

Early ports in the Horn of Africa

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This article gives a brief account of discoveries relating to pre-Islamic ports in north-eastern Somalia (Fig. 1). [1] It summarizes some of the results of an expedition from the British Institute in Eastern Africa in 1975 and 1976. The work was directed by the writer, and carried out in collaboration with Somali colleagues. We are indebted to them, and to the Government of the Somali Democratic Republic, for their assistance.

To the Ancient Egyptians, the land of Punt, usually identified with the northern Somali coast, was equated with the land of incense, and throughout history aromatic gums

have been the chief commodity sought by merchants coming to the Horn of Africa. This is made plain by Strabo, writing at the turn of the Christian era (*Geog.* 16.4.14), whose knowledge of the coast (derived from Artemidorus), however, ends with the region of Cape Guardafui (Ras 'Asir). Such gums are emphasized again in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, whose most probable date is the 2nd or early 3rd century AD.

The coast of the north-eastern Horn is very arid and almost entirely lacking in harbours. Not only are the possibilities of shelter poor, but for much of the year the winds are very

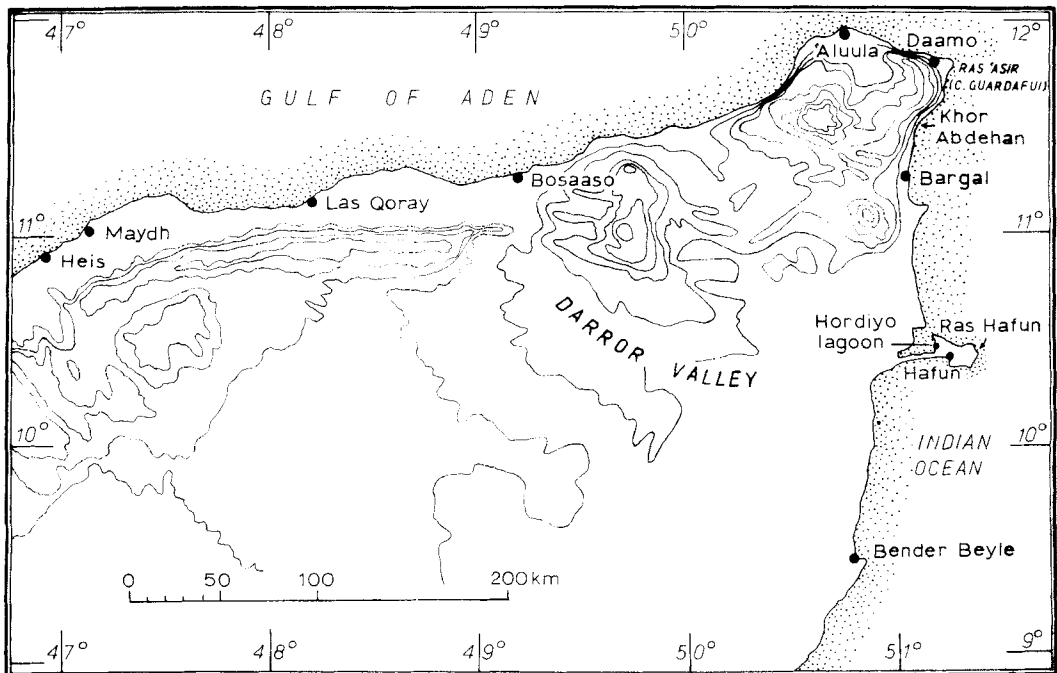


Figure 1. Map of north-eastern Somalia.



Figure 2. The Harbour of Mundus or Mosyllon, east of Heis.

strong. The exposed nature of almost all the landing places may have to do with the survival in this region of sewn boats (*beden*), built without any metal fastenings, which are said to endure striking the foreshore as they ride in through the surf better than other vessels.

Heis

The first site with which we are concerned is to the east of Heis on the northern coast. Here, extending for some 4 km along the coast, there is a very large assemblage of cairns of various types, previously referred to by Révoil (1882). A thorough search of the area, however, revealed no dwelling site. Excavation of one of the smaller, robbed, cairns yielded fragments of Roman glass of about the 4th century AD. Potsherds picked up on the surface ranged in date from the 2nd century to about the 5th and included sherds of a vessel of Nubian ware, evidence of trade with upper Egypt. Other sherds are of Roman origin. These finds may be compared with the remarkable collection of glass found by Révoil, notably of the mosaic variety dating probably to the 1st century AD,

and now in the Musée de l'Homme. Immediately to the east of the area of the cairns is a headland with adjacent islet which affords shelter to the cove on its western side; this is most likely to have served as a harbour (Fig.2). The region of the cape is called Ma'ajilayn, [2] which name can be compared with Mosyllon of the *Periplus* (sec. 10). Mosyllon is however described in the *Periplus* simply as being on a beach, with a bad anchorage; the description of the next port to the west, **Mundus**, where an island close to the shore is mentioned, fits the site better. Perhaps the places have been confused; it is notable that Pliny, writing rather later than Strabo (*Nat. Hist.*, vi. xxxiv: 175) mentions Mossylites Cape and Harbour as the 'most easterly point known to him.

The lack of any trace of permanent houses at this site suggests that the trade was conducted by nomads who presumably would have come and pitched temporary dwellings (perhaps like the modern Somali *aqal*, easily dismantled for travel) during the trading season. Much of the high quality Roman glassware which they received in exchange for their goods (compare

also the mention of the import of glass in the *Periplus*) would be ill-adapted to nomadic life; it would seem unlikely that it was intended to trade with the interior – the towns of the Aksumite kingdom were served by ports on the Red Sea coast, and there is no evidence of urban communities further south. Perhaps these objects were destined only for the dead. The wheat mentioned as an import in the *Periplus* would no doubt have been a welcome addition to the diet of nomads, then as now.

Daamo

Just to the west of Cape Guardafui in the vicinity of the village of Daamo is another site which, though the pottery found has not been precisely dated, seems also to be of the Roman period. A unique feature of this site is a number of wall-like features cut out of the rock; there are also a few cut blocks nearby, but nothing which from surface indication can be described as a permanent building (Fig. 3). It has not, however, been possible to excavate at this site. The place is almost certain to be the **Market of Spices** of the *Periplus* (Cap. 12);

as all are agreed, the **Cape of Spices** is the adjacent Cape Guardafui. [31]

Hafun

(Xaafuun in the official orthography.) The peninsula of Hafun lies some 150 km south of Cape Guardafui. It consists of a massif of sandstone connected to the mainland by a remarkable sandspit, or *tombolo*, some 25 km long. The excavations were carried out at two newly-discovered sites. The first (**Hafun West**) is situated near the shore of a shallow lagoon which lies between the peninsula and the mainland (Fig. 4). Here excavations revealed the severely eroded and damaged remains of a structure partly built of cut blocks. This is probably contemporary with fragments of high-quality painted pottery apparently of Hellenistic origin excavated in the lower part of the adjacent deposit; storage pots of coarse soft ware were also found in the same stratum. The site is presumably the remains of a small port establishment of the 2nd or 3rd century BC of which the Roman geographers were ignorant. It would have served ships which



Figure 3. Rock-cut-'walls' west of Cape Guardafui. The village of Daamo, and adjacent landing place is just visible in the distance.



Figure 4. The Hafun peninsula viewed from Hordiyu, across the lagoon (properly named Khor Naaleeye). The arrow indicates the approximate position of the early port site. In foreground a *huri* dugout canoe with stone anchor; a *beden* of sewn construction afloat.

came through the lagoon. A wadi which derives from the Darror Valley debouches into the western part of the lagoon; that valley leads to a region where it is said good quality myrrh may be obtained. Later occupation at the site is attributed provisionally to around the 3rd century AD, by which time the stone structure was in ruins. Among the ashy debris of that occupation a large number of turtle bones were found but no shells; one may surmise that the latter were sold for export. There is also a substantial mound of shells of *Murex virginicus* nearby; these may have been used for the extraction of dye. [4] The edges of the lagoon are exceptionally favourable to the production of salt by evaporation, and it may be that this was carried out in antiquity, as at the present day.

In the vicinity are a number of small cairns built largely, if not entirely, with stone taken from the main building, as evidenced by cut blocks of various shapes. One of these was excavated, revealing a crouched burial with the hands to the face, facing west with the head to the north. There were no grave goods, but

sherds of pottery lying adjacent to other cairns were similar to those of the later occupation of the main building. Burials of this type accord with the description of those of nomadic troglodytes in Strabo's *Geography* (16.4.17.).

On the southern side of the Peninsula (which protects the bay from the north-eastern monsoon) lies what has been termed **Hafun Main Site** adjacent to a harbour (Fig. 5). This is probably to be identified with the mart named **Opone** in the *Periplus* (Sec. 13).

A number of test-pits were dug at this site. There is up to 2 m of occupation, consisting mainly of bands of charcoal and sand, together with many ovens made of old pots. There is no sign of any permanent dwellings, though there were some traces of substantial post-holes.

Low rectangular stone-built tombs in the vicinity yielded glazed pottery related to 'Parthian' types, and glass. These and the finds from the settlement site, are provisionally ascribed to the 2nd to 3rd centuries AD, though a base of a Sasanian-Islamic blue-glazed jar found near one of numerous cairns in the hinterland indicates some later occupation.



Figure 5. The harbour of Hafun viewed from the settlement site, believed to be Opone.

South of Hafun no sites of comparable settlements have been found.

In considering these ports which were trading with the Mediterranean world, we are struck by the almost complete lack of permanent structures other than tombs. Given the very large amount of pottery (in a variety of wares) used at Hafun, however, it would seem in view of the unsuitability of pottery to the nomadic life that this site would have been occupied by some of its population through the year. There

is however no evidence of such permanent occupation at the Heis site, where pottery is rare.

It is remarkable that in this region no relics were found of Islamic towns, other than settlements of the last two centuries. It has not however been possible to visit Berbera, where there are likely to be remains of early settlement. Zeila must have been an important place in Islamic times; no one however has yet identified an early site there.

Notes

- [1] Substantial portions of this article duplicate matter to be published in the Proceedings of the 8th Panafrican Congress of Prehistory and Quaternary Studies; these are included here by courtesy of the editors of those Proceedings.
- [2] The letter transcribed as 'j' in Ma'ajilayn is pronounced much like the English 'ch' though rather softer.
- [3] Révoil recorded this site but called it by the name Olok, which is in fact another village some 4 km to the west.
- [4] There does not appear to be any documentary evidence one way or the other on the question of whether *M. virginicus* can yield a dye (or that it is edible). However, dye can be obtained from a large number of species of Muricaceae. (For this information I am indebted to Miss K. M. Way of the British Museum, (Natural History).

References

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