



ETHIOPIA

ETHIOPIA, RELATIONS WITH PERSIA.

i. Pre-Islamic Period.

ii. Islamic Era.

i. PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

Ethiopia (OPers. *Kuša-*), Elam. *ku-æá*, Akk. *ku-ú-æu*, was located on the western fringe of the Achaemenid Empire (cf. *DPh* 6 = *DH* 5 [Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 136 and 147]). The Ethiopians (OPers. *Kušiyā*; Gr. *Aithí-opes* “with [sun]burnt faces”) are named among the peoples of the Persian Empire (*DNa* 30, *DSe* 30, *XPh* 28 [Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 137, 141, 151]) and are included at the end of Herodotus’s satrapy list (3.97, 2f.). Their country was probably not part of a satrapy in the Achaemenid Empire and they did not pay regular taxes; they rather seem to have exchanged biennial gifts only like gold, ebony, boys, and elephant tusks (Herodotus, 3.97, 2) such as the ones shown on the Apadāna reliefs at Persepolis on which they are depicted last in the series of the tributaries of the Persian Empire. The use of Kushite ivory is confirmed on one of the building inscriptions at Darius’ palace at Susa (*DSf* 43f. [Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 143]).

Soon after Cambyses had succeeded his father Cyrus in 529 B.C.E. he led his army to the eastern borders of Egypt. The expedition against the “long-lived”



Ethiopians (Herodotus, 7.17-22) was ill-prepared and hasty, however, and ended in disaster with heavy losses of manpower due to lack of food; Cambyses himself is said to have gone mad after the campaign had failed. This invasion by Cambyses has been a matter of constant dispute within Nubian studies: Decisive in the matter of its authenticity is the answer to the question whether the ruler named *Kmbswdn* in the so-called stela of Nastasen can be identified with Cambyses or not (cf. Morkot, pp. 323, 326f., 330f. for an analysis of this stela). A possible allusion to the Cambyses campaign may be seen in the *Aithiopiká* of Heliodorus of Emesa (3rd century C.E.), which is a romance at the background of a conflict between a Meriotic king (Hydaspes) and the Persian satrap Oroondates.

From the time of the early Greek literary sources until the Hellenistic period Ethiopia was idealized by the Greeks, who considered the Ethiopians to be a semi-mythological people. Memnon, the ruler of the Homeric Ethiopians, they identified with the Great Persian King (cf. Georges, pp. 48f., 68f., 267 n. 1) and even at a time when the Greeks had come to know the Persians a little better, they continued to link the two Eastern peoples: e.g., for Herodotus Achaemenid Susa remained the *Memnóneion ásty* (5.54, 2).

According to Herodotus the Ethiopians, clad in leopard or lion skins, wearing long bows and painted with vermilion and chalk provided one of the most colorful, as well as warlike, contingents in the army with which Xerxes invaded Greece in 480-79 B.C. (Herodotus, 7.69, 2; cf. also Head, p. 53. For a description of Kushites on Greek pottery cf. Morkot, pp. 328-30). A delegation from the Ethiopians is included in the lists of Arrian (7.15, 4-5) and Diodorus (17.113, 1-2) amongst those which awaited Alexander on his return to Babylon in the spring of 323 B.C.

During a lengthy conflict in the 6th century C.E. between Byzantium and the Sasanians, with South Arabia at stake as an object of obvious economic interest for control over the lower Red Sea and trade with India, Persian and Ethiopian armies clashed again; at the request of Justinian, the Ethiopians landed in Yemen in 525, in order to help their Monophysite Christian co-religionists (for the background and evolution of this conflict cf. Bosworth, pp. 604-7 and Frye, pp. 156f.).



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ii. ISLAMIC PERIOD

Before modern times, there were no direct relations between Ethiopia and Persia. Vycichl suggests that the term “King of Kings,” the title of the Ethiopian kings found on Axoumite inscriptions, is related to the Persian *šāhanšāh*, but it is difficult to prove that elements of Persian civilization penetrated ancient Ethiopia (Vycichl, p. 203; Hammerschmidt, p. 151; Bernard and Drewes, pp. 251, 368; Caquot, p. 207).

The most important direct contact between Ethiopia and Persia occurred



shortly before the rise of Islam in the Yemen, an area with which Ethiopia had close cultural, linguistic, and political ties. To protect Christians from persecution by a Jewish Himyarite prince, the Ethiopian king Ella Aṣbeḥa (Hellestheaios in Procopius; [Figure 1](#)) had invaded the Yemen ca. 525, leaving Esimiphaïos (the SMYF' of the Sabeian inscriptions) there as a puppet king. Esimiphaïos was deposed by his Ethiopian troops, who chose as their leader Abraha, said to have been the slave of a Byzantine merchant in the Ethiopian port of Adulis. The Byzantine emperor Justinian (r. 527-565) urged Ethiopia and Yemen to join the war against Persia and to buy silk for the Byzantines directly from India (Procopius, *De Bello Persico* I, 20.9-12). The latter plan was resisted by Persian merchants in the Red Sea ports. Several times Abraha promised Justinian to invade Persia—i.e., to attack the Lakhmids of Ḥīra, allies of the Persians—but he apparently marched only against the Banū Ma'add (ca. 545, recorded in the inscription of Morayḡān; G. Ryckmans, pp. 275-84; J. Ryckmans, pp. 339-42). His attack on Mecca (Koran 105) provoked a Persian invasion of the Yemen. According to local tradition in the Yemen, Sayf b. Ḍī Yazan, a Himyarite prince, sought assistance against the Ethiopians, first from the Byzantine emperor, then from Ḳosrow Anōšīrvān I (r. 531-79). Ḳosrow sent 800 Daylamite prisoners to Yemen under the leadership of another released prisoner, who bore the title *wahrīz*. The defeat of the Ethiopians under Abraha's son Masrūq, ca. 570 C.E., put an end to their domination of the Yemen (for further details on the Ethiopians and Persians in pre-Islamic Yemen, see ABNĀ').

There are vague indications of a Persian presence on the western coast of the Red Sea in early Islamic times. In the Beja territory, in the angle formed with the Aṭḡbarā river and the hills of the Eritrean-Sudanese frontier, a great number of imposing tombs are found, which might date before the 9th century. Local tradition is uncertain about their origin. They are attributed to the Beja themselves, to Christians in general, to the Byzantines, and to the "Fors," an Arabic word for Persians (Conti Rossini, pp. 279-80). In Ethiopia of Biblical times, the Persians were called "Fārs," a term also applied to the Medes, Assyrians, and Chaldeans. Perhaps this is related to the tradition of the African Red Sea coast and its hinterland that the "Fors" occupied all the important places on the coast and built the cisterns that are still seen there. Such cisterns are also found at So'āken, in the Dahlak archipelago, and elsewhere. In what is now a very inhospitable area, the "Fors" are said to have had beautiful grain and banana plantations and a splendid town called Adga located in the mountains facing the sea. Dankali tradition says that the port of



Assab was a great center of the “Fors,” who were later destroyed or chased away by Songo invaders from the interior. Upon leaving, the “Fors” filled up the cisterns and covered them (Conti Rossini, pp. 295-96). So far, these traditions have not been substantiated, nor is there any indication that these “Fors” were related to the Persians who occupied the Yemen ca. 572-629. Yet traditions of a Persian presence in the region seem to be quite old. Ebn al-Mojāwer (d. 690/1291), perhaps of Persian descent himself, remarked that the coastal town of Ġolāfeqa in the Tehāma in southwestern Arabia had been repaired after a period of decay by Persians from Sīrāf or Persian fugitives from Jedda (Löfgren, ii, p. 240). Ebn Baṭṭūṭa (8th/14th cent.; tr. Gibb, ii, p. 360) mentions ancient cisterns outside Jedda and adds that the town was said to have been founded by Persians. Local traditions along the East African coast attribute the founding of various port cities to “Shirazis,” and trade connections between East Africa and Sīrāf are well documented for the medieval period (see EAST AFRICA i).

Incidental contacts between the Ethiopian and the Persian courts took place in the 11th/17th century. An envoy from the Ethiopian king Fāsīladas (r. 1632-1667) visited the court of Shah ‘Abbās II (r. 1642-1666) to deliver gifts and compliments but was dismissed rudely (Van Donzel, p. 36). The Ethiopian mission was probably part of the policy of this Ethiopian king to enter into contact with foreign powers. In 1683 Hiob Ludolf met an Armenian merchant in Paris who told him that there was an Armenian at the Ethiopian court, an expert in siegecraft, gunpower, and cannon balls, who had been an envoy from the Ethiopian king (probably Yohannes I, r. 1667-82) to the Persian court. Among other things he had taken a zebra as a gift (Ludolf, p. 266; cf. Chardin, ii, p. 45). Later Shah Soltān Ḥosayn asked the Ethiopian king Yostos (r. 1711-1716) for a zebra (Petráček, p. 360). The Dutch agent of the East India Company in Mokā in Yemen mentions another envoy to the Safavid court during the reign of the Ethiopian king Iyāsu I (r. 1682-1706), perhaps Ādam b. ‘Abd-al-Razzāq, the Abyssinian Muslim whom Iyāsu sent to the Safavid court to “settle some matter” (Van Donzel, p. 139). There were also indirect trade links. During his second stay at Batavia (now Jakarta), the merchant/envoy from the Ethiopians, Ḳvāja Morād, related that in the Ethiopian ports of Zayla‘, Baylūl, Masawwa‘ and Suakin Arab merchants traded Persian broadcloth and spices for slaves, gold and silver, tusks, cow-hides, coffee, salep, butter, oil, and honey (Van Donzel, p. 78).



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