

Despatches from Puntland: On the trail of the first large scale expedition launched by Hatshepsut¹ in the land of Punt². *Sharmarke.samatar@yahoo.com*



— Route of Hatshepsut's expedition.
— Author's trail following on the expedition's journey in the land of Punt.

On the trail just in the land Punt

Garowe

It was in the afternoon when I arrived Garowe, the capital city of Puntland state of Somalia. Few people were out and about. Siesta is common here just like any other place in Somalia. Every day right after lunch, everyone shelters from the sweltering heat of the afternoon sun. The city wakes up again just during the afternoon prayers. Men, women, children, beggars, hawkers, three-wheeled scooter taxis fill the streets of Garowe. Traffic on the city centre's main road is often chaotic and quite terrible. Honking is very common. It is a means of communication. Motorists vent their frustrations, or greet friends, fellow drivers, pedestrians, or just for the sake of honking.

Most of the houses are newly built. Villas, bungalows, few mansions, simple houses, tall houses, stone houses, government ministries, colleges and universities, etc. The fresh paints bathed on most of all these buildings indicate that they are not even a

¹ 18th Dynasty Pharaoh Queen, history's first great woman. She ruled Egypt 1473 – 1458 BC. She was the first female Pharaoh.

² Land of Punt means "God's land". http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/radio4/iot/iot_20141106-1700a.mp3 (28:30 – 28:50)

decade old. This relatively well-mastered town plan is missing the most essential and a must for a city with its standard – a park. With daily temperatures hovering above 30 degrees most of the time, gardens, greenery with eucalyptus and acacia trees can be an oasis in this concrete and corrugated iron roof jungle.

Just before dusk, it is a tradition for many Garowe families to stroll and visit families and relatives or dine out, a custom dating back many years. Elegant and beautiful women with charming oval faces and fine large dark eyes, with ebony tint skin and slender figures come out to the city. Their sartorial splendour completes their magnificence and refinement. The scents of Uunsi, a local aromatic fragrance and perfume, wafting through the air from their directions. Their perfect grace and breeding walks resemble that of Hatshepsut in the Temple of Karnak and Deir el Bahri³. The pharaoh queen could have had received many cosmetic adornment tips from the foremothers of these women in Puntland, the foremost of noble ladies. I gazed at some of them passing by and was enthralled by their exquisite femininity with an air of superiority about them. I felt that I was completely transported to that era of Hatshepsut and Nefertiti⁴ only to be woken up by the honking of a Toyota car. I came out of my trance and found out that the driver did it for no reason.

Sheep and goats on swathes of grazing land. The famous Nugaal horses roam wild. The shallow groundwater of Nugaal valley and the Gu' rains support vigorous growth of shrubs and grasses ideal for rearing the blackhead Somali sheep and goats. On my way from Garowe to Qardho and Bosaso, the sight of waves of goats and sheep browsing tirelessly on entire fields on both sides of the tarmac road to the Red Sea illustrates the suitability of the region for livestock. Small villages and thinly populated hamlets are sparsely dot along the road. Make shift cafes and restaurants provide boiled goat meat, lamb liver curry, canjeera⁵, coffee and spiced sugary tea. The wilderness of the countryside is almost peerless. Herds of camels accompanied by tall, lean and muscular herders are on the move from all directions. It is migration time. They are in search of fresh pasture and water on this rolling hills and plateaus of Barra Cajin⁶. I strode from a cafe to catch up with a couple of herders and enquire about their destination. They have trekked from the semi-arid countryside of Hawd⁷ and are now moving to Dharoor Valley. This could be a journey of more than 1000 miles to be covered in few days. What an astonishing feat in this age of Land Cruisers, Jeep trucks and Iveco vehicles! It is not beyond conjecture to assume that the Pharaoh Queen's expedition had interacted intricately with the forefathers of these proud and friendly nomads crisscrossing the vast plains of Horn of Africa, and collected sheep, goats and leopard skin from this part of the land of Punt by trading with its inhabitants.

(To be continued.....)

³ Two of the most beautiful temples in Egypt erected during Hatshepsut's rule. The walls of Deir el Bahri were illustrated with a colourful account of the trading expedition to Puntland.

⁴ Egyptian queen (1370 – 1330 BC.) and royal wife of Akhenaten, an Egyptian king

⁵ Somali bread which is thin, flat and circular, about 20 cm in diameter.

⁶ One of the previous names of Puntland. The term means land of the non-Arabs – Barral 'Ajami.

⁷ Sool region of Puntland.