On the Pretended Phœnician Circumnavigation of Africa

Author(s): E. J. Webb

Source: *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Sep., 1906), pp. 297-298

Published by: [The Royal Geographical Society \(with the Institute of British Geographers\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1776740>

Accessed: 12/02/2015 06:39

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Geographical Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Kong, prepared by Mr. George Bentham, was followed by grants for floras of Australia and New Zealand, while official support was eventually given to those of Ceylon and South Africa, commenced by independent workers. A flora of Mauritius was also prepared by Mr. Baker, of Kew, under the authority of the Colonial Government. A flora of Tropical Africa, originally planned to include the collections of Livingstone's and other expeditions, and placed under the editorship of Prof. Oliver, has, after various vicissitudes, been extended under the charge of Sir W. Thiselton-Dyer so as to form ten volumes, of which the greater part has now been issued. One of the most important of the whole series is the 'Flora of British India,' a monument to the persevering labours of Sir Joseph Hooker, which was completed in 1897; while that of the Malay peninsula has for some time been in active preparation. A similar undertaking will no doubt be carried out eventually by Canada without outside assistance, while, apart from this, the most important gaps still remaining relate to British Guiana and Honduras.

OBITUARY.

Khan Bahadur Yusuf Sharif.

ON June 20 last, at Jabalpur, in India, there passed away one of the best of the native geographers who learned their work in the Indian Survey Department. Khan Bahadur Yusuf Sharif was a Mohammedan gentleman of the best type. Clever and persevering, possessed of considerable mathematical talent, and a genuine thirst for geographical exploration, he was almost typical in these modern days of those splendid Mohammedan geographers who have left us so many valuable records of Asiatic travel in mediæval times. Yusuf Sharif won the good opinion of all officials with whom he had to deal, and would have been a distinguished servant of the Government in any capacity in which he might have been employed. He was one of the small band of native surveyors attached to the Russo-Afghan Boundary Commission of 1884-85, where his skill as a topographer and his power of making friends with all sorts and conditions of men were most useful factors in the acquisition of a large store of geographical knowledge which was new then and has never yet been superseded or revised. Subsequently he was employed in Persia, and was especially successful in dealing with the difficult country of the Bakhtiari tribes. He carried out a rough triangulation from the coast, and gave us our first indications of the nature of the hill districts that intervene between the coasts and Kirman. The great value of his work as a geographer lies in its thoroughness. He was in all respects a most able and trustworthy servant of the Indian Government, who rewarded him with the title of Khan Bahadur. He also received the recognition of the Royal Geographical Society for his excellent work on more than one occasion.

CORRESPONDENCE.

"On the Pretended Phœnician Circumnavigation of Africa."

MANY of those who claim a pre-Hellenic antiquity for Zimbabwe and other South African ruins appeal to the Phœnician legend as a confirmation of their views.*

* Dr. A. H. Keane, *Geographical Journal*, vol. 27, p. 338; Dr. Carl Peters, 'The Eldorado of the Ancients,' p. 317; Messrs. Hall and Neal, 'Ancient Ruins of Rhodesia,' p. 29; 'World's History,' vol. 2, p. 590 (English version).

Could they be convinced that this legend tells, not for, but against their theory, they would perhaps be ready to subject it to a somewhat more searching criticism.

It has often been remarked that modern believers accept the story for the very reason which caused Herodotus to hesitate, the mention of a sun on the right hand, which is usually, if somewhat boldly, interpreted to mean a sun seen in the north at noon. It is less generally observed that what made Herodotus himself a believer—namely, the tale that the Phœnicians were able to achieve so enormous an enterprise by raising crops on whatever part of the coast they might have reached when seed-time came round—is so little credible to his followers, that, while professing to accept his story, they generally reject this essential part of it.

Thus Rennell's elaborate argument * is a plea for a story of which Rennell himself, and not Herodotus, is the author. In order to find a really possible method by which his Phœnicians could have renewed their supplies, he was compelled to assume, like modern advocates of a South African Ophir, that a trade with Sofala had already been long in existence. Neither he nor they seem to perceive that, if this theory of a pre-established African trade be true, then the mention of a northerly sun, which was supposed to be of irresistible strength, ceases to have any force whatever. At Sofala, in lat. 20° S., the midday sun is to be seen in the north for much the greater part of the year, and it is ridiculous to suppose that people trading regularly with that port did not know this. If the Phœnicians came back from the far south to startle the world with the tale of a northerly sun, it shows very clearly that they can never have been to the far south before.

Really, however, the modern idea that this tale of a northerly sun must be true because it could not have been invented is largely due to modern ignorance of elementary astronomy. To see the noonday sun *always* in the north one must be south of the southern tropic; to see it there *generally* one must be south of the equator. But merely to have seen it there proves no more than that the observer has been south of the Tropic of Cancer. And so much had been accomplished by civilized man long before Herodotus. That the midsummer sun was vertical at Syene must have been a well-known fact ages before Eratosthenes made use of it to measure the Earth's circumference. And surely the people further south still, as at Meroë, must have known that with them the shadow fell, not to the north, as in Lower Egypt, but to the south. Now, the southern coast of Africa, wherever it was, could not but lie further south still than Meroë.

Why, if Herodotus is to be believed when he speaks of a Phœnician circumnavigation,† does no one believe him when he goes on to speak of a Carthaginian one? How is it that a voyage which should have proved the vast southerly prolongation of Africa came to be cited as a proof that this prolongation was small? How, if even Sofala were known to civilized men, could a theory have long prevailed among geographers that the equatorial region was impassable? Posidonius, who denied this theory,‡ and believed that Africa could be circumnavigated,§ yet rejected the Phœnician legend. Posidonius must have understood the argument from the northerly sun as well as we. Have not we moderns shown ourselves in this matter somewhat less wisely critical than Posidonius?

E. J. WEBB.

Burghelere, Newbury.

* 'Geographical System of Herodotus,' pp. 673 *sqq.*

† Herodotus, iv. 42, 43.

‡ Cleomedes, i. 6.

§ Strabo, ii. p. 98