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**Somalia: land of the Gods.
Ancient Egyptians and the Horn of Africa**

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Suez without Somalia is pointless. Even the Ancient Egyptians point this out. The tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor (ca. 1990-1645bc) is a classic of Ancient Egyptian Literature. Some say it may have even influenced Homer's *Odyssey*, given the striking echoes. Today the shipwrecked sailor allows us to focus on the importance of Somalia.

He is shipwrecked and finds himself in conversation with a Prince of Punt, in the shape of a giant Snake. This fabled land is of uncertain identification but has given the name to a region called Puntland within today's Somalia. To the west of Puntland is Somaliland which has been recognised as an independent state by Ethiopia on 1st January 2024. The shipwrecked sailor tries to offer riches and wealth to the Prince of Punt to obtain his freedom. The story is extraordinary: a man is shipwrecked on an island where he encounters a giant snake who explains how its entire family had been killed by a fiery star which fell to the ground. The snake offers freedom to the sailor but requests that he be aware of his luck in being alive. It is one of the oldest stories on record. The Snake reveals that he is Prince of Punt.

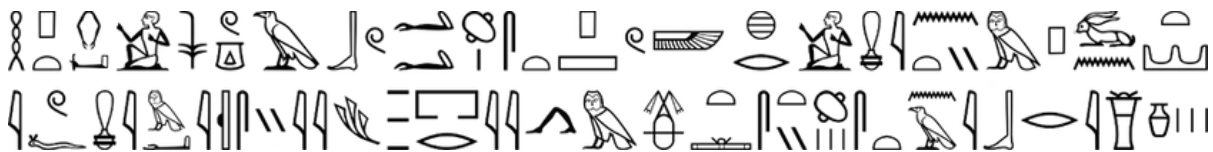


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"Then he smiled at my speech, because of that which was in his heart, for he said to me: "You are not rich in perfumes, for all that you have is but common incense. As for me, I am prince of the land of Punt, and I have perfumes. Only the oil which you say you would bring is not common in this isle. But, when you shall depart from this place, you shall never more see this isle; it shall be changed into waves.'" (Shipwrecked Sailor 149-152)

Punt was crucial for Egypt especially for luxury goods, such as perfumes. It had gold at the time of Khufu (ca. 2589-2566bc - Cheops the builder of one of the main pyramids [4th dynasty]). Pharaoh Sahure (ca 2450bc) also made an important expedition into Punt (5th Dynasty). With the reunification of Egypt in the 18th dynasty (1550-1292bc), Punt becomes crucial once more. The woman pharaoh Hatshepsut organised the most important expedition to Punt depicted in her funerary temple at Deir el Bahri. After the 20th dynasty Punt was no longer in reach of Egyptian merchants. It became a mythical land a sort of Eldorado to which one would compare one's loved one as one may see in the following poem:



(J. L. Foster, *Love Songs of the New Kingdom*, New York, 1974, p. 25)

"When I hold my love close, and her arms steal around me, I'm like a man translated to Punt, or like someone out in the reed flats, when the world suddenly bursts into flower".

The Egyptian dynasties, which are often considered most powerful and wealthy, were trading with land of Punt, or the Horn of Africa. The beginning of Homer's Iliad claims that the Gods were away from their residence on Mt. Olympus, because they were feasting at a divine banquet in Ethiopia near the Ocean (Hom. Il. 423-427). It is



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tempting to associate with land of the Gods near Ethiopia with the alternative name of Punt which was ta ntr (), precisely the land of the Gods.

When the Romans conquered Egypt, they not only increased the commerce with the Horn of Africa, but they took part of the commerce between that area and the Indian subcontinent. Symbol of this contact is the Buddha statue found at the port of Berenike, southern Egypt, connected with a port further south known in Greek as Malao. The new name is Berbera (Ancient *Malao Μαλαώ*), the chief port of Somaliland, a country recognized as independent only by Ethiopia. In exchange the port of Berbera can be used by Ethiopia. The Indians who reached Berenike in Egypt, probably also stopped over in Berbera in Somaliland as they were entering the Red Sea. The port of Berbera may become crucial for Indian exports towards the Red Sea and the Mediterranean beyond.

Some of the most important trade came from the horn of Africa as Akhenaten's successor Horemheb (1319-1292bC) informs us:



(Saqqara, Horemheb Stela, British Museum EA551)

“Adoration to you O Maat, lady of the North wind who open up the noses of the living and give breath to the one who in his (=Ra’s) bark: may you cause the hereditary prince Horemheb to smell the breeze which heaven produces, just as the Lady of Punt smells its smell at the Lake of Myrrh.” (Murnane, Texts from the age of Amarna, 105c).

Those who have invested in the Suez Canal and the Red Sea trade might consider stability in Somalia so important that they may well agree with the Ancient Egyptians and consider it the Land of the Gods.