Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures

Arabic Documents from Medieval Nubia

Geoffrey Khan

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Semitic Languages and Cultures 24

ISSN (print): 2632-6906

ISSN (digital): 2632-6914

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-230-3

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-231-0

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-232-7

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0391

Cover image: Fortress of Qasr Ibrim - on a cliff above the Nile in Nubia. Print from David Roberts' *Egypt & Nubia* (London: F.G. Moon, 1846-49), v. 2, pt 5. Library of Congress, Reproduction number LC-USZC4-3998, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fortress_of_Ibrim--Nubia-David_Roberts.jpg.
Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

The main fonts used in this volume are Charis SIL, Scheherazade New, SBL Greek, and Segoe UI Historic.

1. INTRODUCTION

The geographical term Nubia is typically used to refer to a region that extends from the first cataract of the Nile, just south of Aswan, to the confluence of the Blue and White Niles, near Khartoum below the sixth cataract. The western boundary is in the Libyan desert and the eastern boundary is the Ethiopian plateau northwards, but these delimitations are somewhat vague. The core of Nubia is the Middle Nile from Aswan to Khartoum (Williams and Emberling 2020, 2).

The rocky cataracts and associated stretches of shallow water make the river more difficult to navigate than the Upper Nile above the first cataract. Since travel north and south historically relied primarily on river travel, the first cataract was a natural border that typically coincided with a political boundary between Egypt and Nubia in antiquity and the Middle Ages. There have been some periods of history, however, in which Egypt and Nubia have been politically united.

Lower Nubia, which formed the geographical background of most of the documents published in this volume, is the portion of the Nile valley, approximately 350 kilometres in length, between the first and second cataracts. This region now spans the south of Egypt and the north of the Republic of Sudan. Upper Nubia is the region of Nubia that lies south of the second cataract.

The Nubians are a group of people who speak some form of the Nubian language, which belongs to the Nilo-Saharan family of languages. The term ‘Nubian’ first appears in written sources in the Kushite period (seventh century BC–fourth century

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0391.01

AD; Rilly 2008). They are mentioned by Strabo (*Geography* VII), quoting Eratosthenes (276–196 BC), who refers to them by the term *Noubai*. They originally inhabited the region of Kordofan and Darfur and subsequently moved into the Central Nile valley and migrated to the north after the end of the Meroitic dynasty in the fourth century AD. Modern archaeologists and historians, however, are cautious of regarding the migrating Nubians as an ethnically uniform people (Vantini 1981, 25; Welsby 2002, 7; Williams and Emberling 2020, 3). In the fifth century AD, the Nubians gradually pressed down the Nile from territories north of the second cataract and became established in northern Nubia (Obłuski 2014, 35). Subsequently, through partial conquest and settlement of the Nubians, the spoken language of the region shifted to Nubian.

Greek sources also refer to a group of people called the *Nobates*, who were a nomadic people originating in the Libyan desert and settled south of Aswan in late antiquity. According to Halm (1998, 66), they were distinct in origin from the *Noubai*. The Byzantine emperor Diocletian (284–305 AD) settled the *Nobates* south of the first cataract and contracted them with an annual payment to prevent raids into the territory of the empire from the south. By the Islamic period, descendants of the *Noubai* and the *Nobates* were referred to in Arabic sources by the single term *al-Nūba*.

Christianity was introduced into Nubia in the sixth century AD under the auspices of the church organisation of Byzantine Egypt, and subsequently the churches of the region came under the jurisdiction of the Coptic patriarchate of Alexandria

(Gadallah 1959; Vantini 1981, 33–50; Welsby 2002, 31–67; Swanson 2007; Tsakos 2021). There is archaeological evidence for the establishment of Christianity at Qaṣr Ibrīm near the beginning of the sixth century (Adams 1996, 5). At that period, Nubia consisted of three kingdoms (Tsakos 2021, 2):

(i) Nobadia, with its capital in Pachōras (Faras), north of Wādī Ḥalfa, apparently extending from Aswan to the third cataract;
(ii) Makuria, with its capital in Dongola.[1] This controlled the territory up to some point between the region of Abu Hamed/Mograt Island and the junction of the Nile with the River Atbara;
(iii) Alodia, with its capital in Soba near Khartoum, extending to an unknown area in Gezira between the Blue and White Niles.

These kingdoms emerged from competing chiefdoms that developed after the collapse of the Kushite kingdom based in Meroe in the fourth century AD (Welsby 2002, 15–16; Tsakos 2021, 4). The names of the kingdoms given above are based on those that are found in Greek Byzantine sources. The Arabic and indigenous Nubian names are as follows:

[1] The archaeological site known as Old Dongola (in Arabic *Dunqulā al-ʿAjūz*) lies about 80 kilometres south of the modern town of Dongola.

Table 1: Arabic and indigenous Nubian names of Nubian kingdoms

Byzantine	**Arabic**	**Nubian**
Nobadia	al-Marīs	Migi
Makuria	al-Muqurra	Dotawo
Alodia	ʿAlwa	Aroua

The nomadic Beja tribes (known in early sources as the Blemmyes) of the eastern desert remained mainly pagan at this period.

In 19 AH/640 AD, the Muslim general ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ began his invasion of Egypt. ʿAmr sent small parties of raiders into Nubia on several occasions, but these were forced to retire discomfited. ʿAbd Allāh ibn Saʿd ibn ʾAbī Sarḥ, who subsequently succeeded ʿAmr as commander of Egypt in 25 AH (646–7 AD), discontinued these raids and made terms with the Nubians. In 31 AH/651–2 AD, ʿAbd Allāh led a well-equipped expedition into Makuria and laid siege to Dongola, under the rule of the Nubian king Qalidurut. According to al-Maqrīzī, the king in Dongola sued for an armistice, which was accepted by ʿAbd Allāh. In the version of events recorded by the earlier historian Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam (d. 257 AH/871 AD; *Futūḥ Miṣr*, 169–89), however, the Nubians were the victors in the battle (Spaulding 1995, 584). According to al-Maqrīzī's account, ʿAbd Allāh concluded peace with the king on the basis of a treaty known in Arabic as *baqṭ*, from Greek πάκτον. Al-Maqrīzī (*Ḵiṭaṭ*, I:369–70) reproduces the text of this, citing a book, now lost, by ʿAbd Allāh ibn Sulaym al-ʾAswānī

(tenth century AD).[2] This imposed on the Nubians the duty of paying an annual tribute of 360 slaves.

This was an unusual treaty. The normal treaty made by the Muslims, referred to as a *ṣulḥ*, was issued when they occupied and gained mastery of a country, absorbing it into *dār al-ʾIslām*. These conditions did not hold in the case of their campaign against Nubia. The *baqṭ*, therefore, is best characterised as a 'truce' (*hudna*) or 'neutralisation' (*muwādaʿa*), terms that are used in some sources (Forand 1971, 113). Nubia, therefore, was neither *dār al-ʾIslām* ('place of Islam') nor *dār al-ḥarb* ('place [that is the target] of religious war').

Bar Hebraeus (*Chronography*, 134) cites the following statement of a Nubian king regarding the *baqṭ*: "Inasmuch as they (i.e., the Arabs) have cut off (their shipments), we also have cut off (ours)." This reflects an interpretation of the *baqṭ* as an agreement of mutual exchange, not a punitive imposition.

The wording of the *baqṭ*, according to al-Maqrīzī, was as follows:

> This is the treaty issued by the *ʾamīr* ʿAbd Allāh ibn Saʿd ibn ʾAbī Sarḥ to the chief of the Nūba and to all the people of his kingdom, a treaty binding upon all the Nubians, great and small, from the boundary of Aswan to the boundary of ʿAlwa. ʿAbd Allāh ibn Saʿd ibn ʾAbī Sarḥ gave them security and a truce, valid between them and the

[2] Al-Maqrīzī's material is quoted from a book entitled كتاب اخبار النوبة والمقرة وعلوة والبجة والنيل 'The Book of Nubia, Muqurra, ʿAlwa, the Beja and the Nile' by ʿAbd Allāh ibn Sulaym al-ʾAswānī, which has not survived (Kheir 1989).

neighbouring Muslims of Upper Egypt, as well as the other Muslims and the *ḏimmī*. You, Nubian people, will be safe with the guarantee of God and His Prophet Muḥammad, that we shall not fight you and shall not wage war upon you, nor shall we carry out raids, as long as you keep the condition laid down between us and yourselves: that you enter our country in transit only, not for the purpose of settling there; we also shall enter your country in transit without settling there. You must protect any Muslim or anyone who is under our protection, if he settles in your country or travels through it, until he leaves it. You must return any fugitive slave belonging to the Muslims who seeks asylum in your country; you must deliver him to the country of Islam. You must likewise return any Muslim who fights against the Muslims; you must drive him out of your country to the country of Islam, without befriending him or without hindering him in any way.… You must give 360 slaves every year, whom you will hand over to the *ʾimām* of the Muslims. They must be chosen from slaves (*raqīq*) of your country, adults, without bodily defects, both male and female, excluding old men, old women and sucklings. You will hand them to the governor (*wālī*) of Aswan.[3] The Muslims do not undertake to drive away enemies who may attack you, or prevent them from attacking you, from the frontier of ʿAlwa to the territory of Aswan. If you give shelter to any slave of the Muslims, or you kill a Muslim, or an ally, or if you allow any damage to be done to the mosque which the Muslims have built within your town, or you retain any part of the 360 men, the treaty and truce will be cancelled, and we and you shall return (to hostility) until God judges between us, for He is the best

[3] It is generally thought that the delivery would have been made at al-Qaṣr, a fortress on the border of Nubia (Gascoigne and Rose 2012).

> Judge. Upon these conditions we are bound by the covenant of God and His Promise and that of His Prophet Muḥammad; you, on your side, stand pledged to us by those you hold most holy in your religion, the protection of Christ, the protection of the Apostles and the protection of those persons whom you hold in the highest respect in your religion and your community. May God be witness between us and you on this.
>
> Written by ʿUmar ibn Šarḥabīl in Ramaḍān 31 AH (652 AD)

The term *baqṭ* is used in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, in the biography of the Patriarch Benjamin (622–661 AD), to refer to the tribute that the Emperor Heraclius (610–641 AD) paid to the Muslims after the battle of the Yarmūk (636 AD; Seignobos 2016, 55). The term in the Nubian treaty, therefore, appears to have referred specifically to the unilateral obligation to deliver a tribute of slaves rather than to the agreement as a whole. As remarked, this was not the spirit of the original agreement, which was rather a truce (*hudna*) ratified by the mutual exchange of gifts.

Other aspects of al-Maqrīzī's account of the *baqṭ* indicate that it is unlikely to be an accurate record of the original agreement.[4] The text of the treaty recorded by him contains several anachronisms. The most conspicuous of these is the condition

[4] According to Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, the *baqṭ* treaty was preserved in an archive in the Egyptian capital until the building was destroyed by fire (Hinds and Sakkout 1981, 214–15). The likelihood, however, that the original document would have survived in archives until later centuries has been called into question by Forand (1971).

relating to the upkeep by the Nubians of a mosque in Dongola. Another possible anachronism is that the *baqṭ* treaty is said to have been negotiated with the Makurian king of Dongola and be binding on the people of his kingdom from the frontier of the land of Aswan to the border of the land of ʿAlwa (the Arabic term for Alodia). The Makurian king was, therefore, presumed to be sovereign over all of the northern Nubians, indicating that Nobadia by this time had been annexed by Makuria and ceased to exist as an independent political entity. The unification of Nobadia and Makuria under the king of Dongola is reflected by Greek and Coptic inscriptions from Lower Nubia dating to the first decade of the 700s (Ruffini 2020, 761). According to Halm (1998, 64), however, the two kingdoms were unified only during the reign of king Merkurios of Dongola (696–c. 710 AD), so the original *baqṭ*, which was drawn up in 31 AH/652 AD, must have been negotiated with the king of Nobadia.

According to Seignobos (2016, I:70–75), al-Maqrīzī is likely to have taken the text of the *baqṭ* treaty from the work of al-ʾAswānī (tenth century AD), upon whom he is dependent for most of his information on Nubia. The presence of a mosque in Dongola is referred to by Ibn Ḥazm (384–456 AH/994–1064 AD; *Jumal Futūḥ al-ʾIslām* II:129). This suggests that there was a Muslim community there in the Fatimid period. Further evidence for this is a Muslim funerary stele datable to the Fatimid period that was discovered in Dongola.[5]

[5] This is being prepared for publication by Robin Seignobos.

Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam (d. 257 AH/871 AD; *Futūḥ Miṣr*, 188–89), records two versions of the *baqṭ*. One was similar to the terms recorded by al-Maqrīzī, but the other, referred to as a *hudna* 'truce', imposed far fewer demands on the Nubians and required them only to return Muslim captives in the immediate aftermath of the battle and not deliver an annual quota of slaves. Spaulding (1995, 584) argues that the latter was the original understanding by the Nubian authorities of the agreement, whereas the first version was the prevailing interpretation of the Islamic theorists of the early Abbasid period. It is relevant to note that some sources refer to the *baqṭ* as a mutual presentation of a gift (*hadiyya*) rather than a tax or tribute (*jizya*), e.g., Ibn Ḵurradāḏbih (Forand 1971, 116).[6] The very use of the term *baqṭ*, which is an Arabicisation of the Greek term πάκτον, suggests that it was essentially a continuation of the settlement made by Diocletian with the *Nobates*, based on mutual benefit, to secure the southern border of the Byzantine empire at the first cataract. The *baqṭ* was made with the descendants of the *Nobates* of the Byzantine period, i.e., with the kingdom of Nobadia. Al-Masʿūdī, indeed, states that the *baqṭ* was made with the king of *Marīs*, a term used to refer to the territory of Nobadia (Halm 1998, 68–70).

By the ninth century, according to Spaulding, the Muslims had begun to believe that the *baqṭ* had been a fixed written

[6] Several Coptic letters were discovered at Qaṣr Ibrīm that are addressed to the eparch and datable to the eighth century AD. These relate to Egyptian–Nubian treaty obligations. They mention the Nubians' obligation to return runaway slaves, but do not mention the obligation to deliver a quota of slaves (Joost Hagen, personal communication).

document that legally bound the Nubians in perpetuity to a status of subordination to the Islamic caliphate with a substantial annual tribute in the form of slaves.[7] There are frequent accounts in the sources of the failure of the Nubians to deliver the quota of slaves and this may have been due to the fact that the Nubians did not accept the Abbasid Muslim interpretation of the *baqṭ*, rather than due to an intentional infringement of a written treaty. According to al-Maqrīzī (citing al-ʾAswānī), the defeated Nubians dutifully paid their annual tribute under the *baqṭ* for about two centuries after the Islamic conquest of Egypt, up to the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Muʿtaṣim (218–27 AH/833–42 AD). We know, however, that this version of events is not accurate, since a surviving original letter on papyrus (see §2.2 below) written by the first Abbasid governor of Egypt in 141 AH/758 AD claims that the slave quota had not been delivered for several years. A Nubian delegation visited al-Muʿtaṣim in 221 AH/836 AD to negotiate the terms of the *baqṭ* and secured an agreement to have the number of slaves reduced by two thirds (Vantini 1970; Forand 1971, 116; Kheir 1989, 69–70). The available data in historiographical sources concerning *baqṭ* shipments indicate that

[7] The delivery of a set number of slaves (commonly 360) appears as a standard component of a number of reported incidents during the early Arab conquests in Africa (Savage 1992, 359). As remarked, al-Maqrīzī gives the number 360 as the quota in his version of the *baqṭ*. There are a few small variations of this number in versions of the *baqṭ* appearing in other sources, e.g., those of al-Masʿūdī, Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, ʾAbū al-Buḥturī and Ibn al-Furāt (Seignobos 2016, 78).

they fell far short of the quota mentioned in al-Maqrīzī's version of the *baqṭ* treaty (Spaulding 1995, 591–93).[8]

There was an advantage to the Arabs in maintaining independent Nubia as a supplier of slaves, since Muslims and Christians under their patronage could not be enslaved. The Nubians, in exchange for the slaves, received various Egyptian goods.

The weakness of the central government of Egypt during the Ṭūlūnid (254–92 AH/868–905 AD) and Iḵšīdid (323–58 AH/935–69 AD) dynasties gave the Nubians and local Beja tribes an opportunity to resume the sporadic raiding of Upper Egypt. When the Fatimids assumed power in 358 AH/969 AD, the *baqṭ* is reported to have been in arrears. According to Ibn Sulaym al-ʾAswānī, he was sent by the Fatimid general Jawhar in an embassy to the king of Dongola to discuss payment of the *baqṭ*.[9] The specific outcome of these negotiations is not recorded. Forand (1971, 121) hypothesises that the *baqṭ* fell into disuse and was only restored in 674 AH/1276 AD by the Mamluk ruler Baybars al-Bunduqdārī. The reality emerging from the documents published in this volume seems to be that the *baqṭ* was not discontinued but rather manifested itself in a way that conflicts with the view presented by the historiographical sources.

---

[8] For other discussions of the *baqṭ*, see Brett (1969); Brunschvig (1975); Renault (1989).

[9] This is quoted by al-Maqrīzī in his *al-Muqaffā* (Troupeau 1954; Kheir 1989, 36).

In the Fatimid period there were generally good relations between Egypt and Nubia without military interventions.[10] One factor conditioning these good relations may have been that the Shiʿite Fatimid dynasty needed new alliances to counterbalance the traditionally Sunni régimes of the Middle East. This is reflected by the fact that many Nubians were appointed to important positions in the Fatimid court and army (Vantini 1981, 129–30; Lev 1987; Tsakos 2021, 18). Also, by the twelfth century, the threat of the Seljuk Turks and the Crusaders made the Fatimid régime increasingly dependent on the development of international trade to supply and fund their military defences (Bramoullé 2012).

At some point around this time, Alodia (Arabic ʿAlwa) became united with Nobadia and Makuria (Arabic al-Muqurra)[11] under a single king (§3.3).

After the Ayyubids took control of Egypt in 567 AH/1171 AD, there were renewed hostilities in the south. Saladin sent his brother Šams al-Dawla with a force that seized and captured the citadel of Qaṣr Ibrīm in 568 AH/1173 AD, an episode that may be reflected in destruction levels encountered during excavations

[10] There were some exceptions. Al-Maqrīzī (*ʾIttiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ bi-ʾAḵbār al-ʾAʾimma al-Fāṭimiyyīn al-Ḵulafāʾ*; Beshir 1975, 21), for example, states that in 556 AH/1161 AD "the King of the Nubians marched against Aswan with twelve thousand horsemen and massacred a great multitude of Muslims."

[11] The original vocalism of this Arabicised word seems to have been al-Muqurra rather than al-Maqurra. The vocalism al-Muqurra is found in Yāqūt's *Kitāb Muʿjam al-Buldān* (Ruffini and Seignobos 2020).

within its cathedral. Subsequently, however, the occupying force was withdrawn. The Mamluks undertook sustained military action against the south after a Nubian attack on ʿAyḏāb and Aswan in 673 AH/1275 AD (Seignobos 2015). This allowed the Islamic element in the local population to gain power. According to the historiographical sources, the payment of the *baqṭ* was disrupted during the tumultuous relations between the Ayyubids and the Nubians, but its terms remained in force and a payment was made in the Mamluk period by Nubia even in 667 AH/1269 AD after the Mamluks had taken effective control of Dongola in 658 AH/1260 AD and installed a Nubian puppet king.

ʾAbū al-Makārim (d. 1208 AD; *Taʾrīḵ al-Kanāʾis wa-l-ʾAdyira*, 272) reports that there were thirteen kings in Nubia, who ruled the land under the supremacy of the Great King.[12] According to Hendrickx (2011), these were eparchs who held sway locally over various parts of the Nile Valley. There is no clear evidence, however, for this number of eparchs at this period. The existence of one such eparch based at Qaṣr Ibrīm is referred to in the medieval documents published in this volume. He governed Lower Nubia where kings of Nobadia once ruled.[13]

The accounts of Ibn Sulaym al-ʾAswānī indicate that the import trade in Lower Nubia was mainly in the hands of Muslim entrepreneurs, who, after the ninth century, were allowed to

[12] This work was mistakenly attributed to ʾAbū Ṣāliḥ by the editor of the text, B. T. A. Evetts, in 1895; cf. den Heijer (1996).

[13] Unpublished Coptic letters to the eparch of Qaṣr Ibrīm datable to the eighth century address the eparch as ‘king’ (Joost Hagen, personal communication).

travel and to settle freely in the northern part of the country. Lower Nubia was given special status as a free-trade zone between Christian Nubia and Muslim Egypt. Under the aegis of these Muslim entrepreneurs, Lower Nubia developed a monetary, or at least semi-monetary, economy. On the other hand, trade beyond the second cataract by Muslims remained restricted. The principal commodity that Nubia exchanged for Egyptian commodities was slaves.[14]

[14] For further details of the historical background, see Adams (1977, 459–507; 1996, 6–7).