AZANIA — SOME ETYMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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There have been a number of attempts to establish an etymology for the name Azania. Liddell and Scott offer the derivation 'land of Zan or Zeus'. Casson suggests that Azania has the same root as Zanzibar, and that this root had the meaning 'black'. Huntingford argues that the name derives from the Greek άξιανειν meaning 'to dry, parch up'. Finally, Dreyer points out that the Afro-Asiatic languages of north-east Africa have a word meaning 'brother' which may have given rise to the name. Liddell and Scott's derivation refers to Azania in Arcadia, whereas the others refer to a region in north-east Africa. This article investigates these derivations and goes on to ask whether the use of the same name for the Arcadian and the African Azania is a coincidence or not.

The evidence

The name Azania referring to north-east Africa is found in the Periplus Maris Erythraei (hereafter PME, 15.2), which probably dates from the first century AD. The author was probably a Greek merchant living in Egypt, who travelled the route himself. The area of the Red Sea as far as Opone he calls 'The Far Side' (τὸ Πέρα Ἠ. 7.4). He puts the country of the Barbaroi beyond Berenice, extending as far as East Africa (ἡ Βαρβαρία Ἑρων 2.1.7–10). The term 'Barbaroi' refers to the Ichthyophagoi, Agriophagoi, Moschophagoi and the Trogodytes, who were notorious for their attacks on travellers in the region. Azania is the author's term for the east coast of Africa from Opone (Ras Hafoun) to Rhapta (Dar es Salaam), which was divided into a number of 'runs', or strips of desert. The Himyarite king Charibael in Muza (Yemen) and his governor controlled the trade along this coast in the author's day (PME 31). The author tells us that the Arabs knew the language of the inhabitants and had intermarried with them (PME 16). The Swahili people and language trace their origins to the integration of the Arabic traders with the local population.

Claudius Ptolemy, the second century AD Alexandrian geographer, gives a rather different description of this region. This author uses the name Barbaria as a general term for the coastal region containing trade ports in Arabia and Africa, including Azania (Ptol. Geog. 1.17.6). The term
Barbaric gulf (βαρβαρικός κόλπος) is used for the coastal ‘runs’ of Azania mentioned in the Periplus, and the name Azania is reserved to refer to the hinterland (Ptol. Geog. 4.7.11). Ptolemy calls the northern part of this region Hippalus after the man who discovered the use of monsoons to sail to and from India (Ptol. Geog. 4.7.41, cf. PME 57) and the southern section ‘the Shallow Sea’ Βραχεία θάλασσα (Ptol. Geog. 4.8.1). There was a regular trade between Rhapta in the extreme south and Aromata near the horn of Africa, as is evident from the mention of a merchant, Theophilus by name (Θεόφιλον δὲ τινα τῶν εἰς τὴν Ἀζανίαν πλεύντων, Ptol. Geog. 1.9.1). Derivatives of the name Azania are also known. Azanitae was later used as an ethnic name referring to Africans in general, as in Pelagius episcopus civitatis Azanitarum. Elsewhere the adjective form Azanensis is used.

In his description of Arcadia, Pausanias says that Azania was the name of a region which Azan inherited from his father Arkas, the descendant of Pelasgos, who had changed the name of his people from Pelasgians to Arcadians (Paus. 8.4.1). Further information is supplied by Stephanus of Byzantium, the 6th century grammarian, who tells us that Azania was one of three regions of Arcadia (the others being Parrhasia and Trapezus) and that Azania contained seventeen cities which fell under the control of Azan (Ethn. ad loc.). A colonising expedition was also said to have set out from Azania in Arcadia and to have settled in Phrygia. The settlement was then named Azanoi, Azanos or Azania (Paus. 8.4.3). Stephanus also refers to the Αζανώι in Phrygia, quoting various sources (Ethn. ad loc.). The citizens were called Azanitai (Ἀζανίται) from the feminine form Azanitis (Ἀζανίτις). Stephanus says that the Azanoi were named after Aizen (Ἀιζην possibly from αἴξην ‘in full bodily strength, vigorous’), who was the son of Tantalos, according to Herodian. Stephanus discounts this derivation by referring to another name for the city, Αζανίος. The name also occurs in Semitic form in the Biblical apocrypha, and Cassiodorus (Hist. Trip. 2) mentions a certain Azanes, the eunuch of Sapor, the 3rd century AD Persian king. As an off-hand conclusion Stephanus mentions another place called Azania in Massilia, on the authority of Philo.

**Derivation**

Huntingford suggests that the word could be derived from the Greek ἀξαίνειν ‘to dry, parch up’. Pliny describes a variety of nuts as azaniae (‘quae se in arbo re ipsa divisere, azaniae vocantur, laeduntque ceteras, nisi detr ahantur’ HN 16.107). Pliny’s description of these nuts suggests that, when dried, they exploded. His adjective azaniae is therefore related to the verb meaning ‘to dry’ and does not indicate the provenance of the nuts. Pliny also mentions an ocean or sea which he calls Azanian and which contains the island Scoocotra (HN 6.108; 6.153). Thus Huntingford suggests that Azania means ‘dried up land’. This meaning is appropriate to the dry
east coast of Africa. Furthermore Pliny’s use of the phrase *azanium mare* is paralleled by the Arabic name for the coast, *Barr Ajjan*, as *bar* can be translated as ‘sea’.\(^{19}\) The Romans, of course, would have known about this region as Graeco-Roman involvement in trade in the Red Sea area had been stepped up by Augustus and exchanges of goods are documented in the *Periplus*.\(^{20}\)

The proverb ‘Ἄξανα ξασά’, which was applied to the Azania in Arcadia, lends support to this argument.\(^{21}\) This proverb refers to the harshness of the land in Arcadian Azania. Stephanus also mentions a drought in Phrygian Azania, which suggests that this region too was dry and harsh and that the name was commonly used of such places (*Ethn. ad loc.*). Objections to Huntingford’s interpretation of the name are that Pliny’s *azanium mare* is too far north for Azania and etymologically the connection is questionable.\(^{22}\) Nevertheless, the Greek evidence suggests that Azania was a name given to a dry, harsh place and that this name was given to the north-east coast of Africa by Greek merchants.

Liddell and Scott suggest ‘the land of Zan or Zeus’ (*LSJ ad loc.*). There is a wealth of evidence in Pausanias to support this suggestion (Paus. 8.1). The family of Azan is closely connected with the inception of the cult of Zeus in Greece. Pelasgos, for example, was said to have been the first to discover that acorns from the grove of Zeus at Dodona were edible. His son Lykaon instituted the Lykaian Games and gave his name to Lykaian Zeus. There are also allusions in Pausanias to sacred mountains associated with the cult of Zeus, such as Mt Lykaion, Mt Azanius and Mt Kyllene. The name Azanis, the daughter of Azan, occurs in Ovid *Fast.* 3.659 in association with the nymph Anna, who first nurtured Zeus (‘invenies, quie nymphen Azanida dicant / etque Iovi primos, Anna, dedisse cibos’).\(^{23}\) The Cretan Kouretes knew of the connection between Zeus and Azan, as is clear from Statius (*Theb.* 4.292).\(^{24}\) In the light of this evidence, the suggestion that the alpha in Azania is privative and that the word means ‘the land without Zeus’ or ‘that God-forsaken hole’, seems improbable.\(^{25}\) Nevertheless the initial alpha of the name needs explanation. It is possible that ‘without Zeus’ meant ‘without rain, dry’, since Zeus was the god of weather, including rain.\(^{26}\) This interpretation reconciles Huntingford’s derivation with that of Liddell and Scott. The simplest derivation, which avoids this difficulty, is to derive the name from the personal name Azan.

The African Azania has also been related to the name Zanzibar, which is taken from the Arabic *zang* ‘rust’ and *bar* ‘coast’ = ‘coast of rust-coloured people’, though Lane takes *zang* to mean ‘black’.\(^{27}\) The coast was named Barbaria, a name which gave rise to the term Berbers, the ancient Caussoid inhabitants of North Africa, many of whom are light rather than dark in skin colour.\(^{28}\) Furthermore Cushites and Semites appear to have entered southern Arabia and north-east Africa already in the 2nd mil-
lenium BC, and the expansion of Bantu-speaking peoples into this area is generally placed later than the first century AD, so that the Azanians may have been Hamito-Semitic rather than Negroid ethnically.

A variant of this theory relates Azania to the name Zingis or Zengisa (Ζίγγις ἢ Ζήγγισα), a cape south of Opone, mentioned by Ptolemy (Ptol. Geog. 4.7.11). Von Wissmann associates this place-name with the Zangenae, mentioned by Pliny, a close contemporary of the author of the Periplus (HN 6.176). The Zangenae were an Arabian tribe mentioned by Juba in association with the Trogodytes, and the Ichthyophagoi, renowned for their swimming ability. Both the Zangenae and Zingis are located at the border between the Red Sea and Azania and both words may be etymologically connected with the name Azania by the Arabic ethnic term Zanj. The word Zanj is used, for example, by the Arab historian Tabari to refer to Black slaves in Mesopotamia, who rebelled against the caliph of Baghdad in 868. The rebels were difficult to subdue and sacked Basra before being suppressed in 883. Krumm derives the word from the Persian zangik meaning 'negro', though Turton questions this. Turton also connects Ptolemy's toponym Zingis with this word and suggests that it was rarely used as an ethnic term, but that when it was, it often had pejorative connotations. The travel notes of the 10th century Arab historian Al-Mas'udi, who knew Marinus, the source of Ptolemy, mentions leopard skins from the 'land of Zanj' and elephant-hunting by the 'Zanj' communities (Zingis) on the East coast of Africa. The name is also used to refer to a governor of Aleppo, presumably black, who founded the Zangid dynasty (1127–1222). This explanation does not explain the initial alpha of Azania. Nevertheless this etymology is suggestive, particularly in the light of the development of a creolised form of Arabic mentioned by the Periplus (PME 15). The name therefore may have been a blend of Arabic and the indigenous African language of the region.

Again, Dreyer points out that the Hamito-Semitic or Afro-Asiatic languages of NE Africa contain a number of words meaning 'brother' which may have been the root of the name Azania. The name would then mean 'land of brothers'. The words cited are san (Beja, North Cushitic); zin (Dembia, Central Cushitic); zino, zinogi (Bachama, Chad); sen (Modgel, Chad); sen (Somrai, Chad). The Bushmen, some of whom survive in East Africa and Southern Africa, are known as the San. The initial alpha of Azania, however, still requires explanation. Huntingford refers to the derivation of Azania from the Arabic ajam 'non-Arab, foreigner', which meets this objection. It is noticeable that Huntingford's derivation is the one echoed by the Greek βαρβαρος, the word on which Barbaria, the name of the coast of north-east Africa, is based. Dreyer fancifully suggests that the Afro-Asian etymology of Azania could be brought into line with Huntingford's derivation of the name from ajam foreigner, if the initial 'a' of
Azania were privative (hence ‘land of those who are not our brothers’). 39

**African and Arcadian Azania**

The origin of the Arcadian Azania is closely associated with the arrival of Pelasgians in Greece. Pausanias, for example, records a poem by Asios in praise of Pelasgos, who is said to have been born of the ‘black earth’, a hall-mark of the Pelasgians (Paus. 8.4). Linguistically there is nothing that prevents the word from being Pelasgian. 40 Arcadia was geographically isolated and linguistically conservative (the region retained the Arcado-Cyprian dialect for a long time). Arcadia could therefore have preserved this pre-Greek name. The form of the name may be paralleled in other Pelasgian names such as "Αζωρος, Γορτυνια, Μελανδια and Πλακια, which bear some lexical resemblance to Azania. 41

Stephanus says that the cult of Zeus in Arcadian Azania was in conflict with the worship of Dionysus. 42 Stephanus here quotes the sixth book of Eudoxus’ geography to the effect that there was a spring in Azania which caused those who tasted its water to be unable to tolerate the smell of wine, because Melampous polluted its waters by immersing the daughters of Proetus in it, after they had been driven mad by Dionysus. The name Melampodes is used to refer to early inhabitants of Egypt, whom Aegyptus is said to have subdued before renaming the land. 43 Melampous is said to have understood birds and insects, which may suggest his African origins. Herodotus tells us that Melampous introduced the phallic procession and the cult of Dionysos into Greece from Egypt (Hdt. 2.49.9). 44 Stephanus’ story supports this statement. Bernal (above, n.24) 75–83, recently suggested that the Pelasgians were Near Eastern, laying emphasis on Herodotus, who claims that the language of the Pelasgians was not Greek (Hdt. 1.58, 2.50). Bernal associates the Pelasgians with Egypt and Canaan and cites Herodotus’ assumption that the Egyptians made themselves kings in Greece (Hdt. 6.55). In addition, Stephanus says that there was another Azania near Massilia. Massilia was founded by the Ionian Phokaians, and Herodotus tells us that the Ionians were Pelasgian settlers (Hdt. 7.94–5). Furthermore, the cave near which the colony of Azania in Phrygia was located contained a statue of Kybele, the mother of Zeus, in Pausanias’ day (Paus. 8.4.3). The worship of Kybele here was similar to the Hittite cult of the Mother Goddess at Tas Suret. Pausanias’ account of the colony may have been an explanation for the similarity in the names. It is possible that the Arcadian Pelasgians originated in Phrygia, however, rather than moving from Arcadia to Phrygia.

There are clear indications, therefore, that the name Azania was not Greek. Stephanus gives a number of variations in the orthography of the name (given above), as well as the bizarre etymology of Hermogenes. Hermogenes derived the word from Exouanous ("Εξουάνους), because during
a famine the cowherds had sacrificed for good pasturage and when the gods
did not listen Euphorbos sacrificed an ouanous (a fox — οὐανοῦς = ἀλφαλούς) and
an exis (a hedgehog — ἐξίς = ἔχινος) to the gods. This did the trick
and Euphorbos was made priest and archon by the inhabitants. The city
was then called Exouanous, which stands for ἔχιναλωπής (‘Hedgehogfox’).
The name was then changed to Azanion (‘Αζανίων’). This fanciful story
is an aetiological fable, characteristic of Libyan tales, which resembled the
fables of Aesop (Arist. Rhet. 1393a 30). The Greek proverb ἄξι τι Διός
φέρει κανόν may also have originated in Libyan tales.46

Conclusion

It is clear, therefore, that the Azania in Arcadia is related to at least two
other places in the ancient world associated with the Pelasgians, and that
the name may not originally have been Greek. There are also indications
that the name was associated with Egypt and possibly with Africa. How­
ever, the argument that the name originated in Africa and was imported
into Greece by the Pelasgians is difficult to prove. The alternative, and
preferable, explanation is that, when the Greek merchants came into con­
act with the people of East Africa, they discovered that the coast was
already extensively colonised by the Arab traders, who had intermarried
with the local inhabitants and produced the Swahili people and a creolised
form of Arabic (PME 16). This creolised language may have contained a
toponym resembling the Greek Azania. Both the author of the Periplus
and Ptolemy may have identified the Swahili name with the non-Greek to­
ponym used by the Pelasgian settlers in Arcadia. The Swahili name may
have borne a superficial, but probably coincidental, resemblance to the
Greek one. The name has since been given other interpretations and mod­
ern interpretations of the name reflect the ideological importance current­ly
attached to it in South Africa.

Notes

1. LSJ ad loc.
5. Casson (above, n.2); Schoff (above, n.2); Huntingford (above, n.3); Tomaszek,
‘Azania’, RE 2.2 (1886), 2639–2640; H. Schlichter, ‘Ptolemy’s Topography of East­
ern Equatorial Africa’, Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society, ns 13 (1891)
513–553; the detailed and descriptive maps and drawings of elevations are given in
C. Müller, *Geographi Graeci Minores*, Paris 1855; G. Bunsen, *De Azania Africæ
Litore Orientali*, Bonn 1852; H.B. Robinson (ed.), *Narrative of Voyages to Ex­
plore the Shores of Africa, Arabia and Madagascar under the Direction of Captain

6. The author talks of ‘trees we have in Egypt’ (we; “t:LVCX xcxt 1:wv 1tcxp’ -1}

7. The Periplus (4.2.1) says that the port of Adulis had to be moved away from the Barbaroi for safety. Cleopatra is said to have spoken the language of the Trogodytes (Plut. Ant. 27.3–4).

8. For the suggested modern equivalents of the ancient toponyms, see Casson (above, n.2).


11. Perin (above, n.10), referring to Patr. Nic. 2.138 (Pisticus Azanensis); 5.138 (πιστός Αζανος); 1.142 (pisticos Azanon).


14. See J.G.C. Anderson, ABSA 4 (1898) 53–7. The settlement was located near to a cave, which was sacred to Kybele.

15. Coins and inscriptions indicate that the name of the Phrygian city was Αζανοι.

16. In the Old Vulgate II Esdras (Esdras and Nehemiah) 20.10, mention is made of Ιεσούς filius Azania.


18. Pliny wrongly restricts the sea to the Hippalos area, but does give tantalising information on places in the region, such as Adulis (Aegyptiorum hoc servi profugi a dominis conditdire), and lists the produce of the area, namely ivory, rhino horn and hides, tortoise-shell, apes and slaves (HN 6.172). Solinus (Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium 54.12; 56.5. c. 200 AD) talks of the pelagios Αζανια.

19. Schoff (above, n.2) tells us that the Arabs called the first part of the east coast of Africa (Somalia), Barr Ajjan, ‘preserving the ancient name’ and the second part Benadir = ‘coast of harbours’. The Portuguese navigator De Barros also refers to the name for the north-east coast of Africa as Ajan. Schoff’s connection between Ausan and the ‘Ausanitic coast’ (above, n.2) 94 is pure speculation (Casson [above, n.2] 252). This conjecture is based on Müller’s suggestion of παρ’ Αὐσανίτην ἠμῶν for the unintelligible ετενήδων (PM E 15). See Casson (above, n.2) 253.


21. Zenob. 2.54 ‘Ἄζάνα κακά: ἐπὶ τῶν κακῶν προσπαλαιώντων. Ἀζάνε άγα τόπος ἐστι τῆς Ἀρκαδίας λεπτόγεως, σκληρός καί ἄκαρπος, περὶ δὲ ποιοῦσι γεωργοῦ οὐδὲν
See Albrecht Diäle, 'Die entdeckungsgeschichtlichen Voraussetzungen des Indienhandels der römischen Kaiserzeit', *ANRW* 29.2 (1978) 562–3. The long quantity of the second syllable of the word *Azania* makes the connection with *Δζάνινες*, which derives from *az-yn-ye/o*, less likely.


24. 'venit et Idaeis ululatibus aemulus Azan, Parrhesiique duces'. The scholiast confirms the connection 'Azan apud Arcades Curetes hoc solum habent de monte Azanio. unde vulgo in sacris Deae Magnae . . . dicitur Azan'. Azan was also the bridegroom of Hippolyte, whom Herakles freed from the centaurs (Diod. 4.33). He is also remembered as the person for whom the first funeral games, which featured horse-races during which Apis was killed, were held. Azan's son, Kleitor, was associated with Lykosoura, which Lykaon had founded. Also Diod. 5.80.1. See Martin Bernal, *Black Athena*, New Jersey 1987, 77 and n.16.

25. The suggestion was made by Peter Green. See Dreyer (above, n.4, 219).


27. Dreyer (above, n.4) 216, takes 'zang' as 'rust-coloured'. Edward William Lane, *An Arabic–English Lexicon*, Beirut 1988, 3, col. 1256, takes 'zang' as 'black'. The root may also be found in the name Zambia, Zambezi, etc. 'Tanzania', however, was formed from a combination of Tanganyika and Zanzibar when the two states amalgamated.

28. Dreyer (above, n.4) 218.


30. Pliny probably wrote after the author of the *Periplus* but is ignorant of much of Azania and probably had finished the *Natural History* when the *Periplus* came into his hands (the fact that he did know of the *Periplus* is indicated by 6.101.7 — a description of the discovery of the monsoons by Hippalus, and a passage of great interest for the significance of the trade with this area). Von Wissmann, 'Zangenae', *RE* Suppl. 11, (1968), 1337–1348, connects the Zangenae with Azania and puts them in East Africa. Von Wissmann also associates the other tribe names in Pliny with places in East Africa (eg. *Bargeni* from Bar Agam).

31. W.H. Schoff (above, n.2) relates the name to the 'ancient Arabic and Persian division of the world into three sections, Hind, Sind, and Zinj' (in this he is following Yule's
commentary on the travels of Marco Polo, which says that Zinj, or Zanj, is one of the three divisions of the Indies [of which Africa formed a part] namely Hind, Sind and Zinj). This resulted in the medieval idea of the Indies, which consisted of Africa together with India and Asia. Marco Polo thought Abyssinia was part of India.


34. Turton (above, n.32) 525.


37. Dreyer (above, n.4).

38. G.W.B. Huntingford (above, n.3).

39. *The Oxford English Dictionary* suggests a connection with Arabic 'adjaan', which refers to the Muslim call to prayer.

41. Fick (above, n.39) 165.

42. *Apollod. Bibl/2.1.4. Δακανὸς μὲν ὄνοµα Ἱβής ἐν Αἰβήῳ κατάρχεισαι, Ἀγυπτον δὲ ἐν Ἀραβίᾳ, δὲ καὶ καταστερημένους τὴν Μεξαμποδάς χώραν (ἀφ’ ἑαυτοῦ) ἁνόμαζοι Ἀγυπτον. Apollodorus is copied by Eustathius 1.60.31–36.

44. See also *Diod. 1.97.4.

45. *Apollod. Bibl/2.1.4. Δακανὸς μὲν ὄνοµα Ἱβής ἐν Αἰβήῳ κατάρχεισαι, Ἀγυπτον δὲ ἐν Ἀραβίᾳ, δὲ καὶ καταστερημένους τὴν Μεξαμποδάς χώραν (ἀφ’ ἑαυτοῦ) ἁνόμαζοι Ἀγυπτον. Apollodorus is copied by Eustathius 1.60.31–36.

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