

# EGYPT AND NŪBA IN THE 13TH CENTURY: A PRELIMINARY NOTE

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## Introduction

Contact between the Muslims and the Nubians had begun as early as the first century A. H. when ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ sent Nāfiʿ b. ʿAbdalqays al-Fihri to occupy Nūba in 21/641-2 (Ibn ʿAbdalḥakam, *Futūḥ* 173). In 25/646-7, more troops were sent to Nūba under the leadership of ʿAbdallāh b. Saʿd b. Abī Sarah, ʿUṭmān's governor in Egypt. A treaty which regulated relations in respect of security and trade was drawn up between the Muslims and the Nubians in 31/652<sup>1</sup>. It was from this time that the so-called *baqt* (tribute) was introduced as a tribute paid from time to time by the Nubian Christians to the Muslim rulers.

*Baqt* differed from other tributes. The Nubians had to send slaves together with other gifts to the Muslims (Lokkegaard 1960: 966). This fulfilled the needs of the Arabs for slaves and *baqt* therefore became one of the most important sources of obtaining slaves, especially from Nūba. On the other hand, the Muslims were also obliged to send wheat and other grains, as well as textiles, to Nūba (*ibid.*).

Thereafter, the Nubians, who were Christians, continued to send tribute to the Muslim rulers in Egypt, albeit reluctantly. Towards the close of the ʿUmayyad period, however, they revolted against their Muslim neighbour in Egypt (Hasan 1967: 29). Except for a few odd occasions, however, relations between the Nubians and the succeeding Islamic dynasties, the *Tulūnīs* (254-92/868-905), the *Ihšīdīs* (323-58/935-69) and the *Fāṭimīs* (297-567/909-1171) had been generally serene. This was probably the result of a recognition on the part of the Christian leaders of the requirement to send regular gifts and slaves to the other party.

When the last *Fāṭimī* caliph was overthrown by the *Ayyūbīs* in 567/1171, the Nubians began to show signs of aggression. This resulted in retaliations on the part of the *Ayyūbīs* and the occupation of Nūba by al-Malik aṣ-Ṣāliḥ's son, Tūrān Šāh in 568/1172 (Ibn al-Aṭīr, *Kāmil* XI, 386; Adams 1977: 456). His army seized Ibrīm, the capital of the kingdom of al-Marīs (*Kāmil* XI, 387; Hasan 1967: 97). Later on, the *Ayyūbīs* left Nūba unattended, as they were preoccupied with the internal conflict in Aswān.

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<sup>1</sup> From then onwards, the Nubians started to send slaves as their tribute. Cf. Ibn ʿAbdalḥakam, *Futūḥ* 169-70, 174; Budge 1928: I, 103.

### Egypt and Sudan during the Time of Qalāwūn (678/1279-689/1290)

In Mamlūk times, *Nūba* consisted of three major kingdoms: al-Marīs, al-Muqurra and ʿAlwa (al-Masʿūdī, *Murūğ* I, 289; Hasan 1967: 5). al-Marīs, with its capital at Ib-rīm, lay in the northernmost part of *Nūba*. In the centre was the kingdom of al-Muqurra with its capital at Dunqula. Further south lay ʿAlwa, with its capital, Suba.

Relations between the Mamlūks and the Nubians began in the time of Baybars when in 667/1268, King Dawūd of *Nūba* sent a mission to Cairo. Accordingly, Baybars ordered the former to present him with the *baqt*. For all that, the sultan busied himself with other problems and was quite unconcerned with the affairs of *Nūba*. It was perhaps owing to this that King Dawūd ignored Baybars' demand for *baqt* (Hasan 1967: 107). In 671/1272, the king infringed the mutual understanding for peace with Baybars when he killed a number of Muslim merchants during his raid against Ayḍab, a port on the coast of the Red Sea<sup>2</sup>.

In 674/1275, another Nubian prince, Šankanda sought Baybars' help to overthrow King Dawūd. This opportunity was taken up by Baybars who wished to retaliate against King Dawūd's imprudence by sending his army to Dunqula (Ibn ʿAbdazzāhir, *Tašrif* 154; Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīḥ* VII, 45). As a result, Šankanda gained the throne and he later signed a truce with the sultan (al-Furāt, *Tārīḥ* VII, 45-6; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* I, 973; Hasan 1967: 108). The principal terms of the treaty were firstly that Šankanda had to send half of the Nubians' revenues to the sultan every year together with other gifts (Hasan 1967: 109; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* I, 973; Ibn Šaddād, *Tārīḥ* 130). Secondly, Baybars was given the power to govern al-Marīs, the northern part of *Nūba* (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* I, 974)<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, Baybars sent two assassins to act as watch-dogs over the new ruler of *Nūba*. In the rest of Nubian territory, the indigenous princelings had a more or less free hand (Lokkegaard 1960: 966).

During the first year of Qalāwūn's reign (678/1279), Šankanda was killed by one of the assassins and Barak, another prince, gained power in al-Muqurra (Ibn ʿAbdazzāhir, *Tašrif* 154). Later, he showed signs of wishing to break free from Qalāwūn's rule. Consequently, the Sultan despatched Saṅṅar al-Manšūrī to overthrow Barak. In his place, Šamamun, another Nubian prince, was given the mandate to rule *Nūba* (*ibid.*; Hasan 1967: 112) on condition that he sent *baqt* to Cairo annually.

In Ramaḍān 685/October 1286, King Adur of ʿAlwa, the ruler in the south of *Nūba*, sent a mission to Qalāwūn with gifts such as elephants and giraffes. He also complained about the King of Dunqula's hostility towards the Mamlūk representative. When Šamamun was notified of his visit he too sent gifts to Cairo to pacify Qalāwūn. Accordingly, in the same year, two ambassadors, ʿAlam ad-Dīn Saṅṅar and

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, see also al-Yūnīnī, *Dayl* III, 2; Ibn ad-Dawādārī, *Kanz* VIII, 167; Ibn ʿAbdazzāhir, *Rawḍ* 416; Ibn Šaddād, *Tārīḥ* 52-3, 129.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Šaddād states that at this point al-Muqurra was one of the sultan's provinces. (Cf. *Tārīḥ* 323)

‘Alam ad-Dīn ar-Rusnī, were sent to Abwāb and Dunqula respectively to look after the affairs of the two states (Hasan 1967: 112; Ibn Ḥaldūn, *Ibar* V, 400-i; Arkell 1961: 198). After completing his investigation, Saṅṅar was captured by Šamamun on his way back to Egypt. ‘Ilm ad-Dīn ar-Rusnī returned safely to Cairo and brought back evidence of Šamamun’s undesirable conduct (‘Āšūr 1964: 84). Qalāwūn inflicted reprisals on Šamamun by sending an army from Cairo and Qus, as well as tribesmen from Upper Egypt, namely, Banū Abī Bakr, Banū Šarīf, Banū Šaybān and others, to lay siege to Dunqula. This army was divided into two groups. Aydamur led the soldiers on the east bank of the Nile, whereas on the other side, the troops were under the leadership of ‘Ilm ad-Dīn Saṅṅar al-Ḥayyāt. As expected, Šamamun was outnumbered by the Mamlūk contingents and he fled to the south.

When Qalāwūn was notified of this success, a nephew of King Dawūd, Sa‘d ad-Dīn, a newly converted Muslim, was sent to assist the Egyptian ambassador in Dunqula. Once the latter reached Qus, he chose to remain there instead of going to Dunqula (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* I, 743; Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīḥ* VIII, 67). Presumably Sa‘d, who knew Šamamun well, was terrified of the possibility that Šamamun would reappear and inflict punishment on him for supporting the sultan. The throne of Dunqula was then filled by Šamamun’s nephew and a treaty was signed by him and Qalāwūn. This treaty is recorded by al-Qalqašandī in his *Šubḥ al-a‘šā* (XIII, 290-1). The newly elected leader swore in the name of God, the Bible and the Virgin Mary. In addition, the king is also promised to send one half of the country’s income to Egypt. He also had to collect a poll-tax of one dinar from every adult in his country to give to the sultan. In conclusion, he was prepared to receive any punishment from God if he broke his oath. Aydamur was instructed to remain in Dunqula whereas the rest of the army journeyed home, bearing a large amount of booty (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* I, 743; Hasan 1967: 113; Ibn Ḥaldūn, *Ibar* VI, 401; Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīḥ* VIII, 83). In the same year, shortly after his defeat, however, Šamamun reappeared in Dunqula, routed the Mamlūk garrison and reinstated himself on the throne. The leader of the garrison and the Nubian king fled to Cairo and informed the sultan of the incident.

Three years later, in Šawwāl 688/October 24, 1289 the Egyptian army once again raided *Nūba*. The army was again divided into two groups, each following the two banks of the River Nile. However, when the Mamlūks reached Dunqula, the Mamlūk sources relate that the capital was devoid of people except for an old man who told them that Šamamun had fled far from Dunqula (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* I, 750; ‘Āšūr 1964: 88; Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīḥ* VIII, 83-4). The Egyptian army gave chase, and upon reaching Šamamun’s hide-out, they ordered him to surrender, but the latter refused to back down. As a result, he was fiercely attacked and took flight. The Egyptian army met with hardly any opposition. The victors entered Dunqula and crowned Prince Budamma as the new ruler. Budamma took an oath of allegiance and promised fealty to the sultan. Except for a Mamlūk garrison, the rest of the army returned to Cairo. Rukn ad-Dīn Baybars al-‘Izzī was left in command of the army in Dunqula.

According to Qalāwūn's biographer, Ibn 'Abdazzāhir, the Egyptian troops in this expedition had penetrated into areas where no Muslim army had previously entered (Ibn 'Abdazzāhir, *Tašrif* 155; Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīḥ* VIII, 92).

No sooner had the Muslim troops left than Šamamun once again made an appearance in Dunqula. A similar fate befell Budamma when he was overcome by Šamamun. This time, the shrewd man changed his tactics by sending a letter to Qalāwūn promising to pay a larger amount of tribute to the sultan (Hasan 1967: 114; Holt 1986: 134; Adams 1977: 527). However, Qalāwūn was intent on attending to more pressing matters in Syria with the advancing Crusaders, and he was also aware of Šamamun's unreliable attitude and promises. For this reason, he ignored the latter's request to be his vassal. This gave Šamamun the opportunity to remain in power in *Nūba*.

All in all, Qalāwūn failed to instal his representative and establish a permanent presence in *Nūba*. Although he succeeded in defeating the local leader in his two great expeditions (Hasan 1967: 44; Hrbek 1977: III, 70), his army was forced to leave *Nūba* and Prince Šamamun was able to reestablish himself on the throne, where he stayed until the end of Qalāwūn's reign and beyond.

One might wonder why the Muslims in general and the Mamlūks in particular were so keen to occupy *Nūba*. It was probably for commercial reasons that the Muslims penetrated into *Nūba*, although politically it was also an added advantage to conquer this territory. Since early times, *Nūba* had been renowned as a source of slaves. As already mentioned, periodically the Nubian leaders sent *baqt* to the Muslim leaders in Egypt in the form of slaves. These slaves were used as domestic servants, labourers and custodians of families and they were also acquired to be recruited into military service. Slaves could also be bought from the slave market in Muslim towns. It was said that Muslim merchants stole Nubian children and sold them as slaves. The slave trade which brought slaves from *Nūba* and expanded to the rest of the Muslim world existed up to the early tenth/sixteenth century (Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīḥ* VII, 69).

Apart from the slaves who were acquired through tribute and the slave trade, there were also those who were captured by the Mamlūks during their expeditions. Ibn al-Furāt mentions that in 687/1288, Saṅṅar al-Manšūrī and his troops entered Cairo. They captured one of the leaders of *Nūba* and his slaves. The sultan distributed the slaves and a number of them were sold at cheap prices (at-Ṭabarī, *Tārīḥ* III, 1429; Ibn Ḥawqal, *Šūra* 53).<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, there were gold and emerald mines in *Nūba* which attracted the Muslims, especially those from Egypt and encouraged them to encroach further south. These mining activities had begun as early as in the third/ninth century. There is a certain amount of evidence which indicates that there were large numbers of Arabs working in this "Land of Mines" in 240/854 (Crowfoot 1911: 528-9).

The presence of natural harbours on this African coast facing the Red Sea was also a contributory factor which attracted the Egyptians. To control *Nūba* would mean

that they would have access to international trade routes. The famous ports in *Nūba* were Badī, Ayḍab and Sawākin (Yāqūt, *Muʿğam* I, 147; Hrbek 1977: 70). These ports were under the control of Arab merchants. In Badī, the merchants were usually engaged in exchanging combs and perfumes for Ethiopian ivory tusks, ostrich eggs and other products (Yaʿqūbī, *Kitāb* 335; Hrbek 1977: 72). Ayḍab, which linked Egypt and the East was famous for its trade in gold. Sawākin, on the other hand, emerged as an important port after the fall of Badī in the sixth/twelfth century.

It was therefore important for the Mamlūks, as the most powerful Muslim rulers of the time, to ensure safety of access to these international trade routes and to exploit the resources within their dominions. In this way they would be able to encourage the economy to flourish. It was as an extension of these activities that the Mamlūks tried again and again to penetrate *Nūba*.

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