

## **Ethiopia and Greece: The Early Connections**

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### **Abstract**

*From literally the beginning of Greek literature, line 22 in Homer's Odyssey, Ethiopia featured as a special place: where men were blameless and most reverent and the gods enjoyed feasts. Ethiopia was known as the source of the Nile River and a source for many exotic materials. Though ancient writers sometimes appear to have been unsure of the exact location of this far-off place, many of the ethnographic and geographic observations recorded by Greek and Latin authors about Ethiopia are detailed and accurate. The earliest connections of Greece and Ethiopia date to the Bronze Age. The first use of the word "Ethiopia" is found on clay tablets from Greece, dating to 1200 BC. Wall-paintings dating 400 years earlier than the tablets may record Greek participation in an expedition to the Land of Punt in the Horn of Africa. These early indications of contact between Greece and Ethiopia should point the way for new archaeological research.*

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## **Introduction**

In ancient Greece, Ethiopia was regarded as a particularly special place, where people were long-lived, blameless, and most reverent. In mythology, for instance, the Greek gods went to Ethiopia where they enjoyed feasts of sheep and bulls. Though ancient Greek and Roman writers sometimes appear to have been unsure of the exact location of this far-off place, a lot of the geographic and ethnographic facts recorded about Ethiopia are surprisingly detailed and accurate. When did the Greeks first mention Ethiopia? What did the Greeks at different time periods know, or what did they think, about Ethiopia? Where exactly was this land of Ethiopia? Do we have evidence that the Greeks actually visited Ethiopia?

### **The Earliest Appearance of the Word “Aithiops”**

The earliest mention in Greek of an Ethiopian is found on several clay tablets from the Bronze Age Mycenaean culture. The Aegean Bronze Age, during which the famous heroes of Greek mythology – Achilles, Odysseus, Jason – were thought to have lived, dates to roughly 3000-1000 BC. After a period of development of scattered villages with agriculturally-based economies, two sophisticated cultures flourished in Greece and the Aegean Islands. Beginning at about 2000 BC, the Minoans, whose written language remains undeciphered but is not Greek, settled primarily on Crete and some of the islands. The Mycenaeans, who wrote tablets in Linear B, an early form of Greek, inhabited the mainland of peninsular Greece at first, but gradually spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean, interacting with and perhaps displacing the Minoans on Crete. Both the Minoans and the Mycenaeans participated in wider trade networks which directly or indirectly reached as far as the Wessex culture in England and the lapis lazuli mines of Afghanistan.

The Linear B tablets which mention an Ethiopian were made as administrative records in the Mycenaean palace at Pylos in southern Greece. The tablets (PY En 74; PY Eo 247; PY Eb 846, PY Ep 301, PY Eb 156) mention a person who has the intriguing name “Aithiops” or “Ethiopian”. He is a land-owner and landlord, it appears, at Pylos (Nakassis). We do not know more about the person to whom the tablet refers – is he named for his ethnicity or homeland? Is he merely particularly sunburned or dark-skinned in appearance, and thus has the nickname “Burnt-face”? Is there any reason to believe that the Bronze Age Greeks had any experience with Ethiopia or Ethiopians?

### **Bronze Age Trade between Greece and Egypt**

There is no doubt that Bronze Age Minoans and Mycenaeans traveled to Egypt. There are hundreds of Egyptian objects which have been found in Aegean Bronze Age contexts. Some, such as stone bowls from Early Bronze sites on Crete, are considered imports based on stylistic similarities. Other objects, such as a statuette with the cartouche of the king User and a disk with the cartouche of the king Khyan, both of which were found at Knossos on Crete, and a blue frit monkey figurine with the cartouche of Amenhotep II (1427-1400 BC) and a faience plaque with cartouche of Amenhotep III (1390-1352 BC), both from Mycenae, were certainly imported from Egypt (Cline). The dates of the various objects extend from the very beginning of dynastic Egypt, to the end of the Bronze Age. Over about two thousand years, contacts increased and waned according to the political and environmental realities within the

participating regions. Even if the exchanges were sporadic or extraordinary, they were of sufficient importance politically and economically for high level contacts – objects featuring the cartouches of kings must have been obtained from upper level government officials, if not from the kings themselves.

Egyptian tomb paintings show foreigners bringing tribute or gifts to honor the pharaoh. The carefully-depicted costumes and physical attributes of the foreigners were intended to identify them by culture, whether or not the depictions were of the actual gift-bearers. Among the foreign emissaries are a group known as the Keftiu. Identification of the word “Keftiu” as a reference to Crete and mainland Greece was made over a century ago, and now is generally, though not universally, accepted (Hall). The Keftiu from Crete are shown in their characteristic kilts and breechcloths, wearing long, wavy hairstyles and pointed-toe shoes (Rehak). We do not know for certain whether Egyptians traveled to Greece. Egyptian ships traveled to the Levant and expeditions were sent from Byblos to Egypt as early as the mid-third millennium BC (Weiner). A stone statue base from Kom el-Hetan, Egypt, dating to the reign of Amenhotep III (1390-1352 BC) is inscribed with a list of Aegean sites, suggesting familiarity with Greece that must have been obtained from real travel, though this is disputed by some (Cline).

There is evidence at Tell el-Dab’a (Avaris) in the eastern Delta of Lower Egypt that Minoans were resident in Egypt during the mid-second millennium B.C., and were part of a network of trade both on the Mediterranean Sea and on the Red Sea (Bietak). Excavations at Wadi/Mersa Gawasis on the Red Sea in Egypt revealed a port which was the gateway, beginning at least in the Middle Kingdom, to a land the Egyptians called Pwenet (Punt). Small quantities of both Canaanite and Minoan pottery were found at Mersa Gawasis (Fattovich).

### **The Land of Punt**

The Egyptians also documented expeditions made to the land of Punt. The earliest record is on the Palermo Stone, which records products imported from Punt during the reign of Sahura in the Fifth Dynasty (2487-2475 BC). The most famous record of an expedition to Punt is the painted reliefs in the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut (1473-1458 BC) at Deir el-Bahri, Egypt (Naville). The difficulty has been that no one knows for sure where Punt was. Numerous scholars have argued on the basis of various texts and images for its location in Sudan, Yemen, Arabia, Uganda, Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> No Puntite archaeological sites have

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<sup>1</sup> Jacke Phillips argues that Punt was at Aksum: Phillips, Jacke (1997), ‘Punt and Aksum: Egypt and the Horn of Africa’, *The Journal of African History*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 423-457. Rodolfo Fattovich argues for eastern Sudan: Fattovich, Rodolfo (1991). ‘The problem of Punt in the light of the recent field work in the Eastern Sudan’; in: *Akten des vierten internationalen Ägyptologen Kongresses, München 1985* / edited by Sylvia Schoske (Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag). Vol. 4 (of 4 vols.), pp. 257–272. Dimitri Meeks argues Punt was not African, but was in Arabia: Meeks, Dimitri (2003) ‘Locating Punt’; in O’Connor, David B. and Quirke, Stephen G. J. editors, *Mysterious Lands: encounters with ancient Egypt* London: Institute of Archaeology, University College London: University College of London Press (2003) pp. 53–80. Aaron Shapland also argues for Arabia, at least as part of Punt: Aaron L. Shapland, ‘In Pursuit of Punt: Egyptian Relations with a Lost Land.’ *Journal of Near and Middle Eastern Studies*, University of Toronto (2010) pp. 10-16. Kenneth Kitchen argues that Punt was just west of Port Sudan in Sudan but extended into the highlands of Eritrea and the northern Tigray region of Ethiopia: Kitchen, Kenneth ‘The Land of Punt’, Shaw, Thurstan, ed. *The Archaeology of Africa: food, metals and towns* London: Routledge (1993) pp. 587-608. F.D.P. Wicker argues that Punt was farther south on Lake Albert in Uganda: Wicker, F.D.P. ‘The road to Punt’, *Geographical Journal*, vol. 164 (1998) pp. 45-56. Stanley Balanda argues that Punt was a coastal area encompassing several ethnic groups, including Djibouti, the northern

been discovered anywhere. However, the lists of exotic materials and animals imported from Punt would suggest that the Horn of Africa is the probable source. An ancient Egyptian mummified baboon, now in the British Museum, which was said by the Egyptians to have come from Punt, may give us solid scientific evidence for the location of this exotic land. Oxygen isotopic analysis of the hairs of the mummified baboon confirm that the animal came from northern Ethiopia or Eritrea (Jarus).

The tomb of Rekhmire (TT100) in Thebes, Egypt, is of particular interest. Rekhmire was an official at the time of Tuthmose III and Amenhotep II, c. 1450 BC. One large wall of the multi-chamber tomb has registers of foreign emissaries bringing gifts. The foreigners depicted in their ethnic costumes include the Retenu of southwest Asia, the Nubians of Sudan or even farther south, the Keftiu from Crete or the Aegean, and men from Punt. Each group carries exotic objects and raw materials, which must be intended to reveal which goods originated in each land. Ostrich eggs and feathers, ivory, fruits, animals, gold in rings and as vessels, daggers and weapons, and various animals: long-horned cattle, giraffes, dogs, monkeys, baboons, bears, and cats are all included in the panoply of gifts. The men from Punt are even shown bringing a tree in a basket which was intended for transplant in Egypt (Davies). This recalls the reliefs of Hatshepsut's Punt expedition which include incense trees in baskets brought back to be planted at her funerary complex.

Egyptian trade with Punt was probably rare, and all the more celebrated because of the extraordinary efforts made to get to Punt. Cyril Aldred concluded:

The produce of Punt, which is included in the tribute from the Southern dependencies, at least cannot have been acquired by annual taxation, but must have been obtained by barter, as is evident from the pictures of the trade-goods offered by the Egyptians to the rulers of Punt in the reign of Hatshepsut. It is doubtful whether a trading mission was dispatched to Punt every year or even every reign. (Aldred 110)

There are 14 tombs at Thebes which show the parade of gifts made by foreigners. If all of these emissaries came at the same time to Egypt, they no doubt would have met one another in the local markets. It is most likely that the event depicted in the Tomb of Rekhmire was an extraordinary occurrence, not something that happened routinely, since tomb paintings tended to celebrate the outstanding or notable achievements of the deceased. It is notable that only 4 tombs (TT 86, 89, 100, 143) show gifts from Punt. Nevertheless, if these gifts were carried in for special occasions to honor a pharaoh, it is highly probable that Keftiu men met Nubians and men from Punt from time to time, and most likely they could have seen, probably would have desired, and perhaps even might have obtained some of the precious materials to take back home.

Hundreds of objects of elephant and hippopotamus ivory, ostrich eggs, gold, and rock crystal have been recovered in Aegean Bronze Age archaeological contexts. It is possible, of course,

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coast of Somalia, the coast of Eritrea and southeastern Sudan, and across the strait, the coasts of Arabia, Yemen and Oman: Stanley Balanda, "The So-Called "Mine of Punt" and Its Location." *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, Vol. 42 (2005/2006), pp. 33-44. Louise Bradbury argues that Punt was in Sudan along the Nile, primarily between the 4th and 5th cataracts: Louise Bradbury, Reflections on Traveling to "God's Land" and Punt in the Middle Kingdom, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, Vol. 25 (1988), pp. 127-156. Jon Kalb places Punt in the Awsa area of the Afar depression in Ethiopia, in the northern Rift Valley: Kalb, Job. "Awsa and Punt: Into the Mix." *Nyame Akuma* 71 (June, 2009) pp. 31-34.

that all of these materials were imported from Egypt or Syria, or traded second- or third-hand by merchants who made a circuit of the Eastern Mediterranean. A shipwreck found off the coast of Turkey at Uluburun (Kas) has demonstrated the international nature of Bronze Age trade. The ship sank in about 1300 BC, possibly because it was carrying more than ten tons of Cypriot copper in its hold. Additional raw materials on this one small ship included ivory, gold, ingots of blue glass, ostrich eggs, tin, Anatolian silver, African Blackwood (ebony), terebinth resin in Canaanite jars, murex shells for purple dye, orpiment, and beads, including some beads of amber from the Baltic region. Finished objects on the boat include Mycenaean and Cypriot pottery, a small wood tablet with ivory hinges, jewelry, knives, swords and spears. The objects came from all over the place – this was a truly international cargo. Some of the sailors, some of the merchants must have met people from very different parts of the world. Some of the products probably originated in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the ebony and perhaps the ivory and ostrich eggs, though elephants and ostriches were present in Syria at this time. Mycenaean Greeks were probably part of the crew of the ship, based on the pottery and personal items (knives) found in the wreckage (Pulak).

Minoans and Mycenaeans from Bronze Age Greece went to Egypt, Syria, and Anatolia. They imported materials from farther away: lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, amber from the Baltic regions, spices from Asia. Is there any evidence for trade with Punt? Isn't it likely that some of the exotic materials from Punt ended up in the Aegean? Is there any evidence for contact with 'Ethiopians' -- wherever they might have been?

### **Aegean Wall-paintings as Evidence for Contact with Punt**

Paintings made on the plastered walls of houses in the small town of Akrotiri on the Aegean island of Thera (Santorini) give us some additional information. The town was preserved when the volcano which makes up the island erupted in 1627 BC (Warburton). The frescos in the houses show a variety of animals, landscapes, cultic scenes, and people. Among them are baboons, monkeys, and gazelles, all of which live still today in Ethiopia.

House Beta has a fresco of Grant's Gazelles on one wall (not, as they have often been identified, antelopes). Grant's Gazelles are present in the lower areas of Ethiopia, near the Kenya border, and both east and west of the Rift Valley. The North wall of Room Beta 6 features Grivet monkeys, which are found in the highlands of Ethiopia (Masseti and Bruner). Other frescos include papyrus plants, an African near a palm tree, an invasion with some men drowning off the coast, and a flotilla of ships heading off on an expedition.

All of these paintings have been interpreted in multiple ways by scholars, but no one has looked at the possibility that these are a record of participation in an expedition to Punt. The landscape in which the monkeys climb is often compared to the landscape of Thera, but in fact the landscape in the fresco is even more similar to the landscape of eastern Tigray, where the monkeys actually live and clamber on the rocks. If Minoans from Akrotiri joined an expedition to Punt, it would account for their familiarity with the animals of the Ethiopian highlands, and their remarkably accurate depiction of the animals in the frescos. It would also explain some of the more exotic elements (papyrus, palm trees, cats, water fowl, and baboons) which were surely not part of the everyday scene on the island of Thera. Like the procession of gift-bearers in the Tomb of Rekhmire, we should probably expect that these frescos represented an extraordinary event, not merely the view out the window.

## Conclusion

The first Greek poet was Homer, a blind bard who around 750 BC composed two epic poems about the Trojan War, which the Greeks believed was part of their history. Both poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, mention Ethiopia. The gods visit this special place, as does one Mycenaean Greek king, Menelaus.

Iliad 1.423-4

Zeu\j ga\r e0j 0Wkeano\n met' a0mu/monaj Ai0qioph~aj  
xqizo\j e1bh kata\ dai=ta, qeoi\ d' a3ma pa/ntej e3ponto:

For yesterday Zeus went to Oceanus,  
for a feast with the blameless Ethiopians.  
The gods all journeyed with him.

Iliad 23.205-7

“ou0x e3doj: ei]mi ga\r au]tij e0p' 0Wkeanoi=o r9e/eqra,  
Ai0qio/pwn e0j gai=an, o3qi r9e/zous' e9kato/mbaj  
a0qana/toij, i3na dh\ kai\ e0gw\ metadai/somai i9rw~n.

[The goddess Iris speaking] "No seat for me, for I must go back to the streams of Oceanus and the land of the Ethiopians who are offering hecatombs to the immortals, and I would have my share.

Odyssey 1.22-26<sup>2</sup>

0All' o9 me\n Ai0qi/opaj meteki/ae thlo/q' e0o/ntaj,  
Ai0qi/opaj, toi\ dixqa\ dedai/atai, e3sxatoi a0ndrw~n,  
oi9 me\n dusome/nou 9Uperi/onoj, oi9 d' a0ni/ontoj,  
a0ntio/wn tau/rwn te kai\ a0rneiw~n e9kato/mbhj.  
e1nq' o3 ge te/rpeto daiti\ parh/menoi:

But he [the god Poseidon] was visiting the Ethiopians who are far-away,  
The Ethiopians, divided in two places, the farthest of men,  
Some, where Hyperion [the sun] sets and some where he rises  
Offering hecatombs both of bulls and of sheep.  
And he enjoyed partaking in the feast.

Odyssey 4.84

[Menelaos speaking]

h] ga\r polla\ paqw\n kai\ po/ll' e0palhqeij,

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<sup>2</sup> Odyssey 5.282-290 mentions the trip of Poseidon to the Ethiopians again as he is dismayed that the other gods went against him while he was away. But the passage offers no further details about Ethiopia.

h0gago/mhn e0n nhusi\ kai\ o0gdoa/tw| e1tei h]lqon:  
Ku/pron Foini/khn te kai\ Ai0gupti/ouj e0palhqeì\j,  
Ai0qi/opa/j q' i9ko/mhn kai\ Sidoni/ouj kai\ 0Erembou\j  
kai\ Libu/hn, i3na t' a1rnej a1far keraoi\ tele/qousi.

For having experienced many things and having wandered to many places  
I was led among the islands and arrived in the eighth year.  
Having wandered to Cyprus and Phoenicia and Egypt  
I visited the Ethiopians and Sidonians and Erebi  
And Libya, where sheep are born with horns.

Evidently, then, both gods and heroes found their way to Ethiopia. We do not know exactly where it was they went. Homer's description of Ethiopia divided into a western and eastern part sounds very much like the Horn of Africa and Arabian peninsula, which were most likely allied or united at the time Homer was composing his epics, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, during the period alternately called D'MT, the Yeha period, or the Ethio-Sabaeen period. Certainly there was an ocean journey involved, and to the Greeks, the place was about as far away as you could go, where the last men lived. It was also a place that honored the gods and offered feasts.

Classics scholars and archaeologists have argued that Homer's tales reflect an oral history of the Aegean Bronze Age. Archaeologically-attested 'proof' that Homer's tales were accurate is regularly cited by both historians and archaeologists. Homer says the men wore bronze armor – archaeologists found bronze armor. Homer says they wore helmets made of boars' tusks – archaeologists found boars' tusk helmets. Homer talks of chariots – archaeologists found gravestones and frescos of warriors in chariots. Palaces, ships, graves, gold, weapons, feasting vessels – archaeology has provided countless examples of physical remains which corroborate the epics of Homer. Why, then, would we not accept the information about Ethiopia as well?

The answer is, perhaps, that there are simply too many gaps still in the archaeological research of Ethiopia. We still do not know where to look for the sites of Punt. Ethiopia has not produced evidence for trade with Egypt or the Minoans or the Nubians in the Bronze Age. We have not learned yet about the incense trade in the Bronze and Iron Ages in Ethiopia, nor have Aegean archaeologists looked specifically for the olibanum and myrrh which grows only in the Horn of Africa and Southern Arabia. All of this awaits discovery, and let us hope the wait will not be too long.



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