to the kingdom of Arabia as first constituted.” (Casson 1989: 61).



**Map 2 – East Africa and the ancient world, from 200 BC to 100 AD.  
(Observe the interlacustrine-Nile route)**

As noted earlier, this remark leads us to believe that if the Arabs were not making all this up, there had been a cultural and economic relationship between the Middle East and East Africa long before the mid first century AD when the *Periplus* was authored.

Recent archaeological works on the coast of Tanzania, mainly near the Rufiji Delta and in the islands of Zanzibar and Mafia, have found several sites of the Early Iron Working (EIW) tradition. These are known to have belonged to Bantu speakers (Phillipson 1993) dating from between 200 BC and 300 AD. These sites have been found to contain remains of trade goods including beads and pottery from the Mediterranean world, the Middle East and India (Chami 1999; Chami 2001a, b and c). This list adds to what was reported by the *Periplus* as goods imported and exported from Azania (Casson 1989). Map 2 shows how the situation was in Greco-Roman times. Observe the presence of iron working cultural complexes including Limbo, Urewe and Meroe (Chami 1999).

### *The Sasanians and the Coast of East Africa*

Very little is known about the relationship between the Middle East and East Africa between 300 and 700 AD. Only one early 6<sup>th</sup> century document, that of Cosmas Indicopleustus, is known to have reported an interior trade route between the Axumites and East Africa (Freeman-Grenville 1975). However, the history of the Middle East shows that the Romans lost influence in the Red Sea and in the Indian Ocean from about 300 AD onwards (Robinson 1937; Whitehouse & Williamson 1973).

It should be noted here that the Sasanian power began in 225 AD when the first Sasanian ruler, Ardashir, overthrew the last of the Parthians. The Sassanid power was more consolidated between 310-79 AD when Shahpur II controlled Arabia as far west as Yathrib (Medina) (Whitehouse & Williamson 1973).

On their side, Ethiopians based at Axum started controlling the Red Sea from the fourth century. From 524/5 to 600 AD, they controlled southern Arabia and with the support of the Romans (Byzantines), they were already challenging the Sasanians in the Indian Ocean. Sasanians controlled Arabia and the Indian Ocean again from 600 AD, having ships based at Aden (Whitehouse and Williamson 1973).

It is likely that while the Ethiopians used the interior route to trade with East Africa, as reported by Cosmas, the people of the Middle East may have used the Indian Ocean to access East Africa. Cosmas mentions the town called Sasu, which was the trade center of East Africa, as trading with Axumites. Sasu is reported to have been located in the interior, but near the ocean. Gold was the main item of export. It is not known if Sasu was formerly Rhapta which had changed name. Ptolemy reported that Rhapta was located a bit to the interior

(Huntingford 1980). There could have been another town emerging to the north of Rhapta which had greater connections with the Sasanian Persian Gulf. As it will be noted later, this could be Lanjuya and hence the site of Unguja Ukuu in Zanzibar.

If the historical data is not clear, one thing is obvious from the archaeological record regarding the coast of Tanzania from 400 to 600 AD. The EIW tradition, which was the cultural tradition of the Azanian, split into two separate sub-traditions. What is known today as TIW tradition developed in the area of the Zanzibar Channel, the island and the interior. What is called Mwangia tradition developed on the coast south of the Zanzibar Channel, with the core at the Rufiji region of the EIW tradition. The largest known site of the former is that of Unguja Ukuu in Zanzibar (Juma 1996). The sites of the TIW tradition seem to have benefited more from international trade as they have many artefacts from the northern Indian ocean, especially from Persia (Chami 1994; Juma 1996). So far, no artefacts of external trade have been found at the Mwangia sites.

By 600 AD the TIW tradition, now called the Early TIW, had grown more powerful. The Early TIW Phase, dated as 600-750 AD, was affluent and stable. This tradition expanded to cover the Mwangia area as far south as Mozambique and as far interior as the borders of modern Tanzania. However, the Kenya and Somali coasts seem to have been little affected by the Early TIW phase as no site of this tradition dating back to before 800 AD is presently known.

The archaeology of the early phase TIW tradition has been reported elsewhere (Chami 1994). The main trade partner of the Early TIW tradition were the Sasanians as their green/blue ware predominates in every TIW site. Beads and glass from the north Indian Ocean also occur very frequently. Siraf may have started acting as the main port in the Middle East connecting East Africa with the rest of the world (Whitehouse & Williamson 1973; Tampoe 1989).

### *The early Muslims and East Africa (700-1200 AD)*

Hitti (1955) and Hodges & Whitehouse (1983) have described the rise of Islam in the Middle East and its effect on the rest of the known ancient world. The Muslims replaced the Sasanid power all over the Middle East by 700 AD when the Umayyad Caliphs took power. At this time, Muslim forces in crusade were advancing through North Africa and Asia.

The earliest recorded attempt by the Muslims to conquer East Africa occurred at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Al Jahiz, a 9<sup>th</sup> century African scholar based in the Middle East, wrote about East Africa and episodes that had taken place there from the 7<sup>th</sup> century. One of the events took place in the late 7<sup>th</sup>

century when Arabs led by an Omani Prince organised a war expedition against the East Africans then called Zanj. The Arab army “was destroyed by the natives” (Lewicki 1974: 19). It is not clear if there were any more efforts by Arabs to launch war in East Africa. What appears clear from Al Jahiz’s report is that East Africa was politically and militarily well organized.

Al Jahiz and other writers also suggest that after the 8<sup>th</sup> century, East Africa was divided into two political regions. Al Jahiz, in his *Kitab Fakh al-Sudan ala ‘l-Bidan* (the Book of the Ascendency of the Negroes over the Whites) (*id.*: 19), reported the two polities as Qanbala and Lunjuya.

These two place names appear in later Arab reports. The former becomes Qanbalu in the work of Masud in the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Freeman-Grenville 1975) and in Idrisi’s (12<sup>th</sup> century) in which the area was mapped. Lunjuya is probably the area that appeared in Idrisi’s map as Ungûja (Trimingham 1975). Masud reported an African religion which involved open air sermons in the presence of the king. He also reports an organised African army.

The settlement of Quabalu had an African Muslim population speaking an African language called *Zahjiyya* (*id.*: 130-131). They were mixed with non-Muslims. The Muslims had conquered the non-Muslims by means of a crusade “in the same manner as the Muslim conquest of the island of Crete in the Mediterranean” (*id.*: 130).

By Idrisi’s time (12<sup>th</sup> century), the Arabs and the Chinese seemed to know quite a bit about East Africa in so far as maps of that time featured the interior as far as the Great Lake region and southern Africa where “Ard al-wag-wags” was located (Trimingham 1975; Wheatley 1975).

Although the division of East Africa followed the same logic of Al Jahiz, Masud and Idrisi, writing in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, divided East Africa between *Ard az-Zanj* to the north and *Ard Sufala* to the south. Notice that Trimingham (*id.*: 138) suggests that Idrisi located Unguja on the island of Zanzibar as part of the Sufala area, and that he located Quabalu on Pemba, which is in *Ard az-Zanj*. It is therefore safe to assume that Al Jâhiz’s geographical division is the same as that of Idrisi. The only difference is that the former referred to the capitals of the two territories.

It is necessary to understand what really happened after the Zanj-Omani war of the late 7<sup>th</sup> century in which the Arabs were defeated. Neville Chittick (1975), James Kirkman (1983) and Mark Horton (1996) have examined Arabic records and East African chronicles concerning the beginning of Islam in East Africa and the Middle East/East Africa relationship. An important episode concerns an Omani, Sulayman bin ‘Abbad al-Julanda, and his brothers, running from the Caliph ‘Abd-al-Malik to the land of Zanj where they died in 700 AD. This involved an army, as the group was made of close relatives, followers and tribes (Kirkman 1983).

Could they be the same group reported by Al Jahiz as coming to East Africa for war? Could they all have died? If some remained, could they have settled on the northern coast where the Early TIW tradition, which had defeated them, had little influence at that time? Could the remaining force organize the peripheral TIW communities to the north and found more enterprising settlements in the Lamu archipelago and on Pemba (Qunbalu in the polity of *Ard az-Zanj*)? If it were the case, then the powerful Early TIW region to the south had Unguja as a center in the Ard Sufala.

More settlers are reported to have come to East Africa in the time of the great Abbasid caliphs (757-809 AD). For example, "in the Pate history Harun al-Rashid is said to have sent settlers to East Africa..." (Kirkman 1983: 45). The chronicle of Kilwa also talks about a Persian family coming to East Africa and founding important Swahili settlements including Kilwa. And in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Quarmathians or Emozaydys are reported to have migrated to the coast of East Africa (Horton 1996: 425-426).

There has been no way of verifying the immigration movements up to now. Kirkman (1983) and Sutton (1998) have viewed the reports based mostly on the Swahili chronicles as mythical. According to Sutton (1998: 118), the purpose of these stories:

"[...] as with any royal or sultanate history, was to provide a noble pedigree and sense of legitimacy. More than that, on the African shores and islands it was necessary, for townspeople as much as their rulers, to invoke an origin in Arabia or the Persian Gulf in order to demonstrate a genuine Muslim ancestry in the heartlands of Islam."

Several facts, however, are very clear from the accounts of travellers and visitors and from the archaeological records.

First, from about 800 AD, the northern coast of East Africa became more populated than before with major towns of the Later TIW tradition emerging. In the south, the sites of the Early TIW tradition declined and immediately afterwards, about 900 AD, another tradition, called Plain Ware, different from that of the northern TIW, emerged (Chami 1998).

Second, at the same time period, the northern coast is more Muslim than the southern coast. Archaeology in the Lamu archipelago and historical records for Qunbalu suggest that the north had Muslim communities from about the 9<sup>th</sup> century or slightly earlier (Horton 1996). Actually, the sailor mentioned in the report by Buzurg ibn Shahriyar (10<sup>th</sup> century), who had been driven by wind past Qunbalu and accidentally landed in the land of Sufala, found the community to be non-Muslim. It was a few years later that Islam was introduced in the area after the king whom the sailor had cunningly sold into slavery in the Middle East had managed to come back and convert his own people.

Third, there was more active trading between the Middle East and the northern coast of East Africa between 800-1200 AD. Trade good remains in the

Plain Ware tradition are absent and limited in number for the islands of Kilwa and Mafia. The knowledge obtained from travellers' records suggest that nearly all traders from the Middle East ended their mission on the northern coast or islands whose capital was Quabalu. Masud (10<sup>th</sup> century) travelled several times to Qunbalu using trading ships. The records of Buzurg also mention a sailor who travelled to Quabalu from Siraf in Persia; this sailor landed accidentally in the land of Sufala after being driven by winds past Qunbalu.

Lastly are the impressions of Chinese travellers and visitors during the Sung dynasty (960-1279 AD). A modern reconstruction of East Africa as possibly envisaged by a Chinese official of that time suggests that the coast of East Africa was predominantly Muslim north of Mombasa, but not south of there (Wheatley 1975: 84).

On the other hand, there are several elements that clearly show that East Africans influenced affairs in the Middle East in the early Islamic period. This side of things has never been emphasized enough, probably because the north has always been seen as a provider to the south.

First, the pottery tradition of TIW dating back to the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries has been found in the Middle East. Sutton (1998: 121) has suggested that the tradition may have reached there through the use of pottery vessels "in ships and smaller boats, serving as containers for foodstuffs and other items of merchandise, or simply for the water and provisions required on board for the voyage." Probably other explanations for the finding of the TIW pottery in the Middle East should be evoked. This could include consideration of settlements by East Africans in the Middle East.

Secondly, East Africans have been reported to have been taken to the Middle East as slaves. According to Trimmingham (1975: 123)<sup>2</sup> there were so many East Africans (Zanj slaves) in the Middle East by the 9<sup>th</sup> century that they were able to organize their own army under their African leader, *Sahib-al-Zanj*, called Ali ibin-Muhammad. They revolted and fought the government based at Bagdad. They were able to rule and maintain power for more than fifteen years.

Other forces with Zanj contingents continued after the Zanj rule had been overthrown.

"In the armies of the Qarmatians there were Negro Zanj contingents (refugees from the ruthless suppression of the Zanj revolt) – those in 'Umân numbered 6,000, forming the main strength of the force – while the imperial (Dailamite) army which next occupied 'Uman was composed to a considerable extent of Negroes." (Trimingham *ibid.*).

The fact that the same population, whose power seems to have diminished from about 913 AD, could migrate back to their home land in East Africa and

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<sup>2</sup> See also Hitti 1956: 467; Whitehouse 1983: 151.

form a Muslim political and military force, has been indicated elsewhere (Horton 1996: 425).

### *The Swahili period (1200-1500 AD)*

The end of the long, die-hard, orthodox African culture on the southern coast of East Africa was in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This is the time when the archaeological Plain Ware tradition (Chami 1998) came to an end. The Swahili tradition, which was more Islamic with a good deal of Arabic influence, was introduced throughout the coast of East Africa. Archaeologically, the tradition of this time period is called Neck Punctating or Swahili. This is the tradition that had been flourishing on the northern coast from the end of the early Islamic period although with some slight changes in its culture. Horton (1996) and Wilson & Omar (1997) have described this tradition. By 1250 AD it had spread to all the islands, the Mozambique coast and northern Madagascar (Chami 1998; Radimilahy 1998). Kilwa controlled trade to southern Africa and for the most part on the coast of East Africa. Coins minted by the Kilwa sultanate spread all the way to southern Africa and the Middle East. Many coins from other parts, especially from the Muslim world, have also been found in East Africa (Sutton 1998; Horton 1996).

The relationship between the Middle East and East Africa seems to have been very healthy during this time. No documents suggest the existence of slave trade. In 1331, Ibn Battuta described the people of Kilwa as black. He found them to be Muslims fighting their non-Muslim neighbours to the interior (Gibb 1939).

Muslim traders and visitors from the Middle East frequented the towns of the Swahili world, especially Kilwa. The towns of the Swahili grew very wealthy and were built using coral stones and lime. Swahili relations extended all the way to China with the king of Malindi sending gifts, including a live giraffe, to the Chinese emperor (Kusimba 2000).

With Swahili communities being so prosperous, no wonder that there were frequent visits of the Swahili people to the Middle East, in particular to conduct pilgrimages. Arabic became the language of knowledge and most Swahili monuments bear inscriptions in this language. Coins of Kilwa made from about 1200 to 1400 (Chittick 1974)<sup>3</sup> bore Arabic inscriptions. It is also probably at this time that the Swahili people started developing many mythical legends of their origins in the Middle East, now viewed as their "sacred land" (Sutton 1998).

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<sup>3</sup> For a different opinion, see Horton (1996), Sutton (1998).



The rise of the Mahdali dynasty, at Kilwa under al Hasan bin Sulaiman after 1300, ushered the way for East African Islam.

“The Mahdali house, with its international connections and concern that Kilwa be seen as a full member of the Islamic world, ensured moreover once for all conformity with the mainstream Sunni persuasion of Islam following the Shaf’i school, such as has persisted along the Swahili coast since that period.” (Sutton 1998: 129).

When the Portuguese came to East Africa they found people from the Middle East in the Swahili towns; they were mainly visitors or traders. The Portuguese distinguished the “Suaili”, African people from “Arab”, from those “whose home was, or had been, Arabia” (Allen 1993: 3).

### *Conclusion*

This article has attempted to provide evidence for both a cultural and economic relationship that existed between the Middle East and East Africa from the earliest known records to about 1500. It has been shown that it is possible that Egyptian records shed some light upon what happened on the Red Sea and East Africa in the Greco-Roman period. The literature of the Greco-Roman times is anecdotal but reliable. The literature contains evidence of contact between East Africa, the Middle East, the Mediterranean world and India. East Africa is called Paanchaea and later on Azania. Between 300-700 AD, East Africa entered into a dark age. The literature is mostly silent about relationships between East Africa and the Middle East. From 700 to 1500 AD, the relationship between the coast of East Africa and the Middle East is better recorded in Arabic literature.

Archaeology has been used to shed more light on the problem of the Middle East /East Africa relationship. Old and new archaeological data suggest that there existed a regular relationship between the Middle East and East Africa even during the dark ages. Only a shift of power both in the north and in East Africa itself affected these links, leading to a realignment of trade relations and hence, to change of trade centers and trade routes.

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