NOTES
on the
HISTORY of BERBERA

by
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Burton says that Berbera has been occupied in turn by the Eura (old Persians); the Arabs, the Turks, the Gallows and the Somalis. According to a map of the Egyptian Empire of 1450 B.C. (Atlas of Ancient and Classical Geography) the Somali coast was part of that domain, an extension of the land of Punt on the Red Sea Coast, but only Egypt proper was included in the Persian Empire of 525 B.C. (Ibid). To the mapmakers of Classical times, the Somali coast was either unknown, as it was to Herodius (1450 B.C.), or on the extreme confines of the known world. The area is marked Cinnamomum FeraRegio in a map of the world according to Eratosthenes (220 B.C.) and Ptolemy (A.D. 150), marks the coastal town of Mosyllum which might possibly have been Berbera. This, however, is not the view of Dr. Drake-Brockman who states firmly that Berbera, then called Malao, was known to the early Greek and Roman traders, but was never a trading post of much importance as Aulis (Zeila) took the trade of the northern interior and the products of central Somalia, including Myrrh and frankincense, went to the markets of Mossyrium opposite Malt Island.

None of this is much help in establishing what sort of a place Berbera was and what kind of people lived there. The only clear fact seems to be that the coastal strip had some contact with the outside world but the interior had none at all and was not even worth marking on a map. That it was, not an altogether uninhabited interior, is very remote, there is the evidence of arrowheads, axe heads and cave drawings, but the people who made these things or those who had taken their place presumably only impinged on the consciousness of the Greeks and Romans when they came down to the coast to sell the products of the interior. Indeed, until quite modern times, the known facts about Somaliland are few and the history of Berbera shares the general obscurity. In spite of its good harbour, it was not the place where, by tradition, the fathers...
of the Somali race established themselves when they came from over the sea; they came to Maldia and gradually worked their way southwards and westwards. The story of Bunder Abbas may have reference to this period. So far as is known, it is said that several generations occurred from the east to the west, and that a small section of the Abass joined a local village of poor fishermen. Later, when Berberah was first used as an alternate site, at an unknown date, the people of Bunder Abbas, a town which had never been occupied during the hot weather, except by a few families of fishermen, moved to the site of modern Berberah. Among the graves of Bunder Abbas are those of three Arabian Seyyids who are said to have moved west with the original Abass migration.

There are a number of facts and theories that anyone attempting to piece together a general history of Somalia has to face - the so-called Galla grave, left behind by a pagan people; the possibility that there were migrations from the west as well as from the east; ruined towns apparently built by Arab slave traders, other ruined towns which appear to have been built by a settled, semi nomadic people; the fact that the Medjans and Somalis practised more of the arts of a settled people than the other Somalis. In addition, anyone dealing with the history of Berberah will have to cope with the question of the aqueduct. This, according to Burton, who saw the ruins in 1858, ran from Dubar, where there were extensive ruins of seven miles to a reservoir on the sea shore; Bengal Prendergast Walsh who used material from the ruins some thirty years later to make a hillside room described the aqueduct as a solid construction of large stone slabs. It is clear that at some time Berberah was a large enough town to justify such an erection, and was ruled by people of considerable engineering skill. Unfortunately, until an archaeologist gets to work, it is not possible to go much further than Burton who, near a hundred years ago said: Of the origin of Berberah there is no history. The existence of the town is a survival of the Maliki, the people of the sea, and the probability is that two Himyari chieftains, about 2,000 years ago, the troops of the Anyshirwan expelled the Abyssinians from Al-Yaman and re-established there a Himyari prince under the vassalage of the Persian Monarchs, nowadays we should feel inclined to leave out with great probability from the foregoing sentence. Burton himself was more sceptical than Lieut. Cruitenden R.N., whom he quotes as believing that the aqueduct was built by these Persian vassals from the Yemen. Burton's own comment is:

- though all the maritime Somali country abounds in traditions of the Furs of Ancient Persians, none are given of Bunder Abbas. Justifies the assumption of the country of masons. The antiquity of 1300 years ago... the Somali assert that ten generations ago their ancestors drove out the Gallas from Berberah, and attribute these works to the ancient Pagans. That nation of savages, however, was never capable of constructing a scientific aqueduct. I therefore prefer attributing these remains at Berberah to the Ottomans, who, after the conquest of Aden by Sulayman Pasha in A.D. 1538, held Al-Yaman for about 100 years and as auxiliaries of the king of Adel, penetrated as far as Abyssinia. Traces of their architecture are found at Zayla and Harar, and according to tradition, they possessed at Berberah a settlement called, after its founder, Bunder Abbas.

That Burton gives a totally different account of the founding of Bunder Abbas to that above in these notes is only to be expected when oral tradition is relied upon and, in fact, there is no reason why there should not be some truth in both stories.

With mention of King of Adel, something like firm ground is reached. It seems to be agreed that Adel-Audal or Auzal was the Mahomedan kingdom of Zayla, which, at least at times, embraced Berberah. Burton's dates, however, are not easy to arrange into a coherent story. Adel, he says, had been an Arab kingdom in the 7th century. In the 14th century it was engaged in wars with Abyssinia and about 1400 was badly defeated, the city of Zayla itself being besieged. At about this time, according to Burton, the founder of the Ishak Tribe, Sheikh Ishuk, had landed at Mait with forty-four saints. A few years later forty-four Hashamit saints also landed at Zayla and, after a solemn conclave, dispersed to preach Islam. It was not until 1500, however, that the newly formed Somali people drove the Galla from Berberah.

With the sixteenth century the pace quickens. About 1500, the Turks, according to Burton, had conquered the Yemen and the Janissaries drove the Arab merchants to the opposite shore and then followed them to lay imposts on the trade they set up between Adel and India: The Portuguese then appeared on the scene and, in July 1516, burned Zayla: they would have sacked Berbera too, but their fleet was dispersed by storms. After this, the Ottomans appeared.

Burton says that they conquered Aden in 1538, held the Yemen for 100 years, and, as auxiliaries of the King of Adel, penetrated as far as Abyssinia. It is then rather surprising to learn from Burton that in the year 1557 (the year after Zayla's fall) López Sánchez took without resistance, the inhabitants having fled, and burned the city of «Barbara near to Zayla, a place not unlike to it, but much less».

The story of the escape of Berberah in 1516 is repeated by Dr. Drake-Brockman, but a new note is struck by the «handbook of Abyssinia» (London 1867) in a chapter said to be compiled chiefly from the writings of Marmol and Bermudez. Here it is said that Berberah:

- is situated at the bottom of a convenient bay, on an Island of its name, but called by De Lisle, «Alondia». It has been all along a kind of rival in commerce with that of Zayla and is no less reported to by foreign merchants, who carry on much the same trade...
traffic. It is opposite Aden and made once a considerable figure, but was burnt and plundered by the Portuguese fleet in 1655 who expected to have found a considerable spoil in it, but were severely disappointed. The inhabitants having had time enough to carry away their most valuable effects away.

If one abandons any attempt to decide whether Berbera was burnt and if so, how often, things do not become any less difficult as evidence of the liveliness of Berbera's trade just after, according to Burton, the Somalians boasted the Gallas; there is the statement that in August 1507, Alonzo Duarte, having sailed from Socotra to intercept the ships which, at that season, start for Berbera and Zanzibar and all the Red Sea for Zanzibar, at Ceilan, and all the ports of Malabar. This puts the story on a sounder footing, but it is otherwise with information in the "Handbook of the Kingdom of Abyssinia." Here Berbera in the early 17th century appears as part of the Mohammedan kingdom of Aden, now Somaliland, which sits along the southern and western coasts of the Gulf of Aden, extends to Cape Guardafui, from which it begins to wind itself southward, along the Indian Sea. The Governor is despot and monarchical through the protection of kings, of homages, and tributes. This is all very well and it is also perfectly probable that the main traffic of the country consists of gold dust, elephants' teeth, frankincense, and negro slaves, all of which they fetch chiefly from Abyssinia, with whom they are continually at war. These goods were exchanged with merchants from Arabia, Cambay and other parts for cotton, silk and linen of various sorts, cloth, wines, and other commodities, ivory, crystal, dates, palm oil, arms, Arabian horses, and other such products. The duties begin to appear when Berbera is described not only as an island, but also as a fertile and populous country. The greater part of which, was exported by merchants into other countries.

Bartema, writing in the sixteenth century and quoted by Burton, had also described Berbera as an island and perhaps later writers copied his mistakes. The passage given by Burton reads:

"The island is beautifully situated on the coast of Arabia, the principal of its inhabitants being Mahometans. The island is fertile and well-peopled. It has abundant water. The inhabitants are of colour, inclining to black. All their riches is in herds of cattle."

Unfortunately, from the 17th until the 19th century, there are no available books on Berbera. Even Burton skips over the period rapidly and without dates. After stating that Zella was sacked in 1516, he progresses over several centuries, in a few sentences:

"When the Turks were compelled to retire from Southern Arabia, it became subject to the Prince of Sana'a, who gave it in perpetuity to the family of a Sasa, and into decay, Zayla passed under the authority of the Sheik of Mocha, who, though retaining some part of the revenue, had yet the power of displacing the Governor. By him it was farmed out to the Hajj Saurey, who paid annually to Sayyid Mohammed Al-Barr; at Mocha, the sum of 750 crowns and reserved all that he could collect above that sum for himself. In A.D. 1848 Zayla was taken from the family of Al-Barr and farmed out to a Shari' marks by the Turk, the Governor of Mocha, by Hodidah."

Several mid-19th century descriptions are available and they show a town fallen into decay. Drake-Brockman, quoting from Johnstone's "Travels in Abyssinia," says that in March 1842 Berbera consisted of only a few thousand people belonging to nomads who had come to the produce the interior for rice, dates and cloths. The British agent then was Ali Shari' marks (Governor of Zayla in Burton's time) who had earned himself the right to fly the Red Ensign on his ships many years earlier for his behaviour during a night attack on an English brig in Berbera harbour and also for saving the lives of the crew.

Lt. Colonel Glendower of the Indian Navy, writing in 1848 and quoted by Burton, says that Berbera was deserted from April until the early part of October, not even fishermen being found there, but that during the cool weather there was a flourishing trade and the harbour was filled with ships from India as well as the Red Sea and other ports. Bartema the Turkish Slave merchant meets his correspondent from Muscat, Bagdad, and Bunder Abbas, and the savage Butcher at Zayla is said to be smooth-spoken and civil. By the first week in April, however, Berbera has again deserted, nothing being left to mark the site of a town lately containing 20,000 inhabitants, beyond bones of slaughtered camels and sheep, and the framework of a few huts, which is carefully piled on the beach in readiness for the ensuing years. Exports at this period included clarified butter, thin-coated horns, and cattle, among the imports were cloth, iron, and sand in small bars, lead and zinc, beads, dates, and rice.

By the time Burton visited Berbera there had been a still further decline in the prosperity of the cool weather, which was largely the result of the slave trade, the consequent reduction of the port and its customs and profits, which had ruined trade, the state of law and order is demonstrated by the fact that on Burton's second visit his party was attacked on the beach and one of his companions murdered.

The decay of Berbera may have been partly due to the decline of the slave trade, though this was still profitable and Burton mentions that in April 1855 after the arrival of a caravan of 3,000 souls from Harrat, 500 slaves of both sexes were for sale.
Burton describes the town as a wretched collection of dirty mat huts contracted to about one sixth of its former dimensions and surrounded for nearly a mile by desert land strewn with bits of glass and pottery. To the south and east lay a saltine sand flat, northwards the sea strand had... became a huge cemetry and westward, close up to the town, ran a creek forming the harbour. There were many ruins near the town, but it was difficult to determine their date; they were particularly extensive near Dubar and, of course, included the aqueduct.

From the time of Burton's visit until twenty years later, the Egyptians arrived, thing did not get any better in Berbera. The Ayyal Ahmad section of the Habr Awal were, according to Foreign Office papers, in control of Berbera but were at enmity with the Habr Tolaam and Habr Gerhajis whom they were able to keep in check only by means of fire-arms, chiefly in the hands of Arab mercenaries.

The Egyptians came to Berbera in 1874. At that time the Port had lost most of its prosperity an important, partly because inter-tribal wars in the interior prevented caravans bringing in merchandise, partly because of a general decline in the slave trade.

According to local tradition, the Egyptians sent a delegation who bought Berbera from a group of elders; one elder, Abdiilahi Liban, Habr Awal reh Ahmed, protested at the sale, and said that it was not lawful to sell something that could not be carried in a piece of cloth and that, therefore, it was wrong to sell Berbera. He, however, was overruled.

During their ten years in the town, the Egyptians carried through a large building programme. Foreign Office papers make mention of lighthouse and creditable pier, two masjids, barracks, a hospital and store rooms, all substantially built. Water was piped from Dubar to the Egyptian town (now called the Shaab area). The building was however only carried out, according to L. P. (Under the Flag and Somali Coast Stories) through the enforcement of a corvee, which naturally made the Egyptian authorities unpopular.

It is clear from Foreign Office papers that the Egyptians failed entirely to enforce law and order in the interior, with the result that the trade and prosperity of Berbera did not revive. Their will, indeed, barely lasted beyond the range of the guns of their garrisons and they could not keep the road between harar and Berbera open.

Trade does not seem to have been entirely dead, however, since there were Indian and Greek merchants in the town and presumably the export of sheep to Aden kept things going. In these proreige...
Meanwhile the Aden government were getting increasingly anxious about their food supplies from Berbera. Since the beginning of 1884, ships of the Royal Navy had been keeping an eye on the Somali coast. Major Hunter, who had been consul since 1881, does not seem to have feared German intervention, but he was apprehensive, and it appears with very justification, that the whole coast would be taken over by either the Italians or the French. In any event, either of these powers took action. He feared that the town would probably break out. In the Ayall, Ahmed were still in a state of Jurasms, even after the British had occupied Berbera. Gerhais. In either case the food supplies of Aden would be endangered.

The elders of Berbera seem to have been aware of the difficulties which would face them when the Egyptians withdrew and the Ayall Ahmed asked for the British protection. In July, 1884 Major Hunter made a provisional agreement with the Berbera people, and in the following month Mr. Langton Prendergast Walsh took over as Vice Consul in Berbera. He was generally welcomed, especially by the Habr Awal and the elders. The Egyptians had been sent on ahead as it was reported that he was plotting to hand Berbera over to the Germans.

At this stage the Turks laid claim to Berbera on the grounds that they were suzerains of Egypt; they took no action, however, and the British government, which had never given de jure recognition to the Egyptian regime, rejected their claim.

Mr. Walsh's first duty when he was appointed to administer Berbera was to secure law and order. He was supported by a force of forty-five armed police and an unarmed constabulary. Soon after his arrival he increased his force by another fifty; his only properly trained men however were twenty-six from India. By the time the Commissioner-in-Chief, East Indies, had visited Berbera, just before October, 1884, and had expressed his doubts about the efficiency of the police, Habr Awal Somalis, Arabs, Indians and some Turkish deserters had been enrolled. Mr. Walsh was deeply hurt at the criticism of his mixed force, especially his force, by a man of his position. Residents in Berbera tried the hundred and twenty-four cases in one year, besides dismissing or settling out of court petty affairs (Life of Sir Percy Cox by Philip Graves). At the beginning of the period, there was a certain classic simplicity about the administration of justice, even in Berbera; no formal warrants were issued; men being summoned to court by the presentation of a stone, marked with a broad arrow.

Keeping order in the town was not easy, at first. It was the custom for a tribesman to come to market armed with two spears, a sword and a shield. It took time to persuade the country people that weapons were best left for safe custody in the police station. But by the time Walsh left in 1893, this new custom had been established. The appointment of a reliable and learned Qadi was another important step in peace; the Qadi did away with court accusation, and had much occasion for disputes especially over marriage arrangements, which might have led to inter-tribal fighting.

Berbera at this period began to change in appearance. For the first time (so far as is known) the town was well populated, all the

tension between the British and French became so great in this part of the world that there was a possibility of the two nations coming to blows.

As well as his police force, Mr. Walsh had an armed crew and a patrol of men. A large boat had belonged to the Bey. There was a police camp with a police house, all of which was in the southeast corner of the town.

Early in 1885, when there were eight or ten thousand people in the town, there was a small riot, and the hundred or so police opened fire, killing two and wounding four, before Mr. Walsh came to control them. The inciters of the riot, however, had no serious following as things quickly quietened down. H. M. S. Foxhound arrived and the Commanding Officer, the surgeon, and Mr. Walsh went into the town and attended to the wounded men without exciting hostility. As a precaution, the ships' boats were armed, manned and brought alongside when Mr. Walsh went to arrest the ring leaders in the riot. One man was arrested, and two got away, but there was no resistance.

After these stirring times, a more peaceful time followed. The country was calm and administrative difficulties were reduced. The modern sense of the word—i.e. all that was done was that caravans and travellers were protected and troops and police were sent to intervene in inter-tribal fighting became too serious. In Berbera (and also in Zelab and Balkh) however all the apparatus of government was set up. Just over two years after Walsh had first arrived there were courts, customs, houses and revenue offices. The Gast牸 was Resident in Berbera. He tried three hundred and twenty-four cases in one year, besides dismissing or settling out of court petty affairs (Life of Sir Percy Cox by Philip Graves). At the beginning of the period, there was a certain classic simplicity about the administration of justice, even in Berbera; no formal warrants were issued, men being summoned to court by the presentation of a stone, marked with a broad arrow.

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year round. Not much building of substantial shops and houses took place until 1888 when a fire destroyed almost all the huts and "gurges" of which the town then consisted. After the fire and more especially after 1893; modern Berbera began to emerge. The main town was laid out with wide, straight streets and one-storied stone building began to appear in increasing numbers. Though there are several descriptions of Berbera available, it is difficult to date particular buildings, but among early government constructions there appear to have been the customs house, the date market and pier. During the nineties the Roman Catholic mission put up what Dr. Drake-Brockman describes as "a very substantial stone built edifice; there were in what is now Masieed Nur Road. The mission moved after a time to Diamoch on the Sheikh road and finally left the country in 1910.

According to Captain H. G. C. Swayne, who visited the country many times between 1885 and 1893, Berbera was apportioned off into tribal areas. Speaking of the town at a time when permanent buildings were few, he says that the huts were "divided by streets, the different blocks of building space being allotted to the respective Somali tribes, clans and families." There is no indications as to when this arrangement ceased, but possibly the fire of 1898, the influx of refugees from the Ogaden in 1895, and the further influx of refugees this time from the east of the country during the Mullah wars all contributed to the breaking down of barriers between the tribes within the town.

There was no hospital when Mr. Walsh took over but a medicine chest was kept in the Residency. For the first two and half years there was an R.N. vessel constantly in the harbour and therefore a Naval surgeon available in case of need. Afterwards an Indian hospital assistant was appointed.

In 1895, when the refugees began to come in and it is said that there were over seven hundred orphans and wails in the town, the assistant Resident's wife turned a large room in her house into a dispensary where the sick could be treated and the undernourished fed. (P: Graves; Life of Sir Percy Cox). By 1900 there was a civil hospital in the Shaab area. (Handbook of Somaliland: Col. F. Adam).

By the turn of the century Berbera was protected from inundation from the sea by an embankment, and a school and water tank had been built. The Court house, treasury, jail and Residency were all in the Shaab area and the police quarters lay between the main town and the Shaab. (Handbook of Somaliland and Official History; Operations in Somaliland 1901-1904). The size of the population is a matter of doubt. Captain Swayne gives the figure of 30,000 in the trading season. Colonel Adams, writing of 1900, suggested that the fixed population was 5,000 rising to 25,000 during the cool weather. Colonel Adams, writing of 1900, suggested that the fixed population was 5,000 rising to 25,000 during the cool weather and operations in Somaliland agree with him.

Dr. Drake-Brockman, whose book "British Somaliland" was published in 1912, gives a hot weather total of eight or ten thousand which, he says, rose to anything from twenty to forty thousand in December and January. The only possible conclusion seems to be that the population, and especially the static population, was growing.

There was also, according to all authorities, a great increase in prosperity. Here figures are, at the moment, almost totally lacking. When the Egyptians left, it was reported that the revenue of the town had been £6,074 with expenditure (which included £1,500 for gold, £28,000 in goods, £1,200 for camel and horse) at £9,057. Captain Swayne states that in 1891-1892 the total value of the trade of Berbera and Bulhar was £280,664 of which £161,112 worth were imports. Dr. Drake-Brockman merely confines himself to the statement that there had been a vast increase in trade.

During the period up to the Mullah wars not only Berbera but its neighbourhood became more peaceful. Mr. Walsh mentions bands of mounted raiders carrying off stock operating near Dubar, in spite of this, he was able to abandon the forts between the Shaab and the Harageh away, and years later he withdrew the police post, protecting the town but not so far.

Sportsmen and other travellers at this time provided almost a minor industry for Berbera since servants, guards, camel and camelmen were hired at Berbera or Bulhar. Sometimes during the later nineties a traveller's bungalow was built; it accommodated six with difficulty. Among the distinguished visitors were the Duke of Hamilton, the future Lord Curzon; Prince Esterams; Count Coudenhove and Lord Delamere. The Duke and Duchess of Connaught came to Berbera during Mr. Walsh's tenure of office and were entertained by Somali dancers.

The era of light administration came to an end with the advent of the Mullah wars, though there was an attempt to revive the system in 1910. Bin Abdulla Hassan tried first to preach in Berbera, but met with no success and so moved out to the east. During the campaigns that followed, Berbera suffered less than the rest of the country since, aside from a brief raid during which he fired down the town, there is no record of his name, the Mullah's operations were far away. Many refugees came into the town but there seems to have been work for everybody, it is recorded that labour was cheap and expensive, and that it was necessary to augment the labour force from time to
During the wars, one of the greatest opponents of Bin Abdullah Hassan was the great poet Ali Ja'ama Habib, Akil of the Esa Musa Ter Wais. One of the streets in Berbera is now called after him. A song of his against the Mad Mullah has been translated: 'Ali is the custom to help strangers or travellers and not to harm or rob them, but in his case he robs them and takes from them their dates. Considering the Mullah's practices of mutilating his victims or smashing them to death from great heights, the sentiments of the song seem rather mild, but perhaps there are other and more useful verses.

Though Berbera was active and prosperous during the Mullah wars, it suffered long-term losses, much of its trade being transferred to Jibouti, and all development projects, including the scheme to build a railway between Harar and Berbera, being shelved.

The end of the Mullah wars in 1920 meant also the end of Berbera's isolation. Thereafter, as government offices spread throughout Somaliland, Berbera became integrated with the Protectorate.