

■ ETHIOPIA

Awsa and Punt: Into the Mix

Jon Kalb
 Research Fellow
 Vertebrate Paleontology Laboratory
 University of Texas at Austin
 E-mail: j.e.kalb@mail.utexas.edu

Introduction

One of the most enduring mysteries of African history and geography is the location of the fabled land of Punt, an important trading partner with ancient Egypt from early Pharaonic times (ca. 2888 BC) through the reign of Ramses III (1167 BC) (Pankhurst, 1997). Much attention regarding Punt's location has focused on countries bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Breasted 1906:102-122; Doriesse 1959; Edwards 1891; Hable-Sellassie 1972; Kitchen 1971, 1993; Meeks 2003; Pankhurst 1997). I propose that Punt was centered in the area of Awsa (Aussa), a former sultanate, in the central Afar Depression of northeastern Ethiopia. This hypothesis draws from bas-relief and hieroglyphic records of a trading expedition sent to Punt in ca. 1495 BC by Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt (Breasted 1906:102-122; Hable-Sellassie 1972; Kitchen 1971, 1993; Meeks 2003; Pankhurst 1997). The expedition was equipped with five ships with sail and 210 men, including 30 rowers (Edwards 1891).

The Mission in Punt

The major objectives of the mission revolved around acquisition of myrrh incense, considered vital to Egyptian religious ritual. The expedition was instructed, "that the ways to Punt should be searched out, that the highways [trade routes] to the Myrrh-terraces should be penetrated . . . on water and on the land" (Breasted 1906: 102-122). Unlike previous expeditions when the Egyptians used intermediaries to trade with the myrrh-terraces, this mission intended to trade directly with the sellers (Breasted 1906: 115, 116).

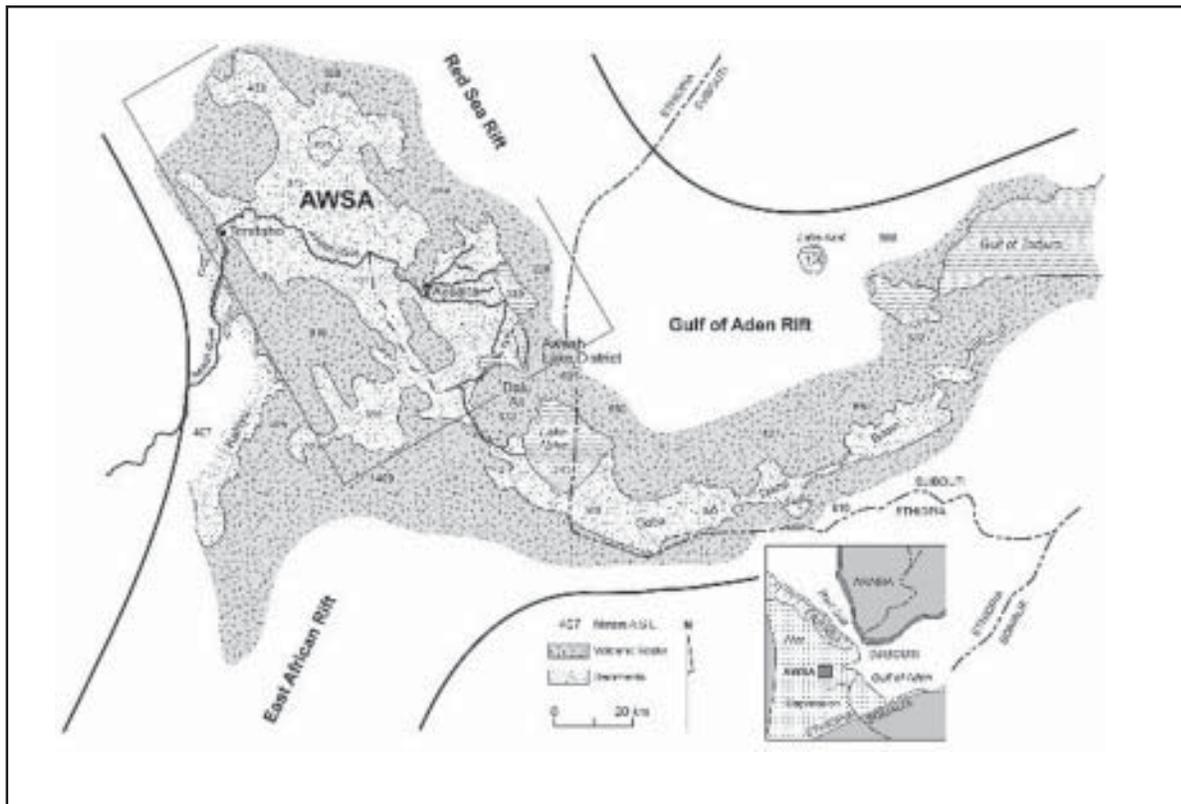
The Way to Punt

Because previous Egyptian expeditions traded with Punt for nearly 1400 years, we can assume the Hatshepsut mission already "searched out" the way to Punt (Hable-Sellassie 1972; Pankhurst 1997). As proposed here, the best route would be: to sail to the southwest end of the Red Sea; round the headland at Obock; sail or row to the west end of the Gulf of Tadjura; and then to walk overland along an east-west corridor of sedimentary basins to Lake Abhé, the southern boundary of Awsa (Figure 1). The advantages of this route were: (a) the way to Awsa was direct and relatively easy to reach by sea and by land; (b) the Egyptians were familiar with navigating in the Red Sea; (c) the Gulf of Tadjura offered a protected and secluded harbor for the Egyptian ships; (d) negotiations with Awsa could be held free from outside interference; and (e) Awsa was located near known myrrh terraces, and offered a range of other trade products from the African interior.

Description of Punt

The reliefs and hieroglyphic text show us that the Puntites raised cattle and traded to the Egyptians a long list of animals, animal products, and flora indigenous to Africa (e.g., giraffes, tusks, and ebony) (Breasted 1906: 102-122; Hable-Sellassie 1972). Punt is also depicted as forested with "inaccessible" channels and dome-shaped huts with stilts (Breasted 1906:102-122; Kitchen 1971, 1993; Meeks 2003). The combination of stilts and flooded channels indicate a history of high water levels, although at the time of the Egyptian visit to Awsa (ca. 1495 BC) water levels had fallen from 145 to 25 m above present levels (Gasse 2000; Gasse and Street 1978). By contrast, climatic conditions today in Awsa are characterized by "accessible" channels, shallow water levels, reduced forests, emerged marshes, and dome-shaped huts without stilts built by the Afar. The Punt houses served a more permanent livelihood, perhaps greater attention to agriculture and trade, in addition to livestock, whereas traditionally the Afar are more pastoralist.

Figure 1: Location of Awsa (Institute Geographic National 1974; Joint Operations Graphic 1971; Varet 1978).



Awsa as Punt

Awsa lies just above the Horn of Africa due west of Djibouti, the Gulf of Tadjura, and the Gulf of Aden (Figure 1). It is drained by the lower Awash River in the area between Tendaho and Lake Abhé. Some 6000 km (Doresse 1959) of sedimentary lowlands are present in a flat terrain, surrounded by desert, towering volcanic cliffs, basalt plateaus, and volcanoes. Awsa is unique as a zone of subaerial sea floor spreading at the junction of the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and East African rifts (Pilger and Rösler 1976). Awsa is also known for its hydrological fluctuations, cluster of small lakes fed by the Awash, and fertile wetlands (Gasse 2000; Gasse and Street 1978). Crude earthworks and primitive irrigation methods suggest Awsa was cultivated to some degree by at least the sixteenth century, when it became a sultanate, and settled since at least the thirteenth century (Butzer pers. comm.; Kalb 2001; Pankhurst 1997: 61). The largest town in Awsa is Aysaita on the banks of the Awash River near the middle of the Depression. Aysaita has long served (and levied) traders and other traffic pass-

ing to and from the African interior, the coast, and the neighboring highlands (Butzer pers. comm.).

The Business in Punt

The importance of myrrh to the Hapshepsut mission is referred to repeatedly in the expedition records (Breasted 1906:102-122), especially the acquisition of 31 “fresh myrrh trees” (Breasted 1906: 112). In return for the myrrh and other items, the Puntites received metal daggers and hatchets, and jewelry (Breasted 1906: 115). The Egyptians succeeded in trading without using intermediaries between themselves and Punt; however, it is unlikely they “penetrated” the terraces and obtained seedlings directly from the sellers, as claimed by Queen Hapshepsut (Breasted 1906:102-122). It would not be surprising if the Puntites showed some reluctance in handing over to the Egyptians such a commercial item as myrrh seedlings since it is apparent the Egyptians intended to use them to produce their own myrrh (Breasted 1906: 118, 122). Ultimately, this could

undermine Punt's trade in that product. Perhaps the Puntites were gambling that the Egyptian agriculture experiment would fail, which apparently it did, since future expeditions to Punt continued to purchase large quantities of myrrh (Kitchen 1993: 597- 601). Overall, it is apparent that the Puntites had little invested in this commodity; rather, acting as middlemen they obtained the plants from their source, which presumably they then offered the Egyptians at a seller's market price—a logical source of myrrh would be the terraces in the neighboring Somali lands known since antiquity for its high-quality myrrh.

Conclusions

Until field evidence or some other unequivocal documentation places the land of Punt in the land of Awsa, a case for Punt's location in the central Afar Depression remains speculative. We can say that Awsa fits a number of criteria—historical, geographical, zoogeographical, and geological—favoring the hypothesis. In the mission record, the Egyptians treat Punt [Awsa] as the source of the myrrh-terraces, which apparently was not the case. Instead, it appears that Punt served as the intermediary between the Egyptians and the myrrh sellers. Although the Egyptian plan was to “penetrate” the terraces directly was unsuccessful, and the Egyptian plan to use seedlings to grow their own myrrh failed, the Hatshepsut mission succeeded in continuing its ties with Punt and returning to Egypt with ample stores of myrrh and other products.

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