Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures

Arabic Documents from Medieval Nubia

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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

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2. THE ARABIC DOCUMENTS FROM QAṢR IBRĪM

2.1. The Site of Qaṣr Ibrīm

Qaṣr Ibrīm (Old Nubian *Silimi*, Greek and Coptic *Phrim*, Latin *Primis*) is an archaeological site situated between the first and second cataracts of the Nile, now in Egypt about 240 km south of the first cataract. In the Middle Ages this was Lower Nubia (Nobadia). The long history of occupation of Qaṣr Ibrīm ranges from the end of the New Kingdom of Pharaonic Egypt in the eleventh century BC to 1812 AD in the Ottoman period. It was a major citadel city built on a bluff that originally rose nearly perpendicularly 70 m above the Nile floodplain or 90 m above the low Nile (Adams 1996, 1; Lane 2000, 490). Its location reflected its strategic and defensive role in Nubia.

Qaṣr Ibrīm is first mentioned in the works of Pliny (*Natural History*, VI:35, 181–82) and Strabo (*Geography*, XVII:1, 54) in relation to the events of 23 BC, in which an invading force of Nubians drove out a Roman garrison and took possession of the citadel. They refer to the place by the name *Primis*. This is likely to be a Latinisation of the indigenous toponym *Pedeme*, which starts to appear in Meroitic funerary stelae around the same period (Adams 1996, 4). This subsequently developed into *Phrim* in Greek/Coptic and *ʾIbrīm* in Arabic. In medieval and Ottoman Arabic documents, the place is referred to as *qalʿat ʾIbrīm* ‘the citadel of Ibrīm’. The term *qaṣr*, therefore, is likely to have been late, possibly added after the site was abandoned.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0391.02

After the construction of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s, however, Qaṣr Ibrīm became flooded by the waters of Lake Nasser and is now reduced to a small island.

Figure 1: Qaṣr Ibrīm in 1826 (Lane 2000, figure 152)

Figure 2: Qaṣr Ibrīm as the waters of Lake Nasser were rising in 1966 (Rose 2011, 2)

Figure 3: Qaṣr Ibrīm in 2008

A licence to excavate Qaṣr Ibrīm was granted to the Egypt Exploration Society as part of the International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia (Säve-Söderbergh 1987). The first season of excavations was in 1961. The city had been abandoned in 1812, during the Ottoman period, more or less intact (Rose 2011). Its fortification walls, the agglomeration of Ottoman houses and the cathedral building (converted to a mosque) at the centre of the city were all well preserved.[1] The Ottoman garrison was made up initially of Bosnian mercenaries and its descendants remained there until they were finally evicted in the year 1811.

In the first season in 1961, it was decided to focus on riverside cemeteries, which were in immediate danger of the rising flood waters (Mills 1982). Excavations of the citadel began in

[1] See the description by Lane (2000, 490–91), who visited the site in 1826.

1963, directed by J. Martin Plumley of the University of Cambridge. There were further seasons of excavations in 1964, 1966, 1969, 1972 and thereafter every two years down to 2006, which was the twenty-sixth and final season. In 1972 the University of Kentucky and American Research Center in Egypt joined the Egypt Exploration Society as sponsors of the excavations in Qaṣr Ibrīm. Between 1976 and 1988 the excavations were directed by William Y. Adams of the University of Kentucky. In 1988 the direction of the excavations was taken over by Mark Horton of the University of Bristol and subsequently in 1996 by Pamela Rose (Adams 1996, 12; Rose 2011).

During the various excavations, a very large number of artefacts and texts were discovered at the site of Qaṣr Ibrīm from the various historical layers of its occupation. The texts include material written in Egyptian hieroglyphs, Demotic, Meroitic, Latin, Greek, Old Nubian, Coptic, Arabic and Turkish (Adams 1979). In the Middle Ages, Old Nubian was the spoken language of Nubia, but written material preserved in Qaṣr Ibrīm from this period is written in four languages, viz. Old Nubian, Arabic, Coptic and Greek. Old Nubian was used for a wide range of documentary and literary writings. Coptic and Greek were mainly restricted to Christian religious texts.

The Arabic texts are mainly documentary and relate to diplomacy and commerce. They are datable to throughout the Islamic period. They include an Arabic papyrus from the middle of the second century AH/eighth century AD, documents from the medieval period and documents from the Ottoman period.

2.2. The Arabic Papyrus

The Arabic papyrus discovered at Qaṣr Ibrīm, which was published by Hinds and Sakkout (1981), is the longest extant papyrus written in Arabic. It is 53.5 cm wide and 264.5 cm long, and consists of 69 lines. It is a letter written in 141 AH/758 AD by the newly installed Abbasid governor of Egypt to the king of Dongola, complaining of the Nubians' failure to fulfill some of their obligations under the *baqṭ* treaty. The letter had evidently been forwarded by the king of Dongola to the eparch at Qaṣr Ibrīm, as the official most directly concerned. This was put in a storage crypt.

2.3. Medieval Scrolls

Plumley (1975b) published two scrolls discovered at Qaṣr Ibrīm containing the same text (with slight differences of wording) in Bohairic Coptic and Arabic respectively. The Arabic document contains 58 lines. Each scroll contains a Letter Testimonial (known in Arabic as *taqlīd*) from the Patriarch Gabriel IV (1370–78 AD) to the people of Nubia, informing them that he had consecrated a new bishop, Timotheos, in the place of their deceased bishop, Athanasios, and instructing them to receive and enthrone Timotheos in his see.

2.4. Documents from the Ottoman Period

In a series of two volumes, Hinds, in collaboration with Sakkout and Ménage, published a corpus of documents from Qaṣr Ibrīm that are datable to the Ottoman period, written in Arabic and Turkish (Hinds and Sakkout 1986; Hinds and Ménage 1991). The

Ottomans took control of Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia in the 1570s. The documents are datable to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They consist mainly of legal documents relating to land and administrative documents relating to military affairs, mostly connected with the pay of the Turkish garrison.

2.5. The Medieval Documents Published in this Volume

2.5.1. Preliminary Remarks

In addition to the published Arabic documents that have been described above, a number of medieval Arabic documents discovered at Qaṣr Ibrīm have so far remained unpublished. These throw new light on relations between Egypt and Nubia in the High Middle Ages, especially in the Fatimid period. They are of particular importance since previous historical studies from the perspective of Arabic sources have been almost entirely based on historiographical sources, often written a long time after the events described and distorted by tendentious points of view. The medieval documents from Qaṣr Ibrīm are firsthand witnesses to the interaction of Egyptians and Nubians and the reality of how the *baqṭ* operated.

Preliminary work on many of these medieval documents was carried out by Elizabeth Sartain. She produced a handlist of the documents and translations of some of them, which were published by Adams (2010, 249–55). In the mid 1990s she passed

the documents on to me to prepare them for publication.[2] The present volume presents the edition of the majority of this corpus of unpublished medieval documents. The edited documents, as far as can be established, are datable to the eleventh and twelfth centuries in the second half of the Fatimid period.

Several of the medieval documents from Qaṣr Ibrīm are not included in the edited corpus, mainly due to their fragmentary state. Also, it should be noted that the Arabic texts discovered in the excavations also included some fragments of literary texts. These also are not included in the edited corpus, with the exception of a poem that appears to have been written by a travelling merchant. In addition, some Old Nubian manuscripts containing also Arabic text were discovered in Qaṣr Ibrīm (see the plates in Ruffini 2014) and at least one Coptic manuscript containing Arabic (Adams 1996, 220–24). The Arabic portions of these bilingual texts are also not included in this volume.

The task of preparing the edition brought numerous challenges. Although I had Elizabeth Sartain's handlist, I was not able to get access to the original documents. Most of them are understood to be in the collection of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, though some were subsequently transferred to the Nubian Museum in Aswan. Moreover, I initially did not have a full collection of the photographs of the corpus. With the help of Julie

[2] In addition to photographs of the documents, Elizabeth Sartain passed on to me a series of notes on the documents and the unpublished manuscript of a lecture entitled 'Nubian-Egyptian Relations in the Late Fatimid Period: The Sudan Trade', which she delivered at the Middle Eastern Studies Association conference, North Carolina, 1993.

Anderson and Loretta Kilroe at the British Museum, where the Qaṣr Ibrīm archive is now kept, I was able to acquire a few of the missing photographs as well as photographs of some documents that were not in Sartain's handlist. This was greatly facilitated by a spreadsheet prepared by Robin Seignobos that collated my collection of photographs with Sartain's handlist. I was eventually able to acquire the remaining missing photographs with the help of Pamela Rose, a former director of excavations, who allowed me to have access to the full digital photographic copy of the artefacts and texts discovered at Qaṣr Ibrīm.

2.5.2. Numbering Systems[3]

It was standard practice for objects, including the Arabic documents discussed here, to be assigned **object numbers**, either as individual items or in groups. This was done by the archaeologists working at the site. In early seasons, the number was usually in the form of the year followed by a sequence number; this was later superseded by a number giving the date followed by a sequence number (e.g., 74.1.23/5 is the fifth object catalogued from those found on 23rd January 1974). In later seasons, where several pieces were found together in a single context, a subsidiary letter or number could be added to the final number to designate the individual pieces (e.g., 78.2.13/45A; 74.1.29/11.7). It is clear, however, that in early seasons (at least up to and including 1974) not all finds were allocated individual object numbers,

[3] This section was written by Pamela Rose. All archival sources cited here are now housed in the Department of Egypt and Sudan, British Museum.

and in the case of texts, the pieces without object numbers were grouped together by language without, as far as it is possible to establish, separating them by provenance. These groups are known only by their registration number.

The **registration number** refers to the number given to individual finds or groups of similar finds in the official Egyptian Antiquities Service register book. This documented which finds were transferred from the site to the Cairo Museum (or, later, to magazines in Aswan), where the objects were then stored prior to dispersal via the division process or for retention in the museum. The registration number took the form of the year and a sequence number, thus 74/12, or simply a sequence number without a year. Individual objects thus often have both an object number (the site record) and a registration number (its entry in the official register book).

Most of the objects were photographed on site, and have one or more **excavation photograph numbers** associated with them. They have a format giving the year, film number and frame number, e.g., 1966A_P06_21A-22. Frequently, the excavation photograph numbers have more than one frame number, as in the example just given. This indicates that two separate photographs, typically of the recto and of the verso, were taken. Sometimes the film number was elaborated to reflect the photographer, or type of film used, so that in the example above, 'P' indicates that the photographer was J. Martin Plumley. The excavation numbers and photograph numbers were related by means of a log book.

All the Arabic documents discussed below were transferred to the Cairo Museum, and thence, at least in the case of the 1966 documents, to the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, where they were assigned **Museum of Islamic Art inventory numbers** in the series 23973, i.e., 23973.1, 23973.2, etc. This number was written on the documents in Arabic numerals. The museum inventory numbers for documents from the 1974 and 1978 excavations are not known. Three of the documents from the 1966A excavations have been assigned the inventory numbers Add. 01, Add. 02 and Add. 03 in Sartain's handlist. The origin of these numbers is unclear.

Finally, following a project conducted by Dr J. Hall of Würzburg University to scan all black and white photographs from Qaṣr Ibrīm, the digital images of the documents have also been assigned an **image number** in the digital collection of images.

Due to the complexity of all these various systems of numbers, it was decided to assign each edited document in this corpus an edition number and to refer to this edition number in any discussion about the document. The edition numbers run from **1** to **53** and are in bold font throughout the book (except in the indexes). The excavation photograph numbers, the digital image numbers and the museum numbers of each document are listed at the beginning of the edition of each document. The object numbers and registration numbers are also indicated, where these can be recovered. Unfortunately, not all of these can be identified and matched with the edition numbers.

2.5.3. Provenance of the Documents[4]

2.5.3.1. 1966

The majority of texts discussed here come from the excavation season conducted in early 1966 (season 1966A). None of them was studied on site and no object numbers were assigned to them, as outlined in Plumley's introduction to Hinds and Sakkout (1986). They were photographed in 1966 only after transport to the Cairo Museum at the end of the season: the photographic log notes for each image only "Arabic mss, Cairo museum" and does not give any further details. Plumley, however, notes that it was the "earlier Arabic" from the excavation that was photographed in 1966 (Hinds and Sakkout 1986, vii–viii).

One of the most important finds of the 1966A season, a sealed pot found in an Ottoman house seen to contain multiple containers and bundles of Arabic documents, was not further investigated that year. By 1968, when Plumley returned to Egypt to continue documentation of the 1966 finds (excavation seasons were not possible in 1967 or 1968), the pot and its contents had been transferred to the Museum of Islamic Art, and the documents themselves opened, catalogued and registered without regard for details of their origin, along with some or all of the "earlier Arabic." This is clear because a number of the documents were photographed in both 1966 and 1968. Some documents were only photographed in 1968, raising the possibility that at least some of these came from the previously unopened

[4] This section was written by Pamela Rose.

documents within the pot. Indeed, Plumley comments that the pot's contents included earlier Arabic material of "the twelfth and thirteenth centuries" as well as Ottoman-period documents (Hinds and Sakkout 1986, viii). The photographic log books for 1968 list all photographs as "Arabic mss Jan to March 1966 in Islamic Museum photographed in Jan 1968" and note the museum accession number.

The official registration book from the 1966A season lists the contexts of all the Arabic documents transferred to Cairo after the excavation. These are:

Table 2: Contexts of all Arabic documents transferred to Cairo after the excavation

Registration Number	**Comment**
66A/10–18	The pot and its contents, dated as "Bosnian" (i.e., Ottoman).
66A/20	"Collection of manuscript fragments (mainly Arabic. Possibly some Turkish)" from houses 295–310,[5] "Bosnian."
66A/27	Page of Arabic manuscript, 30 × 15 cm in size, from room 196, "Bosnian."
66A/111	Collection of Arabic mss, from Tomb T2, Christian and Islamic.

The dating assigned to the fragments relied on context rather than the properties of the documents themselves, and it is possible that earlier documents were present in later contexts.

[5] For the architectural plan and the numbering of the houses, see Adams (1996).

These are the only Arabic materials sent to Cairo from the 1966A season. If we accept Plumley's statement that it was only the "earlier Arabic" that was photographed that same year, then the documents with 1966 photograph numbers must come from 66A/111, Tomb T2. This was one of four chambers cut into a rock face to the south of the cathedral. All were robbed when found, but T2 contained memorial stelae of bishops of Ibrīm, below which, on the floor, were manuscripts in Coptic, Old Nubian and Greek, as well as the Arabic noted above. Plumley thought that together these "may well be the remains of one period of the library and archives of Ibrīm" (Plumley 1966, 11; see also Adams 2010, 54–56). It should be added, however, that a few Arabic fragments were found in the 1966B season, in December of that year. They were given registration number 66B/22, and, as registered pieces, must have been taken to Cairo Museum at the end of the excavation season. There are no photographs and no further information, apart from provenances including the North Temple Plaza and the 'Bosnian' plaza south of house B63. Thus it is unknown whether they might be amongst the pieces photographed by Plumley in the Museum of Islamic Art in 1968.

2.5.3.2. 1974

Some of these documents were recorded in Plumley's photographic log for 1974 with object number 74.1.29/11.x. Another site photographer, Violet MacDermot (VM in the table below), also photographed documents with the same object number (74.1.29/11) without suffixes, but these were Old Nubian texts. Thus the object number covered a context containing documents

in multiple languages. Object number 74.1.29/7 also included both Arabic and Old Nubian fragments. The remaining Arabic texts were either unmarked, or have a number in a circle: numbers 10, 25 and 27 can be identified. These appear to relate to numberings allocated by MacDermot whilst photographing the assemblage with register number 72/12. No other locational data is given in the photographic log books. One might suppose that Plumley photographed the 'important' documents (which perhaps also merited separate find numbers) and left the smaller, unnumbered fragments to the second photographer.

Table 3: Numbers associated with documents photographed in 1974

Edition no.	Object no.	VM number	Registration no.
19		27 in circle	74/12
20		25 in circle	74/12
27	74.1.29/11.7		
28	74.1.29/11.2		
29	74.1.29/11.1		
30	74.1.29/11.3		
32	74.1.29/11.6		
33	74.1.29/11.6		
38	74.1.29/11.4		
39	74.1.29/11.5		
42	74.1.29/7		
43		10 in circle	74/12
44	74.1.29/11.4		

Since objects received their numbers based on the day of their discovery, their provenance can be identified by reference to site records. On 29th January 1974, workmen were removing floors of house LC1–6, rooms 1 and 2. According to Plumley's daybook:

> During the clearing of the floor of room 1 a small quantity of mss in Arabic and Old Nubian were recovered. However, in the adjoining room 2 a much greater quantity of mss was found. Mostly written in Arabic with a few documents in Old Nubian, these mss appear to be, in the main, letters. First examination shows that a number are complete and are possibly to be dated to the twelfth or thirteenth century.

These are presumably papers underlying the *mastaba* noted in the preliminary report (Plumley 1975a, 6–7). The pottery record for the room 2 location formalises it as "sherds associated with archive cache." In the same room, found the next day, was a sealed vessel containing Old Nubian leather scrolls (including dates 1155 or 1156), a Coptic scroll and an Arabic page.

Adams (1996, 47–50, 214–16) describes LC1–6 (redesignated as House 177) as an "eparchal house" and notes several more documents from it:

> In the loose fill beneath the floor of Room 1 were found several small folded papers which appear to be letters to the eparch ([object numbers] 69.2.8/3, 7, 8; [registration number] 69/26; [registration number] 74/12). In the fill beneath the stone-flagged entrance step to Room 2 were more papers, bearing texts both in Arabic and Old Nubian ([object number] 74.1.29/11).

Thus, following Adams, the materials in the present volume would come from both rooms in the house. It should be noted that some scholars subsequently questioned Adam's interpretation of the house (Wojciechowski 2011; Ruffini 2012b, 19). Several of the documents that Adams states were discovered in the

house, however, can now be confirmed to be letters to the eparch and are included in the current corpus.

2.5.3.3. 1978

The photographic log for 1978 records the discovery of Arabic documents as object number 78.2.13/45A-E (registration number 276). The provenance was LC1–22, room 1, upper fill. LC1–22 (redesignated as structure 199) is a small, somewhat nondescript, single room (Adams 2010, 37) without any other distinguishing features. The fact that the texts were found in the upper fill means that they were not necessarily originally associated with the room.

The description of the find is as follows:

> [Five] Arabic texts in cloth.
>
> Cloth dyed blue-green in which are mss on strong brown paper. Cloth is z-spun cotton tabby, indigo dyed, almost a square. Mss are folded carefully. All in black ink. D is folded from one end, all others from both ends then doubled to half width.
>
> A. Side 1: ends of 16 lines. Side 2: Beginnings of 13 lines (including signature?). Top & bottom cut, other side torn. 26.9 × 9.6 cm [edition no. **49**].
>
> B. Side 1: 16 complete lines & 3 short ones lower left. Side 2: Blank. Bottom and left side cut. 16.6 × 27 cm [edition no. **52**].
>
> C. Side 1: complete length of 12 lines, 1 short one interlineated & 3 short lines upside down crammed in. Side 2: 5 lines, inverted, including signature?, complete, and 2 divided lines. 17.7 × 13.8 cm [edition no. **53**].

D. Side 1: 14 lines, probably complete, but bottom surviving line is cut through horizontally. Other side blank. 6 × 17.6 cm [edition no. **50**].

E. Side 1: Complete, 21 lines, some split (near bottom) into two parts. Side 2: 6 lines complete. 18.1 × 27.1cm [edition no. **51**].

The photographs of these documents are the following:

1978_A102_12–12A, 1978_A102_14–14A–1978_A102_19–19A. These include edition nos **51**–**53**.

1978_B09_06A-07–1978_B09_13A-14, 1978_B09_16A-17–1978_B09_18A-19. These include edition nos **49**–**50**.

1978_B11_23–23A, 1978_B19_05A-06.

These are a dossier of legal documents, discovered bound together in a cloth, that relate to the turbulent marital affairs of a certain Maryam ibnat Yuḥannis (**49**, **50**, **51**, **52**, **53**). They may have been gathered together by Maryam. It is significant that the documents were written in Upper Egypt. It would appear that Maryam moved to Qaṣr Ibrīm later in life.

2.5.4. Overview of the Content of the Documents

The medieval Arabic documents in the corpus that is edited in this volume include letters, accounts, legal documents and one poem written by a traveller.

Many of the letters constitute correspondence between Muslim merchants, who were based in Aswan, and the Nubian eparch in Qaṣr Ibrīm. The corpus also includes correspondence between merchants and Muslim dignitaries, such as *ʾamīr*s, and correspondence between merchants.

The accounts were written by the Muslim merchants and mention many of the commodities that are found also in the letters.

In the Middle Ages, the region of Lower Nubia was governed by a royal deputy of the king of Dongola based at Qaṣr Ibrīm, whom I refer to as an eparch, his Greek title, following the custom of historians of Nubia. He appears to have been mainly concerned with the conduct of relations with Muslim Egypt.

A large proportion of the medieval letters discovered at Qaṣr Ibrīm are from merchants who were members of the Arab tribal group known as the Banū al-Kanz. The Banū al-Kanz can be traced in origin to a migration of a part of the Arab tribe of Rabīʿa from Arabia to Upper Egypt in the third century AH/ninth century AD, attracted to the gold and emerald mines in the region (Holt 2012). They amalgamated through intermarriage with the local Beja tribe, which controlled the region between the Red Sea coastline and the eastern banks of the Nile River. They eventually gained control of Aswan, the mines of Wādī al-ʿAllāqī and the frontier zone. In Fatimid times, the ruler of this Arab-Beja tribe was the *de facto* governor of Aswan. Their power derived in a large measure from their control of trade with Nubia and the caravan route to the Red Sea port of ʿAyḏāb. They had considerable wealth and were patrons of literature and scholarship. The documents of the corpus edited in this volume cast important new light on the activities of the Banū al-Kanz.

In 396 AH/1006 AD, the ruling sheikh of the Banū al-Kanz, ʾAbū al-Makārim Hibat Allāh, assisted the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim in the capture of a political rival, ʾAbū Rakwa, who

nearly overthrew al-Ḥākim's régime. For this service, ʾAbū al-Makārim was given the title Kanz al-Dawla 'Treasure of the Dynasty'.[6] The title became hereditary and was assumed by subsequent leaders of the tribe throughout the Fatimid period. It was due to this that the tribe as a whole came to be known as the Banū al-Kanz. The present-day Kenuz Nubians are thought to be their descendants.

Since the *baqṭ* agreement was a non-aggression treaty, the Arab tribesmen had little scope for raiding for booty, so they began to participate in commerce. Aswan was a commercial network linking overland trade routes from the Red Sea and the Upper and Lower Nile.

The Banū al-Kanz were not independent from the Fatimid state and the Kanz al-Dawla reported to the Fatimid governor of Qūṣ. The Fatimid government granted the Kanz al-Dawla responsibility for regulating Fatimid diplomatic relations and commerce with Nubia, tax collection in the frontier villages, protecting the mines of Wādī al-ʿAllāqī and travellers and caravans passing through their sphere of control.

The Banū al-Kanz came into periodic conflict with the Ayyubids and subsequently also with the Mamluks. Eventually, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, they were forced to migrate southward into northern Nubia, where they helped accelerate the expansion of Islam (Garcin and Tuchscherer 2012; Seignobos 2016, I:380–85). They assimilated into the Nubian culture and adopted the Nubian language, although they remained

[6] For the sources for this, see Beshir (1975, 16 n. 2).

Muslims. They assumed control of the Kingdom of Makuria in the early fourteenth century and intermarried with the Nubian royal family, creating a new branch of Nubian people who today are speakers of the Dongolawi (Andaandi) and Kenzi (Mattokki) languages (Ruffini 2019, 114; 2020, 766). The royal throne hall in Dongola was subsequently converted into a mosque (Godlewski and Medeksza 1987).

The letters of the edited corpus provide new insights into relations between Egypt and Nubia. In particular, they demonstrate the important role played by the Banū al-Kanz and by the Nubian eparch in the region.

A detailed analysis of the letters will be given in the ensuing pages, but we may summarise the contribution of the letters to our understanding of relations between Egypt and Nubia in the Fatimid period as follows.

According to historiographical sources, the *baqṭ* remained in force until the full islamicisation of Nubia in the fourteenth century (Cuoq 1986, 75). There is a reference to a Fatimid vizier doubling the *baqṭ* payment owed by the Nubians as a punitive measure and a report (Beshir 1975, 19–20) that the Fatimid ruler al-ʾAfḍal

> wrote to the governor of Upper Egypt to send an army to the borders of the country of the Nubians and to send an emissary to them in order to renew upon them the stipulated quota that had been established by tradition, which is three hundred and sixty heads of slaves every year. Before doing this he should collect from them the arrears of what was due from them in the past.

The letters of the edited corpus, however, do not allude to the purported requirement of the *baqṭ* agreement for the Nubian king to make a delivery of a specific quota of slaves to the Egyptian governor in Upper Egypt in exchange for commodities. Rather, the letters reflect a situation in which the eparch administered the exchange of slaves for goods with individual Muslim merchants who were the agents of the Kanz al-Dawla, the Fatimid government representative in Aswan. The eparch required the Muslims to enter Nubia peacefully and the Kanz al-Dawla required the eparch to reciprocate by guaranteeing the merchants' protection. This was an equipollent diplomatic reciprocity that appears to have been the original spirit of the *baqṭ* agreement, as has been discussed above. It was not a predatory practice that aimed at humiliating Nubia and stripping its wealth. It cannot be excluded, of course, that the formal delivery of a quota of slaves was running in parallel with these interactions with individual merchants, but there is no evidence for this in the corpus. If such deliveries of quotas were taking place at this period, one would have, indeed, expected to find references to them in the correspondence with the eparch.

One of the letters (**24**) refers to a slave (*raqīq*) that the eparch bestowed (*ʾanʿamathu*) upon the writers. This indicates that the process involved was conceived of as the exchange of diplomatic gifts rather than barter of commodities for slaves. This would be in line with the way diplomatic relations between agrarian Northeast African states were conducted (Kapteijns and

Spaulding 1988; 1990; Spaulding and Kapteijns 1994; Spaulding 1995, 584–86).[7]

Reciprocal gift exchange in pre-industrial societies fostered cohesion and peaceful relations between the groups in the absence of protection from a supra-regional dominant political power. According to the model of diplomatic gift exchange in pre-industrial societies proposed by Sindzingre (2017, 12), this is likely to have involved the process of making a gift to create a debt for the receiving group, i.e., exchanging a gift for a debt of reciprocity. A gift is, in principle, voluntary, though this is a polite fiction and reciprocity is expected (Mauss 2002, 3–4). A gift, therefore, is a bid by the giver to gain trust from the recipient (Caillé 2007, 49). Negru (2009) describes a gift that is made with such an expectation of reciprocation as an 'impure gift', which contrasts with a 'pure gift' without any such expectation. It is the 'impure' characteristic of diplomatic gifts that builds social cohesion. There is evidence in the letters for such debts in gift exchanges between the Muslim merchants and the eparch. This would impose an obligation on the receiving group to make a similar exchange in return, thus maintaining a circulation of gifts and debts that would bind the groups. The altruism of gift-giving motivated by the expectation of reciprocation created social cohesion more powerfully than market exchanges. This was because it had evolved as a trait of small hunter-gatherer societies centuries before the development of monetary markets and so was deeply embedded in human psychology (Trivers 1971).

[7] For diplomatic gift exchanges in the Islamic world, see Cutler (2001) and al-Qaddūmī (1996).

Such gift-giving, with its social motivations, lies outside market activity but, as Sindzingre (2017) emphasises, even in the pre-industrial age there were never purely non-market societies. This holds true for the activities of the Muslim merchants reflected in the letters in our corpus. The merchants subsequently sold the slaves as commercial commodities. These were market exchanges and not gift exchanges. Yāqūt (d. 626 AH/1229 AD; *Muʿjam al-Buldān*, IV:515), indicates that in his day (early thirteenth century AD) there were vibrant slave markets on the Egyptian–Nubian border.[8] There is no evidence from the letters of a situation such as that described by al-Masʿūdī (d. 345 AH/956 AD; *Murūj al-Ḏahab* I:132–33), in which there was a regular delivery of quotas of slaves at the border town of Nubia, al-Qaṣr, which were distributed to a variety of officials. It cannot be excluded that such descriptions of the delivery of quotas were fictional constructs of tendentious historiography relating to the *baqṭ* rather than reflections of reality.

Beshir (1975, 21) hypothesises that one of the motivations for the slave trade may have been the increasing demand for slave soldiers in the army. There was a vast expansion of the black infantry corps of the Fatimid army during the reign of

[8] For an examination of the evidence for the external trade of Nubian slaves in the Middle Ages, including their acquisition for service in the army, see Edwards (2011). For slave markets, see Rāġib (1993). Nubian domestic slaves were being sold in Cairo at this period, as shown by the Genizah document published by Perry (2019). For other medieval documents attesting to the acquisition of Nubian slaves, see Bruning (2020, 685).

al-Ḥākim (386–411 AH/996–1021 AD; Lev 2013, 61). It is significant, however, that the letters in our corpus frequently refer to slaves by the terms *waṣīf* and *waṣīfa* (§10.2), which designated slaves who were destined for domestic service (Goitein 1967, 131; Rāġīb 2006, II:23–25). The import of slaves for military service may have taken place by different routes. There is evidence for the import of slaves, for example, through the Red Sea port of Quṣayr (Guo 2004, 43). This appears, however, to be on a small scale. Travellers to Egypt during the eleventh and twelfth centuries mention kidnapping and organised slave raids to the south and southeast of Aswan. It is possible that these raids provided a large proportion of the slaves appearing on the Egyptian markets (Perry 2017, 134).

The diplomatic gift exchange was formally between the eparch, who represented the Nubian king, and his Muslim counterpart, the Kanz al-Dawla, who represented the Fatimid government. Within this system, however, the merchants, who were the agents of the Kanz al-Dawla, appear to have made individual monetary gain through the sale of slaves in Egypt. Thus, the Muslim merchants became entrepreneurs by interfacing with this administered gift exchange. In this respect, the situation was a mixed economy, not private enterprise nor a wholly statist economy.[9]

[9] According to Hudson (2010, 12), this is how Ancient Mesopotamian economies worked. Cf. the remarks of Welsby (2002, 202–3) regarding trade in medieval Nubia. Frenkel (2017, 147), in her study of slavery in the Genizah documents, points out that Jewish merchants did not in

The term ‘entrepreneur’ is a seventeenth-century French term denoting “a person who entered into a contractual relationship with the government for the performance of a service or the supply of goods. The price at which the contract was valued was fixed and the entrepreneurs bore the risks of profit and loss from the bargain” (Kirzner 1979, 39; see also Renger 2000, 155). According to Hudson (2010, 12), “an entrepreneur seeks economic gain either with his own money or, more often, operating with borrowed funds or managing the assets of others (including public institutions) to make something over for himself by cutting expenses or creating a business innovation.” It is likely that this is not far from how the Muslim merchant entrepreneurs in our corpus were operating viz-à-viz the Kanz al-Dawla and the eparch. There was a symbiotic and complementary relationship between the administering institutions and the mercantile enterprise. They did not act by themselves for their own individual interest, but as part of a system. Indeed, the letters in our corpus refer to mercantile partnerships (§9.22).

There are also many references in the Arabic documents to monetary transactions, some of them with the eparch, though it appears that these never involved the purchase of slaves. In some cases, the merchants apologise for not having ready cash for transactions that do not involve slaves (e.g., **21**r, margin, 1), which suggests that monetary purchase was expected in such transactions. Ruffini (2012b, 171–206; 2019) has shown that medieval Nubia was integrated into the currency system of Egypt

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principle deal in slaves, since the import of slaves to Egypt was in the hands of high-ranking Muslim officials.

and coins travelled at face value and were not treated simply as bullion. It is easiest to interpret these monetary transactions with the eparch as market exchanges. These would have been extensions of the Egyptian market economy into Nubia, which were carried out on the back of the diplomatic gift exchanges.

This is, therefore, a further reflection of an entrepreneurial mixed economy of market and non-market exchanges (Hudson 2010, 12). It is important to note that, since the slaves acquired by gift exchange were subsequently sold in Egyptian markets, the reciprocal gift exchanges must have been based on the comparison of abstract values of a monetary standard established by a market economy. Despite being expressed as a gift exchange, the delivery of slaves effectively took the form of a substitute for money. Indeed, the merchants sometimes complained if the slaves were defective in some way, since their market value would have been reduced. The exchange did not have the characteristics of barter, in which the parties compared their immediate needs of particular commodities (Grierson 1978, 11). An exchange of substitutes for money that were subsequently sold, indeed, was tantamount to a market exchange of commodities. Gifts are typically not sold. It would appear, therefore, that even the exchange of slaves for commodities had this distinctive property of a market exchange. Although this exchange was, arguably, in its substance a market exchange, its form was presented and conceptualised as a gift exchange, reflected, for example, by the reference to the 'bestowing' of a slave upon the merchants. It was this external form of the exchange as a gift exchange that served the purpose of creating social cohesion and peaceful

relations, which was the spirit of the truce (*hudna*) between Egypt and Nubia. The fact that it was a market exchange in its substance is likely to have facilitated the exchange, since the Muslim merchants and indeed the eparch were working within the Egyptian monetary market economy.

There is evidence from the letters that merchants made individual commitments of loyalty to the eparch and the king in order to conduct trade in Nubia and be afforded protection (see **9**). This is another manifestation of the individualisation of diplomatic trade and gift exchange. They were representatives of groups, but the exchanges with the eparch and the king were on an individual level and these were controlled by individual controls of loyalty.

The merchants mention only small numbers of slaves in their letters, which were received by individual merchants, and no overall quota. It should be noted that this conflicts with the historiographical sources listed by Beshir (1975), mainly al-Maqrīzī, which report up to five deliveries of *baqṭ* payments during the Fatimid period, consisting of substantial numbers of slaves and luxury goods.

Since, at earlier periods, the Muslim interpretation of the *baqṭ* tended to be a unilateral obligation to pay tribute, it is likely that one common reason why Nubians failed to cooperate was their perception that the Muslims violated a principle of reciprocity, which was a key feature of diplomatic relations between agrarian Northeast African states (Spaulding 1995, 584–86). This reciprocity would have been present in the individual-level gift exchange of slaves for commodities as described above. One may

say that the situation reflected in the letters of individual-level gift exchanges, which were implicitly market exchanges, combined with explicit market exchanges reflects the mutually accepted way in which the *baqṭ* was able to operate.

The letters confirm to some extent the description given by al-ʾAswānī of an open trade zone for Muslim merchants in Lower Nubia between the first and second cataracts. This was an arrangement designed to allow safe trade between potentially hostile political domains, which did not allow Muslim merchants close to the king and his centre of power in Dongola. Parallels to such arrangements can be identified elsewhere in pre-industrial societies. Polanyi (1963), who has extensively studied many such "ports of trade," as he calls them, stresses that they are administered rather than free markets.[10] The trade zone in Lower Nubia was administered by the king through his eparch. As far as can be seen, the merchants traded exclusively with the eparch and his staff, and so foreign trade was a royal monopoly. The political authority of the eparch was associated with his economic power. Nubian documents relating to land sale from Qaṣr Ibrīm indicate that eparchs were big land owners (Ruffini 2016a, 17, 197).

Scholars have compared medieval Nubia to the kingdom of early modern Dahomey in West Africa, which is described by Polanyi (1966) as consisting of a port of trade separated from the remainder of the kingdom. Ruffini (2012b, 61–68) cautions against applying Polanyi's portrayal of Dahomey to medieval Nubia without qualification. According to Polanyi, royal monopolies

[10] I am grateful to the economist Phil Armstrong for discussing with me Polanyi's economic model.

function by the redistribution of wealth in society. Following this model, the royal monopoly on the trade with the Arab merchants would be assumed to have resulted in redistribution of goods by the eparch and the king. According to Ruffini (2012b, 67, 102–3), however, the Nubian documents that he has studied indicate that gift giving in the Christian period was in the private sphere, as acts by private citizens rather than the eparch and the king. Moreover, we see from the Nubian documents that the king did not claim ownership over all land and the Nubian people were not considered to be his slaves. Some historians of Nubia, such as Jay Spaulding (e.g., Spaulding 1995), David Edwards (e.g., Edwards 2004), Ali Osman (e.g., Osman 1982) and Giovanni Ruffini himself, have argued that a more accurate insight into some aspects of medieval Nubia can be gained by the study of modern societies of Northeast Africa. As we have seen, Spaulding in particular retrojects modern customs of diplomatic reciprocity in royal monopolies in Northeast African societies to the functioning of the *baqṭ* in medieval Lower Nubia.

We learn from the documents of our corpus that Muslims had settled within the trade zone. This is confirmed by the discovery of Muslim gravestones, mainly dating to the ninth–eleventh centuries AD, between the first and second cataracts (Edwards 2019, 968–69; Seignobos 2021). Arabic ostraca datable to this period have, moreover, been discovered in sites within the trade zone other than Qaṣr Ibrīm, for example Debeira West (Shinnie and Shinnie 1978, Plate LII). The letters indicate, furthermore, that some Arabic-speaking Muslims appear to have

worked in the service of the Nubian eparch, such as his secretary (*kātib*), who took care of the eparch's Arabic correspondence.

The letters show us also that in reality the Muslim merchants were not totally restricted to this trade zone. Several letters refer to Muslim merchants visiting the capital Dongola and also Soba, the capital of ʿAlwa, which at that period was united with Makuria and Nobadia, in order to conduct trade with the king. This was another component of the royal monopoly that operated separately from the trade zone. This direct trade with the king appears not to have been totally demonetised, as there is a reference to a monetary payment by the king (**9**r:26). The exchanges with the king, therefore, appear to have included market exchanges.

Ruffini (2019) argues that the economy of the Nubian state was monetised with Islamic currency in both Lower Nubia and Upper Nubia and was integrated with the Egyptian economy in a single currency zone. Nubia was economically dependent on Egypt, but exerted its agency to adapt Egyptian economic standards to local ideological needs and local expressions of power.

It is significant that Aswan is referred to in the Arabic letters of the corpus as a *ṯaġr* 'boundary' (e.g., **19**r:3) and Aswan is described in this way also in the works of the medieval geographers, e.g., al-ʾIṣṭaḵrī (d. 346 AH/957 AD; *Masālik al-Mamālik*, 51). This term was typically used to designate a port or inland boundary at the edge of Muslim territory that faced a non-Muslim enemy (Brauer 1995, 12–16; Seignobos 2010). According to al-Maqrīzī (*Ḵiṭaṭ*, I:367), up to the end of the Fatimid period, there was a permanent garrison of armed soldiers in Aswan ready

to protect the border (*ḥifẓ al-ṯaġr*) from incursions of Nubians and blacks (*al-Nūba w-al-Sūdān*). The economic integration of Nubia with Egypt did not correspond to the political boundary between them and commercial interactions, therefore, required the peace-making element of diplomatic gift exchanges.

Furthermore, the letters indicate that the king was dependent on Egypt for military supplies and so Egyptian merchants played a role in guaranteeing the security of the king and his régime. It is likely for this reason that they were given permission to conduct trade directly with the king in Dongola and Soba—letter **39** indicates that a Muslim merchant had travelled to Soba to sell supplies for the king's army. The Muslims were, moreover, given diplomatic gifts of land within Lower Nubia by the king, apparently as an exchange for military and political aid in periods of tension with Egypt or during dynastic struggles (see document **21**). So, there was a mixture of market and non-market exchanges.

Just as there were private commitments of loyalty made between the merchants and the eparch, there were private commitments of loyalty made between the Muslims and the king. While operating in Nubia, Muslims had the status of loyal Nubian subjects, who made formal commitments of allegiance, rather than visiting Egyptians with safe conduct. This would have created a higher level of security for the Nubians when dealing with the Muslim merchants. Another possibility is that these commitments of loyalty reflect that the Muslims concerned were, in fact, residents of Nubia and regular subjects of the king. This is not, however, a necessary conclusion.

Diplomatic gift exchange in the restricted trade zone in Lower Nubia, on the one hand, and the military and political aid supplied to the king in exchange for diplomatic gifts of land and royal trading concessions, on the other hand, both supplemented by market exchanges, were strategies to increase the economic power of the king and his eparch, and to maintain the political security of the régime. As we have seen, the nature of the activities in the trade zone of Lower Nubia was further determined by the original spirit of the truce (*hudna*), which required equipollent reciprocity and mutual protection.

The legal documents of the corpus include a lease of land (**44**), a lease of a boat (**45**), documents of sale of land (**46**), an acknowledgement of a debt (**47**) and marriage contracts and other documents relating to marriage (**48**–**53**). These documents were drawn up within the jurisdiction of a Muslim *qāḍī* in Egypt, in most cases, it seems, in Aswan.

The parties concerned included both Muslims and Nubians. The fact that they were discovered in Qaṣr Ibrīm indicates that some of the parties must have been resident in Nubia at some point. They reflect the settlement of Nubians in Upper Egypt and the settlement of Muslims in Nubia. Indeed the documents of sale **46** recto and **46** verso seem to be relating to plots of land south of Aswan in Nubia. Document **44** refers to a Nubian resident in Lower Nubia who served as a Fatimid military officer with an estate (*ʾiqṭāʿ*) in Upper Egypt. Presumably, he owed allegiance to both the Fatimid and Nubian authorities. Likewise, the Muslim merchants operating in Nubia appear to have owed allegiance to both the Kanz al-Dawla, the representative of the Fatimid

government, on the one hand, and also the Nubian eparch and king, on the other. This system of dual loyalty maintained peaceful Egyptian–Nubian relations.

In this context, it should be noted that the majority of the people serving the Muslim merchants operating in Nubia, such as their slave boys (*ġilmān*, sing. *ġulām*), appear from their names to have been Nubians. Some of those who served the merchants, moreover, were resident in Nubia (see §10).

All this reflects the integration and symbiosis of Egyptians and Nubians in the society of the region across the political border between Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia.

In what follows, I shall divide the description and analysis of the documents into three main groups: the correspondence with eparchs (§3), other correspondence and accounts (§4) and legal documents (§5). This has the advantage of drawing attention to distinctive features of each of the groups of documents. Some features relating to the life and work of the Muslim community, however, inevitably cut across groups of documents. Following the treatment of these three categories of documents, I present a series of inventories and studies that relate to the entire corpus.