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# Arabic Documents from Medieval Nubia

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## 3. THE CORRESPONDENCE WITH EPARCHS

### 3.1. Preliminary Remarks

Twenty-five of the documents of the corpus constitute correspondence with the eparchs who were based in Qaṣr Ibrīm. A large proportion of these are letters sent to the eparch Uruwī (1–16). There are two letters sent by the eparch Uruwī (17–18), two letters sent to the eparch Īsū (19–20) and five letters sent to an unnamed eparch (21–25). One letter (26) is written to the deputy of the eparch Darmā and one to the secretary of the eparch Uruwī (27).

### 3.2. The Eparchs

#### 3.2.1. Uruwī

The eparch Uruwī figures more prominently than any other eparch in the corpus. The name of Uruwī is represented in the Arabic documents in most cases with the orthography اروى, in one case اوى (9v, address, right column, 2) and in another case روى (27r:3). The name of this eparch appears in Old Nubian documents with the orthography ορροϣϣι ‘Ourouwi’, e.g., P. QI IV 109, verso, line 20, where he is mentioned as the one who regulates work and payment, and P. QI IV 95, where he is mentioned as the recipient of the document. According to Grzegorz Ochała (personal communication), however, the latter document is likely to have been written before Ourouwi became eparch.

In Nubian orthography, the digraph oy can represent either short [u] or long [u:] (Van Gerven Oei 2021, 36). The Arabic orthography اروى would appear to reflect the pronunciation [uruwi:], with short [u] vowels and the Arabic wāw corresponding to the glide ڨ [w] in the Nubian orthography ογρογῑ ‘Ourouwi’. The Arabic orthography روى (27r:3) would reflect the elision of the first vowel [ruwi:], which would be a phonetic process that would be more expected for a short vowel than a long vowel. It also indicates that the stress did not fall on the initial syllable of [uruwi:].

A few of the Arabic letters of the corpus that are addressed to Uruwī contain evidence that they were written during the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-ʿĀḍid li-Dīn Allāh, who was in office from 555 AH/1160 AD to 567 AH/1171 AD. Some of the names of the writers of the letters that appear in the address have the epithet العاضدى *al-ʿĀḍidī*, which indicates that they were affiliated to al-ʿĀḍid (1v, address, left column, 5; 8v, address, left column, 5). One letter reports the news of the killing of the vizier Šāwar by Širkūh (6r:7), which we know took place in the year 564 AH/1169 AD. So Uruwī’s term of office must have extended to at least 564 AH/1169 AD.

The sender of the Nubian letter P. QI IV 94 is ογρογῑλ (Ourouēl) “the eparch of Nobadia.” It is likely that this was a variant form of the name ογρογῑ ‘Ourouwi’. The vowel represented by ῑ in Old Nubian was, in fact, pronounced [i] or [i:] (Van Gerven Oei 2021, 35), although historians normally transcribe it as ē. So ογρογῑλ would have been pronounced [urui:l].

The successor of the eparch Uruwī is likely to have been the eparch Masē, who is referred to in a dossier of Nubian documents compatible with a date before 1172 (Ruffini 2012b, 214).

### 3.2.2. Darmā

Letter **26** is addressed to al-Bazīl, the deputy (*al-nāʿib*) of the eparch Darmā, i.e., vice-eparch. Vice-eparchs are mentioned in various Nubian documents, e.g., P. QI III 38, P. QI III 40, P. QI III 49, P. QI III 50, P. QI IV 67, P. QI IV 69, P. QI IV 84, P. QI IV 94, P. QI IV 102. The name al-Bazīl appears to be the name Basil with intervocalic voicing.<sup>1</sup>

The eparch Darmā referred to in **26** can be identified with the eparch Darne (Δαρμε). He is mentioned in a protocol of a Nubian proclamation dated 22nd August 1155 issued by King Moses George (P. QI III 30) and also in the Nubian document P. QI IV 109. In letter **26**, his name is represented by the Arabic orthography درما, indicating that the final vowel was pronounced long. The Nubian character ε, which is written at the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Intervocalic voicing is attested in Old Nubian for the velar consonant κ /k/, which is sometimes represented between vowels as r /g/. This voicing of intervocalic velars occurs also in modern Nubian languages (Van Gerven Oei 2021, 36, 408). The Old Nubian character c /s/ occasionally interchanges with the Nubian character z /z/ in Nubian names. This is found in intervocalic position, e.g., ελειζαβετ for ελεικαβετ (Mina 1942, no. 107), and also in word-initial position, e.g., ζαηλ for цаηλ (Hellström 1970, I:235; II, Corpus Y, no. 232:1 and pl. 157:5), ζιμεωνι for ciμεωνι (Zyhlarz 1932, 187–90). It is significant that the distinction between [s] and [z] is not phonemic in modern Nubian languages, e.g., Nobíin (Bell 1971, 118).

name ⲁⲣⲙⲉ, represents either a short or long vowel. The fact that the Arabic transcription of the name has final *mater lectionis* 'alif rather than *mater lectionis* yā' suggests that the final Nubian vowel was heard as a mid-low vowel [ɛ:] rather than a mid-high vowel [e:].

The name of the writer of letter **26**, which appears in the address, has the epithet العاضدى *al-ʿĀḍidī*, as do the writers of the letters to Uruwī **1** and **8**. This indicates that he was affiliated to al-ʿĀḍid (555 AH/1160 AD–567 AH/1171 AD). Indeed, most of the other titles of the writer of **26** are identical to those of the writers of **1** and **8** and it is likely that **1**, **8** and **26** were sent by the same person.

Letter **23**, which is written to an unnamed eparch, mentions the name Darmā in a somewhat obscure passage:

He entered Aswan and gathered the slaves [i.e., servants] of Darmā and brought me to them and said to me that “the Master of the Horses has ordered me to take over the administrative office.” (23r:9–10)

This Darmā appears to have been an official of some kind but was not the eparch ('Master of the Horses'). Several Nubian documents dating from 1155 to 1187, which is likely to coincide with the date of **23**, refer to men called Dar-me with various official titles including *ḡeshsh* of the *domestikos* and *meizoteros* (Ruffini 2012b, 268–69). The functions of these officials are not completely clear. The term *domestikos* was used in the Byzantine empire as a title for both officials with military duties and those with civil administrative duties. In Nubian sources, the eparch of Nobadia is sometimes referred to as the *domestikos* of Paḡōras. The *ḡeshsh* and the *meizoteros* were lower ranking officials.

### 3.2.3. Īsū

Letters **19** and **20** are addressed to the eparch Īsū. In **19** his name is spelt يسوا and in **20** ايسوا. An eparch with the name ИСОУ is mentioned in the Nubian document P. QI IV 101. This name is normally transcribed Iēsou by historians, but one should take into account that the Nubian vowel represented by the letter Н was pronounced [i] or [i:] (Van Gerven Oei 2021, 35). The spelling ИСОУ, therefore, would have been pronounced [ii:sū] or simply [i:su:] without an initial glide. The Arabic orthographies يسوا and ايسوا are likely to have both been intended to represent the pronunciation [i:su:].<sup>2</sup>

The Nubian document P. QI IV 101, which mentions Iēsou [Īsū], is likely to be datable to around 1155, since a certain Papasa *kartoularios*<sup>3</sup> mentioned in this document could be identified with a man of the same name and title in P. QI III 30, which is dated 22nd August 1155. As we indicated already, P. QI III 30 is a Nubian proclamation issued by King Moses George, which mentions the eparch Darne. The eparch Iēsou [Īsū], therefore, must have been in office shortly before or shortly after 1155. The date of the document, 1155, was roughly the period in which Moses George is thought to have succeeded his uncle King David, and he reigned until around 1190 (Ruffini 2012b, 247–48). The document P. QI IV 101, which mentions the eparch Īsū, refers to King

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<sup>2</sup> Cf., furthermore, the variant spellings of the name in Nubian sources: DBMNT / TM Nam 3410 (ИСОУС): DBMNT NamVar 300288 (ИСОУ), 300218 (ICOУ), 301143 (ΠCOУ), 300907 (EICOУ), 300984 (EΠCOУ).

<sup>3</sup> This literally means ‘archivist’, though the precise duties of this official are not clear.

David (Δαυτι Dauti) and not King Moses George. So Īsū's office of eparch must have begun in the reign of King David before 1155.

We could infer from the fact that Darne was eparch in 1155 and that his office extended into the reign of al-ʿĀḍid (555 AH/1160 AD–567 AH/1171 AD) that the eparch Īsū preceded the eparch Darne.

There is evidence, however, that Īsū was still eparch during the reign of Moses George. The Arabic document 1974\_V08\_24–24A,<sup>4</sup> which is not included in the present corpus, is apparently a pen exercise containing various addresses. This includes the following:

ابى الخير يسو وزير الملك موسى احياه الله وارشده

‘Abū al-Kayr Īsū, vizier of the King Mūyis, may God cause him to live and guide him.’

ابى الخير يسو... وزير الملك موسى ادام الله مملكته

‘Abū al-Kayr Īsū... the vizier of King Mūyis, may God cause his kingdom to endure.’

This indicates that the eparch Īsū (represented here as يسو without the final *ʿalif*) was the vizier of king Mūyis, who can be identified as Moses George. So Īsū's term of office extended into the reign of Moses George.

One possibility is that the periods in which Darne and Īsū were eparchs overlapped. This may have been because the two eparchs were in conflict. The Nubian document P. QI IV 101, which mentions the eparch Īsū, was, in fact, written by another

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<sup>4</sup> This is part of registration number 74/12 and part of object number 74.1.29/7.



eparch called Asouwil, who appears to be in conflict with the eparch Īsū. Such rivalries between competing eparchs could, therefore, occur.

The Arabic letter **27**, which is addressed to the secretary of the eparch Uruwī, indicates that Uruwī was the son of the preceding eparch.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately there is a lacuna in the document where his father's name would have appeared. Given the preceding discussion, it is not clear whether his father was Dar-me or Īsū. In the edition of **27**, however, I have tentatively offered the reading يسو Īsū in the lacuna, since there is no trace of the rising *hasta* of the final 'alif of درما above the lacuna and the lacuna is sufficiently small for us to expect to see the top of an 'alif. As we have seen, the orthography يسو, without an 'alif, is attested in the document 1974\_V08\_24–24A, which is discussed above.

Ruffini (2012b, 247–48) presents evidence that an eparch called Joasse in Nubian sources coincided chronologically with the reign of King Moses George and also with that of his predecessor King David, who was his uncle. The names Īsū and Joasse are too different to be the alternative names of the same person. Perhaps Joasse was yet another eparch overlapping with Īsū and/or Dar-me.

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the possible hereditary nature of the office of eparch, see Hendrickx (2011). Robin Seignobos presented a paper on this subject at the 15th International Conference for Nubian Studies, Warsaw, 2022, which he is currently preparing for publication.

### 3.3. Titles of the Eparchs

In the openings of the letters to the eparchs and in the addresses on the verso, the eparch is given various titles. These include the following:

الأكشيل *al-ʾikšīl* (passim)

اروى خياخ *ʾUruwī kīyāk* (4v, address, right, 2; 6v, address, right, 2)

اروى بن خياخ *ʾUruwī ibn kīyāk* (1v, address, right, 2; 3v, address, right, 2; 5v, address, right, 2; 8v, address, right, 2; 11v, address, right, 2; 12v, address, right, 2)

اوى بن خياخ *ʾU(r)uwī ibn kīyāk* (9v, address, right, 2)

وزير الملك ‘vizier of the king’ (passim)

النائب عن الملك ‘the deputy of the king’ (1v, address, right, 2; 3v, address, right, 2; 5v, address, right, 2; 6v, address, right, 2; 11v, address, right, 2)

النائب عن الملك بقلعة ابريم ‘the deputy of the king in the fortress of Ibrīm’ (1v, address, right, 2; 3v, address, right, 2)

النائب عنه بقلعة ابريم ‘his (i.e., the king’s) deputy in the fortress of Ibrīm’ (8v, address, right, 2)

النائب بقلعة ابريم ‘the deputy in the fortress of Ibrīm’ (9v, address, right, 2)

The Arabic form الأكشيل (*ʾal-ʾikšīl*) represents the Nubian official title *ikšīl*. In Nubian script this is represented as ⲉⲕⲣⲱⲓⲗ with a stroke over the ⲕ, which indicates that it was preceded by ⲓ, i.e., it is equivalent to ⲉⲓⲕⲣⲱⲓⲗ *eikšīl*. The vowel digraph ⲉⲓ was pronounced as short [i] or long [i:] and ⲓ, likewise, represented short [i] or long [i:] (Van Gerven Oei 2021, 34–38). The *mater lectionis*

yā' after the *šin* in the Arabic orthography *الاکشیل* and the lack of a *mater lectionis* before the *kāf* suggest that the Nubian word *ⲉⲓⲕⲣⲓⲗ* was heard with a short vowel in the first syllable and a long vowel in the second syllable, i.e., *ikšīl*.

The term *ⲉⲓⲕⲣⲓⲗ* *ikšīl* is attested in various medieval Nubian sources. It usually occurs in the Nubian sources in combination with the word *ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ* (*ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ*), originally an Egyptian month name, in the phrase *ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ-ikšīl*. The character *ⲕ* only occurs in loanwords in Nubian (Van Gerven Oei 2021, 37). The title *ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ-eikšīl* was often, but not exclusively, borne by the Nubian eparchs. Ruffini (2012b, 45–56), in his detailed study of the title, argues that it may have been used as an inherited honorific as well as an official title. According to Ruffini (2012, 52), the term *ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ-eikšīl* literally denoted an official who held authority over the month of *ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ*. This Egyptian month was originally the time of a festival celebrating Osiris's victory over death, but the festival came to be associated in medieval Christian Nubia with the celebration of Christmas, the key festival of the year, socially, politically and economically. Ruffini suggests that the obligation to host feasts can be seen as a form of enforced wealth redistribution. Van Gerven Oei (2021, 18) is of the opinion that the term *ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ-eikšīl* has its origin in a “pre-Nubian” substrate language.

In the Arabic letters, the title *ⲉⲓⲕⲣⲓⲗ* *ikšīl* does not appear in combination with a word corresponding to *ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ*. The term *ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ*, however, can be identified in the form written *ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ* without diacritics, which appears in the addresses of some of the letters. I propose to read this *ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ*. In some medieval Nubian and Greek sources, the first vowel of the term *ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ* in the phrase *ⲕⲟⲓⲁⲕ-eikšīl*

is represented by a front vowel, which is transcribed by the editors as *ei* or *i*, e.g., *keiakišši*, *keiakshshi*, *kiak(i)šš(i)l*, *keiakiššika* (ⲭⲉⲓⲁⲕⲓⲥⲥⲓⲕⲁ *keiakiššika* < *keiak-ikšil* + accusative *ka*).<sup>6</sup> As remarked, the Nubian digraph *ei* represented a vowel that was pronounced as [i] or [i:]. So, it is possible that خياخ was intended to represent the pronunciation *kiyāk*. The occurrence of velar fricative *k* sounds in خياخ indicates that it was a loanword in Nubian. Modern dialects of Nubian do not have this sound in their sound inventory (cf., e.g., Bell 1971) and it is generally thought that it did not occur in Old Nubian. The form of the word with velar fricatives may be a reflection of its pronunciation in Coptic. The month name *koiak* is attested in numerous variant forms in Coptic. Some variants in the Sahidic dialect have fricatives in both initial and final position, as in the form خياخ, e.g., ⲭⲟⲓⲁⲭ, ⲭⲓⲁⲭ, ⲭⲓⲁⲭⲉⲭ (Crum 1939, 133; Ochała 2011, 228; Richter 2022). The final *kā* rather than *kāf* in the form خياخ appears to reflect a lenition of the final stop /k/ of *koiak* to a fricative after a vowel, resulting in the pronunciation *kiyāk*. Although the fricative sound *k* is generally thought not to occur in Old Nubian, lenition of post-vocalic *k* to *k* in a Nubian name appears to be reflected also by the personal name ماريخرة (4v:1, 5; 6r:4; 9v:19). This can be interpreted as a variant of the attested Nubian name Marikouda,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Offices\\_and\\_Titles](http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Offices_and_Titles), accessed 28 March 2024; Van Gerven Oei (2021, 166, 317, 407). I have normalised the transcriptions of the editors to some extent in conformity to my system of transcription.

<sup>7</sup> DBMNT / TM Nam 33354: DBMNT NamVar 300149 (ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲕⲟⲩⲭⲁ), 301474 (ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲕⲭⲁ).

in which the *k* and the *d* of the name would have undergone lenition, resulting in the fricative *k̥* and the sonorant *r* respectively, i.e., Mārīkura. There is a diacritical dot over the *kā* of ماريخرة in 4v:1 and 6r:4. The interchange of *d* with *r* is attested in other Nubian names, e.g., Menakourra < Menakouda, Maššoura < Maššouda. So, the final fricative in خياخ may also have developed by a process internal to Nubian.

In the Arabic documents, the term *kiyāk* is not used in combination with the title *ʾikšīl*, in a phrase corresponding to the Nubian term *koiak-eikšīl*. Rather, it is used in combination with the proper name Uruwī, e.g., اروى خياخ *ʾUruwī kiyāk* (4v, 6v). The proper name takes the place of the title *eikšīl* in the Nubian phrase. The word *kiyāk* appears to be used as a nominal attribute of *ʾUruwī*. In Arabic such attributes would be expressed either by apposition (*badal*) or by a genitive annexation construction (*ʾidāfa*), in which the dependent attribute follows the head, i.e., either *ʾUruwī, kiyāk*, or *ʾUruwī of kiyāk* respectively. The Nubian phrase *koiak-eikšīl* can be interpreted as a nominal compound expressing a genitive type of attributive relationship, i.e., *eikšīl* of *koiak*. In such constructions, which are productive in Nubian, the attributive nominal is placed before the head noun (Van Gerven Oei 2021, 396), e.g., *ḡon-kouda* lord-servant, i.e., ‘servant of the lord’. Such Nubian compounds often express kinship relations, e.g., *soḡoj-as* ‘soḡoj-daughter = the daughter of a soḡoj (official)’, *eḡ-ḡal* ‘mother-son = brother’. In several of the Arabic documents, the relationship between Uruwī and *kiyāk* is presented as one of kinship by the linking term *ibn* ‘son of’: اروى بن خياخ *ʾUruwī ibn kiyāk* ‘Uruwī son of *kiyāk*’ (1v, 3v, 5v, 8v, 11v, 12v). We learn

from document 27, a letter to the secretary of Uruwī, that Uruwī was the son of an eparch. The *kīyāk* in the phrase ‘Uruwī son of *kīyāk*’, therefore, is likely to be referring to Uruwī’s father, who is designated by the title *kīyāk*. The phrase اروى خياخ in 4v and 6v is likely, therefore, to mean ‘Uruwī of *kīyāk*’ (*ʿidāfa*), which would correspond to Nubian genitive compounds expressing kinship relationships.

In some cases, the name of the eparch in the Arabic documents is combined with the Arabic patronymic (*kunyā*) ʾAbū al-Ḳayr ‘father of goodness’. This is found in combination with the names of Uruwī, Īsū and Darmā:

ابو الخير اروى (15v, address, right, 3)

ابى الخير اروى (7v, address, right, 2)

ابى الخير يسوا (19v, address, right, 1)

[ابى] الخير ايسوا (20v, address, right, 2)

ابى الخير درما (26v, address, right, 2)

The patronymic ʾAbū al-Ḳayr ‘father of goodness’ is widely attested in medieval Arabic sources. It is metaphorical and alludes to a praiseworthy quality, like the patronymic ʾAbū al-Faḍl ‘father of merit’ (Wensinck 2012). According to al-Qalqaṣandī (*Ṣubḥ al-ʾAʿšā*, V:410), in correspondence emanating from the chancery, a patronymic was used in the address of the addressee when the sender wished to honour him. The fact that it is used with all three eparchs, Uruwī, Īsū and Darmā, suggests that it had an honorific descriptive function.

It is noteworthy that, in the letters to the eparchs, the addresses that contain the phrase ʾAbū al-Ḳayr do not contain the term *kīyāk*. It is possible that the patronymic ʾAbū al-Ḳayr was

intended as an Arabicised form of the term *ḵiyāk*, which took its place in the addresses of these documents. There is a certain phonetic resemblance in its first syllable.

A standard title of the eparchs that appears in the letters is صاحب الخيل *ṣāhib al-ḵayl* ‘Master of the Horses’.

In printed editions of some medieval Arabic historiographical sources, the Nubian eparch is referred to as صاحب الجبل *ṣāhib al-jabal* ‘Master of the Mountain’, e.g.,

ولهذه الناحية وال من قبل عظيم النوبة يعرف بصاحب الجبل

‘This region has a governor from among the Nubian élite who is known as Master of the Mountain.’ (Al-Maqrīzī [d. 845 AH/1441 AD], *Ḳiṭaṭ*, I:352 [citing al-ʿAswānī])

ويعرف صاحب هذه الولاية عند النوبة بصاحب الجبل

‘The one in charge of this region is known among the Nubians as Lord of the Mountain.’ (Al-Maqrīzī [d. 845 AH/1441 AD], *al-Sulūk*, II:199)

ويسمى من يتولى هذه الولاية، عند النوبة، صاحب الجبل

‘The one who governs this region is called by the Nubians Master of the Mountain.’ (Al-Nuwayrī [d. 733 AH/1333 AD], *Nihāyat al-ʿArab*, XXXI:40)

وكتب إلى صاحب الجبل وهو نائب صاحب دنقلة

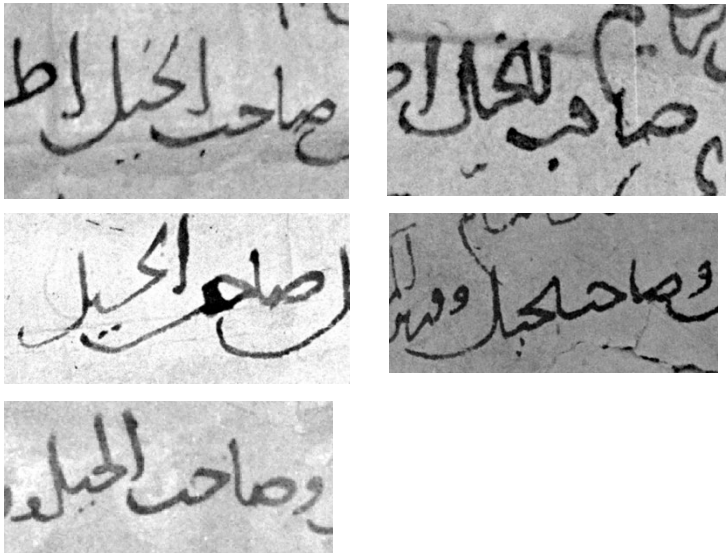
‘and he wrote to the Master of the Mountain, who is the deputy of the ruler of Dongola.’ (Al-Nuwayrī [d. 733 AH/1333 AD], *Nihāyat al-ʿArab*, XXVIII:183)

Compare also ʿAbū al-Makārim (d. 1208; *Taʾrīḵ al-Kanāʾis wa-l-ʿAdyira*, 324), where “the Master of the Mountain” is also mentioned.

Apparently taking his lead from this, Browne (1989, 218; 1996, 160) proposed that the Nubian title of eparchs *soḡoj* had this meaning, deriving it from *sa* ‘lord’ and *ḡoj* ‘mountain’. According to Van Gerven Oei (2021, 16), however, *soḡoj* originated in the “pre-Nubian” substrate of the language. As remarked above, moreover, in Old Nubian compound nominals, the attributive nominal is placed before the head noun (Van Gerven Oei 2021, 396), so the expected order would be ‘mountain-lord’.

In some of the Arabic documents in the corpus, the second term in this Arabic title is written with diacritics that indicate that the reading of the term should be *صاحب الخيل* *ṣāḥib al-ḡayl* ‘Master of the Horses’ rather than *صاحب الجبل* *ṣāḥib al-jabal* ‘Master of the Mountain’, e.g.,

Figure 4: Examples of diacritics indicating the reading ‘Master of the Horses’: 13r (top left), 22r (top right), 2v (middle left), 3v (middle right), 11v (bottom left)





The term *ṣāhib al-ḳayl* ‘Master of the Horses’ is attested in various published medieval Arabic sources as a title of an official, often in a military context, e.g., al-Zubayr ibn Bakkār (d. 256 AH/870 AD), *al-ʿAḳbār al-Muwaffaqiyyāt*, 211; al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH/922 AD), *Taʾrīḳ al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, III:384; al-Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ (d. 544 AH/1149 AD), *Tartīb al-Madārik*, III:332; Ibn al-ʿAṭīr (d. 630 AH/1233 AD), *al-Kāmil fī al-Taʾrīḳ*, IV:202; Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711 AH/1311 AD), *Muḳtaṣar Taʾrīḳ Dimašq*, XX:332; al-Maqrīzī (d. 845 AH/1441 AD), *Ḳiṭāṭ*, I:372. In some published sources, the *ṣāhib al-ḳayl* is explicitly stated to be responsible for horses, e.g.,

صاحب الخيل يث خيلاً لتأخذ له أخبار العدو

‘The Master of the Horses sends horses in order get for him news of the enemy.’ (Al-Maʿarrī [d. 449 AH/1057 AD], *al-Lāmiʿ al-ʿAzīzī*, 459)

وخرج إلى عامر فوجه معه خيلاً. وأمر صاحب الخيل أن يأخذ به على طريق  
قرنة

‘He went out to ʿĀmir and sent horses with him and ordered the Master of the Horses to take him on the Qarna road.’ (Al-Nuwayrī [d. 733 AH/1333 AD], *Nihāyat al-ʿArab*, XXIV:113)

فإن أردت نزولاً أمرت صاحب الخيل... فوقف خيله متنحّية من معسكرك

‘If you want to alight, command the Master of the Horses and stop his horses as they leave your camp.’ (Al-Qalqašandī [d. 821 AH/1418 AD], *Ṣubḥ al-ʿAʿšā*, X:234)

I have, indeed, identified one published medieval source that uses the term *ṣāhib al-ḳayl* apparently to refer to the Nubian eparch:

فسار الهذيل في طلبه إلى أعمال صاحب الخيل، وهو المقيم في أول عمل  
النوبة

‘(The *ʿamīr*) Huḍayl went in pursuit of him to the districts of the Master of the Horses, who dwelt in the first district of the Nubians.’ (Al-ʿAnṭākī [d. 458 AH/1066 AD], *Kitāb al-Dayl*, 478–79)

It does not necessarily follow, however, that the title *ṣāḥib al-jabal* ‘Master of the Mountain’ in the other published sources mentioned above is a corruption based on a misreading of the Arabic word *الحمل* without diacritical dots. Some sources refer to the division of Lower Nubia into a northern and southern district known as *al-ʿAlī* and *al-Jabal* respectively. Qaṣr Ibrīm would have been in *al-Jabal* district and so the designation of the eparch as *ṣāḥib al-jabal* would have related to this district (Seignobos 2015, 564). Various medieval sources refer to a geographical feature of Lower Nubia called *jabal al-janādīl* ‘mountain of the cataracts’, e.g., Ibn al-Wardī (d. 852 AH/1448 AD; *Ḳarīdat al-ʿAjāʾib*, 139), who states that the “ships of the Egyptians and Sudanese reach this mountain.” Trimingham (1965, 64) suggested that *ṣāḥib al-jabal* was an abbreviation of *ṣāḥib jabal al-janādīl* (cf. also Hendrickx 2011, 320–21).

The question arises as to why the eparch should have the title of *ṣāḥib al-ḳayl* ‘Master of the Horses’. It is significant that several of the letters in the corpus refer to the transport of horses (*ḳayl*) to the eparch. The most significant letter is 22, which mentions a complaint by the eparch that the supply of horses (*ḳayl*) for the Nubian army by the Fatimid authorities has stopped. This indicates that the Fatimid ruler was supporting the Nubian army.

An essential component of the army was the cavalry. The letter indicates that the eparch was responsible for mustering the horses for military purposes. Some historical sources state that the Arabs supplied horses to the Nubians in exchange for slaves as part of the terms of the *baqt*, e.g., Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam (d. 257 AH/871 AD), *Futūḥ Miṣr*, 59.

The supply of horses to the eparch is mentioned also in other letters, e.g., “When he (the bearer of this letter) is present (with you), ask him about your horses (*kaylika*)” (23r:19); “Let me and the Nubians know about the transport of the horses (*al-ḵuyūl*)” (33:16).

Some letters, furthermore, refer to the delivery to the eparch of military equipment, such “the helmet (*al-kūḍa*),... the three scabbards (*qurub*) and the spear (*al-rumḥ*)” (31v:1).<sup>8</sup> Letter 23r:4, 5 refers to the delivery of muzzles (*al-kimāmāt*), which may relate to accoutrements of horses for military purposes. The

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<sup>8</sup> For references to helmets in medieval Nubia in other sources see Zarroug (1991, 89) and Spaulding (1998, 49). Many spearheads have been found in Nubian archaeological sites (Shinnie 1961, fig. 29: 5 and 6; Daniels and Welsby 1991, fig. 64: 103 and 104; Adams 2010, pl. 21: e and f; Adams and Adams 1999, pl. 6.5D: b). The medieval Arab historians indicate that the Nubians were excellent archers and were given the nickname *rumāt al-ḥadaq* ‘pupil-smiters’ (Trimingham 1965, 61; Halm 1998, 68). The Nubians had a unique style of archery and manufactured bows and arrows themselves (Zieliński 2015). This explains why they are not referred to as merchandise carried by the Muslim merchants. I am grateful to Gabriel Gerhards for drawing my attention to several of these references.

account 43v:4 refers to ‘army wool’ (ṣūf ‘askarī), which was presumably a military supply.

The eparch’s title *ṣāhib al-ḳayl*, therefore, is likely to designate a core military duty of the holder of the office. This, however, was clearly not his exclusive activity. He was responsible for facilitating all types of trade on behalf of the Nubian king, as well as having other fiscal and administrative functions (Adams 1977, 464–66; 1996, 225; Hendrickx 2011).

There is a parallel with the Roman title *magister equitum* ‘Master of the Horses’, ‘Master of the Cavalry’, who served as the deputy of a Roman dictator (head of state). In Roman administration, the *magister equitum* could operate independently of the cavalry in various political roles subordinate to the dictator (Sherwin-White and Lintott 2015; Gizewski 2006). The term was used in the Byzantine empire under Constantine (fourth century AD; Lee 2018). The latest attestation is in 411 AD (Martindale 1980, 1181), but it appears not to be attested in the later Byzantine period.<sup>9</sup> According to Hendrickx (2011, 304–7), the office of Nubian eparch in Lower Nubia would have been created on the model of the Roman and Byzantine office of governor after the unification of Nobadia and Makuria. Since by this period the Byzantine governor was no longer called *magister equitum*, it is problematic to regard the parallel with the eparch’s Arabic title to be

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<sup>9</sup> It is not found in *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit* (Lilie et al. 2013). I am grateful to Andrew Marsham and Giovanni Ruffini for drawing my attention to this reference and the previous references in this paragraph.

the result of a direct calque. The parallel, however, seems too striking to be a coincidence.

There is some evidence from other sources that the Nubian eparch had a military role. In parallel Nubian and Greek versions of a work known as *The Book of the Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, St Michael is referred to in Greek as ἀρχιστράτηγος ‘commander-in-chief’ and as *soḡoj* in Nubian (Tsakos 2023, 147–49). The title *soḡoj* is the usual Nubian term for eparch. Moreover, St Michael in this text is said to be wearing red and this can be compared to the red attire of military saints in Nubian iconography (Magdalena Wozniak, personal communication).

The Nubian title ‘Lord of the Horses’ *mourtin ḡod* is attested in the Nubian land sale document P. QI III 37, published by Browne (cf. Ruffini 2012b, 83). In this document, the title is associated with a man called K̲ael, whom Browne (P. QI III, p. 85) identifies with a K̲ael mentioned in the Nubian document P. QI III 34 of his corpus, who bears the title *soḡoj*, and so would be an eparch.<sup>10</sup> In the protocol of P. QI III 37, however, it is stated that Adama was eparch (*soḡoj*) at that time. The title *mourtin ḡod* in this document, therefore, would appear to be a military title of somebody who was not eparch.

Various titles of the eparch found in the Arabic letters relate to the geographical scope of his authority. These include the following:

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<sup>10</sup> See the discussion in Ruffini (2012b, 83), who cautions against identifying all these titles with the eparch.

متولى بلاد مريس واعمالها *mutawallī bilād Marīs wa-ʿaʿmālihā* ‘the governor of the Land of Marīs and its districts’ (2v, address, right, 3; 10v, address, right, 2; 14v, address, right, 2; 16v, address, right, 2; 24v, address, right, 1–2)

متولى بلاد المريس واعمالها *mutawallī bilād al-Marīs wa-ʿaʿmālihā* ‘the governor of the Land of al-Marīs and its districts’ (21v, address, right, 2)

متولي اعمال بلاد المريس *mutawallī ʿaʿmāl bilād al-Marīs* ‘the governor of the districts of the land of al-Marīs’ (21r:2)

متولى القلعة الابریمیة وبلاد مريس *mutawallī al-qalʿa al-ʾibrīmiyya wa-bilād Marīs* ‘the governor of the fortress of Ibrīm and the land of Marīs’ (7v, address, right, 2)

متولى بلاد مريس *mutawallī bilād Marīs* ‘the governor of the land of Marīs’ (17v, address, right, 2–3)

متولى بلاد المقرة والمريس *mutawallī bilād al-Muqurra wa-l-Marīs* ‘the governor of the land of al-Muqurra and al-Marīs’ (15v address, right, 2–3)

متولى ابریم وبلاد مكن *mutawallī ʾIbrīm wa-bilād Migin* ‘the governor of Ibrīm and the land of Nobadia’ (22v, address, right, 2)

متولى بلاد مريس مكن واعمالها *mutawallī bilād Marīs Migin* ‘the governor of Marīs Nobadia’ (19v, address, right, 2)

The topographical name مريس *Marīs* or المريس *al-Marīs* in the addresses of many of the Arabic letters is an Arabicised form of the Coptic term ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲥ *Marīs* ‘southern country’. In Coptic, it is used to designate both Upper Egypt and also Lower Nubia, the latter being the territory designated by the Arabicised form مريس

*Marīs* (Crum 1939, 300).<sup>11</sup> The capital of *Marīs* was Faras (Greek/Coptic Paḳōras). Some of the eparchs had the title of ‘domestikos of Faras’ in Nubian documents (Ruffini 2012b, 34, 38, 50, 208). The Arabicised form *Marīs* designates the region of northern Nubia that corresponded geographically to the earlier kingdom of Nobadia. According to al-ʿAswānī, the southern boundary of *Marīs* was the village of Bistū just south of the third cataract (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḳiṭaṭ*, I:353). South of this was the region of the earlier kingdom of Makuria (Arabic *al-Muqurra*). South of Makuria was the earlier kingdom of Alodia (Arabic ‘*Alwa*). The Arabic term *al-bilād al-qibliyya* ‘the southern land’ is found in 16r:7, which appears to be an Arabic calque of the Coptic *Marīs*. The term *al-bilād al-baḥriyya* ‘the northern land’ occurs in 24v:3, which is presumably referring to the region of Aswan north of Nobadia. Letter 24v:1–3 refers to ‘the news from the north’ (*al-ʿaḳbār al-baḥriyya*) and letter 38r:5 mentions ‘a town in the north’ (*bilād baḥrī*). Some letters use the term *bilād al-Nūba* ‘land of the Nubians’ (14r:3; 16r:10; 32:6; 45:7) to refer to the zone of Lower Nubia where the Muslim merchants operated. It is relevant to note here that in the papyrus document dated 758 AD that was published by Hinds and Sakkout (1981, 218), the addressee is given the title *ṣāḥib Muqurra wa-Nūba* ‘the master of Muqurra and Nūba’, where *Nūba* is used as an Arabic equivalent of Nobadia (i.e., *al-Marīs*) and this is likely to be the sense of *bilād al-Nūba* in the documents cited above.

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<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Joost Hagen for pointing this out to me.

At the period when the Arabic letters were written, the former kingdoms of Nobadia and Makuria were united under a single king based in Dongola. The text of the *baqt* treaty (al-Maqrizī, *Ḳiṭaṭ*, I:323–24) states that this was a “covenant binding upon the Nūba... from the frontier of Aswan to that of ‘Alwa,” indicating this unity. This is also confirmed by al-Ya‘qūbī (*Ta’rīk*, I:217), who wrote in 278 AH/891 AD:

The Nūba have become two kingdoms. The first is the kingdom that they call Muqurra.... The capital of their kingdom is Dongola. It is they who made peace with the Muslims and pay them *baqt*.... The other Nubian kingdom, which they call ‘Alwa, is much more dangerous than Muqurra. Its capital is called Soba.

There is evidence that by the Fatimid period also Alodia (‘Alwa) had lost its independent status and was under the king of Dongola (see below).

Letter 15 contains the title *mutawallī bilād al-Muqurra wa-l-Marīs* ‘the governor of the land of al-Muqurra and al-Marīs’, indicating that the eparch’s authority extended across the united kingdom of Nobadia and Makuria. A number of decrees of Nubian kings have been discovered in Qaṣr Ibrīm, which reflect the centralisation of the administration in Dongola, indicating that the kings of Dongola were involved in the affairs of Lower Nubia at local levels (Ruffini 2016a; 2020, 763).

The form مكن in the address of 19 and 22 would seem to be an Arabic transcription of the Nubian topographic element *migin* in the title *migin soḥoj* ‘the eparch of Nobadia’, which is attested in Nubian sources (Ruffini 2012b, 34). The form *migin* is



a genitive form of *migi-*. The *kāf* of Arabic was perceived to be the closest approximation to the Nubian sound /g/.

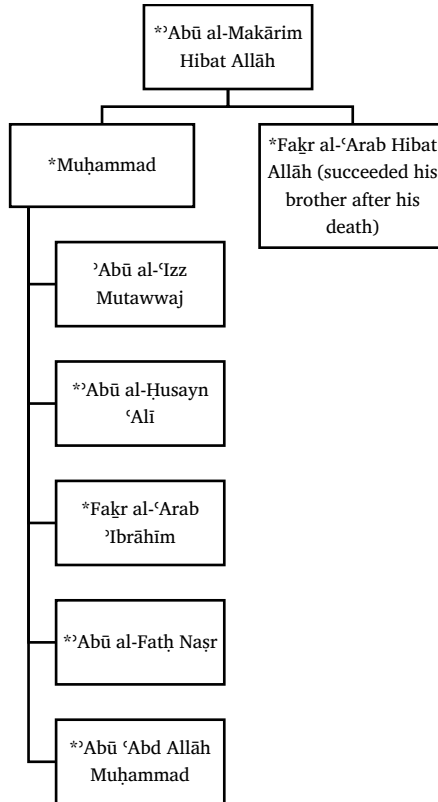
The Arabic term *mutawallī* in the titles is used in Fatimid administrative and legal documents as a title of the head of government offices and institutions (Khan 1993a, 106, 107, 175, 342, 358, 416, 434).

### 3.4. The Correspondents with the Eparch

We learn from the addresses of the letters about the identity of the correspondents with the eparch. In most cases, these are the senders of the letters. Letters **17** and **18** are sent by the eparch Uruwī, so the correspondents are the recipients.

Many of the correspondents are members of the Banū al-Kanz. Some are high-ranking *'amīrs*. These include the leaders of the Banū al-Kanz, known as Kanz al-Dawla (**1**, **8**, **26**). The family tree and succession of the leaders of the Banū al-Kanz in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the period of the Qaṣr Ibrīm corpus, are represented below in Figure 5 following Seignobos (2020, 141). Those who are recorded as having the title of Kanz al-Dawla are marked with an asterisk. The exact dates of the periods of their leadership are not known.

Figure 5: Leaders of the Banū al-Kanz in the eleventh and twelfth centuries



In the addresses of the letters sent by Kanzī leaders, the senders have elaborate honorific titles. The addresses of **1** and **8** contain the name Kanz al-Dawla ʿAbū Maṣṣūr Mutawwaj. This appears to be the same as the Kanz al-Dawla called ʿAbū al-ʿIzz Mutawwaj in the genealogy of Seignobos reproduced in Figure 5. Letters **2** and **7** are from *ʿamīrs* who are sons of the Kanz al-Dawla. According to the addresses, these have the names Tanwīr (**2**, reading not certain) and Naṣr (**7**). In **2**, it is indicated that Tanwīr is son of the Kanz al-Dawla ʿIbrāhīm ibn ʿAlī ibn Mutawwaj ibn ʿAbī Yazīd al-Ḥanafī. The genealogy of the Kanz

al-Dawla ʿIbrāhīm ibn ʿAlī ibn Mutawwaj corresponds to the succession in the family tree in Figure 5. Tanwīr, the son of ʿIbrāhīm, evidently did not serve as the Kanz al-Dawla. It was rather ʿIbrāhīm's son Naṣr who succeeded him to this office, as shown in the genealogy in Figure 5. The sender of letter 7 is described in the address as “the commander Naṣr, the son of the commander Kanz al-Dawla,” which was presumably this Kanz al-Dawla Naṣr ibn ʿIbrāhīm. The address of 26 indicates that the sender was Faḡr al-ʿArab Kanz al-Dawla. This is likely to be the Kanz al-Dawla Faḡr al-ʿArab ʿIbrāhīm who appears in the genealogy above.

The address in 2 attaches the *nisba* al-Ḥanafī to the Kanz al-Dawla ʿIbrāhīm ibn ʿAlī ibn Mutawwaj ibn ʿAbī Yazīd. The Banū al-Kanz claimed descent from the tribe of the Banū Ḥanīfa. The *nisba* al-Ḥanafī is attested in inscriptions from Aswan relating to Kanzī ʿamīrs, e.g., RCEA III, nos 2391, 2392; Wiet (1971, no. 54 [p. 37]).

The senders of several letters have a Kanzī *nisba* but no title indicating their rank. These include Lāmiʿ ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī (3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 12), Ḥusayn ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī (14, 16—he is explicitly stated to be the brother of Lāmiʿ in 16r:5), Ḥāmid al-Kanzī (10), ʿAbū al-Ṭanāʾ Ḥāmid al-Kanzī (11—presumably the same person as the sender of 10). Lāmiʿ ibn Ḥasan was the sender of letter 36 and his son Maṣṣūr was the sender of 30, which were not sent to eparchs.

The other correspondents with the eparchs do not have Kanzī *nisbas*. They include an ʿamīr ʿAbū Maṣṣūr ʿAjīl (22). He is given elaborate honorific titles: “the prosperous, auspicious and most gracious commander, the commander, victor of the religion,

sword of the Commander of the Faithful, 'Abū Maṣṣūr 'Ajl, son of the sincere commander Hilāl al-Dawla, our elder Kanz al-Dīn."

One of the correspondents is Ḥiṣn al-Dawla ibn al-'Asqalānī (13), the title indicating that he had some connection to the Fatimid government. A man with the name Ibn al-'Asqalānī appears also in the text of letter 9, where he is said to be in the entourage of the Nubian king, and an 'amīr with the title Ḥiṣn al-Dawla is the addressee of letter 28. The Kanzī sender of letter 9, Lāmi' ibn Ḥasan, complains bitterly that Ibn al-'Asqalānī has impeded his activities in the court of the Nubian king.

The sender of letter 21 is the son of a judge: 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Qāḍī al-Rašīd 'Alī ibn al-Zubayr. The sender of 23 is an official with the title *Ṣāhib al-Sawārī* 'the Master of the Shipmasts'. The other correspondents have no official title in the address: Muḥammad ibn Ramaḍān al-Ḥājj (15), 'Abū al-Ṭāhir (17), al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad (20). A man with the name 'Abū al-Ṭāhir appears in the body of letter 9r:4 ('Abū al-Ṭāhir ibn Tarīk) and in the account 42r (left, 14). According to the address of letter 34, the recipient was 'Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī, son of the elder, the preacher (*al-dā'i*) 'Abū al-Ṭāhir 'Ubayd Allāh ibn 'Abī Tur'a.

The sender of 21, 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Qāḍī al-Rašīd 'Alī ibn al-Zubayr, belonged to a family who had influential positions in the Fatimid administration. His brother al-Qāḍī al-Rašīd 'Aḥmad appears particularly prominently in the medieval sources. Al-Maqrīzī (*al-Muqaffā al-Kabīr*, I:325) gives the full genealogy of 'Aḥmad as follows:

ʿAḥmad ibn ʿAlī ibn ʿIbrāhīm ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad ibn Falīta ibn Saʿīd ibn ʿIbrāhīm ibn al-Ḥasan, al-Qāḍī al-Rašīd (the Rightly-Guided Judge) ʿAbū ʿAlī al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Qāḍī al-Rašīd Sadīd al-Dawla (the Rightly-Guided Judge, Just One of the Dynasty) ʿAbū al-Ḥasan ʿIbrāhīm ibn al-Qāḍī al-Rašīd al-Mufawwaq Ṭīqat al-Mulk (the Rightly-Guided Judge, the Prosperous, Trust of the Kingdom) ʿAbū ʿIshāq, known as Ibn Zubayr al-Qurašī al-ʿAsadī al-ʿAswānī

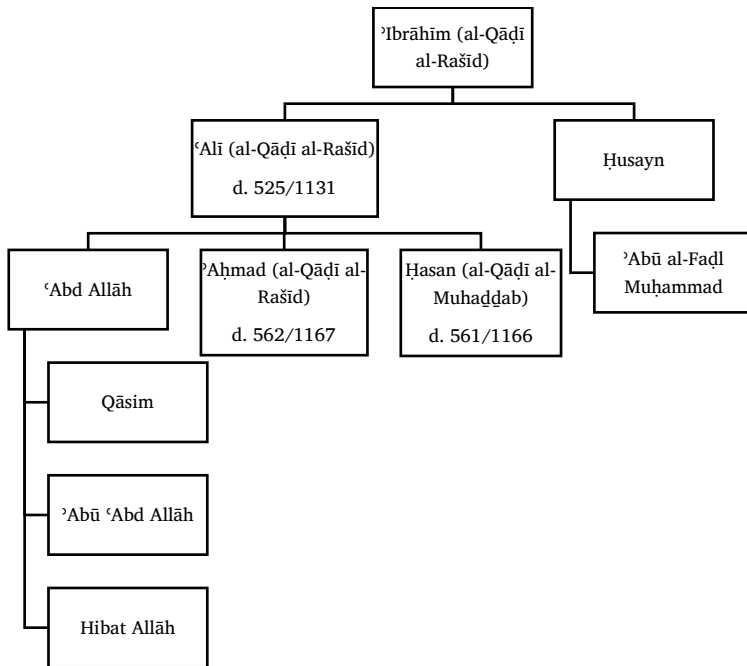
This indicates that ʿAbd Allāh and ʿAḥmad came from a large family of judges. According to al-Maqrīzī (*al-Muqaffā al-Kabīr*, I:181), the grandfather of ʿAbd Allāh and ʿAḥmad, ʿIbrāhīm ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Zubayr, was the judge of Qūṣ, who “was alive in the year 471 AH/1078–79 AD.” The grandfather is mentioned in the legal document 47r:3–4, which is dated 515 AH/1121 AD, during the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-ʿĀmir. Letter 21 mentions ʿAbd Allāh’s sons—Qāsim, ʿAbū ʿAbd Allāh and Hibat Allāh—and his paternal cousin, the judge ʿAbū al-Faḍl Muḥammad ibn Ḥusayn, as well as ʿAbd Allāh’s grandfather. ʿAbū al-Faḍl Muḥammad ibn Ḥusayn was judge of Aswan in 518 AH/1124 AD (Garcin 1976, 117).

ʿAbd Allāh’s brother ʿAḥmad was an envoy of the caliph al-Ḥāfiẓ to Yemen but was executed by the vizier Šāwar on suspicion of attempted rebellion in 562 AH/1167 AD; cf. al-ʿIdfūwī (d. 748 AH/1347 AD), *al-Ṭālīʿ al-Saʿīd*, 98–102, 364; al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā al-Kabīr*, I:325. ʿAḥmad had another brother called Ḥasan al-Qāḍī al-Muḥaḍḍab, who was imprisoned and died one year earlier (Lev 1998, 62–79; Smoor 2006). ʿAḥmad’s brother ʿAbd Allāh, who was the sender of 21, was, therefore, likely to

be out of favour with the Fatimid government (Sartain 1993, 25–26). By contrast, the *ʿamīrs* of the Banū al-Kanz have elaborate titles in the addresses explicitly declaring their loyalty and affiliation to the Fatimid caliph.

The family tree of the members of the family of ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Qāḍī al-Rašīd ʿAlī ibn al-Zubayr who are mentioned above can be reconstructed as follows:<sup>12</sup>

Figure 6: The Banū Zubayr



All this indicates that the correspondents with the eparch did not form a uniform group and in some cases had conflicting interests.

<sup>12</sup> A detailed study of the wider family of the Banū Zubayr is in preparation by Robin Seignobos. Some details of the tree presented here are dependent on his research.

The senders and recipients of the correspondence with eparchs are summarised in the table below:

Table 4: Senders and recipients of the correspondence with eparchs

	<b>Sender</b>	<b>Recipient</b>
1	Kanz al-Dawla ʿAbū Maṣṣūr Mutawwaj	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, Uruwī ibn Qiyāk
2	ʿAbū al-Futūḥ Tanwīr ibn Kanz al-Dawla ʿAbū ʿIshāq ʿIbrāhīm ibn ʿAlī ibn Mutawwaj ibn ʿAbī Yazīd	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, ʿAbū al-Qayr Uruwī
3	Lāmiʿ ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, Uruwī ibn Qiyāk
4	Lāmiʿ ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī	The Master of the Horses, Uruwī Qiyāk
5	Lāmiʿ ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, Uruwī ibn Qiyāk
6	Lāmiʿ ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, Uruwī Qiyāk
7	The commander Naṣr, son of the commander Kanz al-Dawla	The Ikšīl, Master of his (the king's) Horses, ʿAbū al-Qayr Uruwī
8	Kanz al-Dawla ʿAbū Maṣṣūr [Mutawwaj]	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, Uruwī ibn Qiyāk
9	Lāmiʿ ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, Uruwī ibn Qiyāk
10	Ḥāmid al-Kanzī	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, Uruwī
11	ʿAbū al-Ṭanāʾ Ḥāmid al-Kanzī	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, Uruwī ibn Qiyāk
12	Lāmiʿ ibn al-Ḥasan al-Kanzī	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, Uruwī ibn Qiyāk
13	Ḥiṣn al-Dawla ibn al-ʿAsqal-ānī	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, Uruwī

14	Ḥusayn ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, Uruwī
15	Muḥammad ibn Ramaḍān	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses of the King, 'Abū al-Ḳayr Uruwī
16	Ḥusayn ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, Uruwī
17	Master of the Horses, Uruwī	'Abū al-Ṭāhir
18	Uruwī (?)	—
19	The judge 'Abū al-Faḍl Muḥammad ibn al-Fātiḥ ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥusaynī	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, 'Abū al-Ḳayr Īsū
20	Al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad [ ] Naṣr [ ]	Master of the Horses, 'Abū al-Ḳayr Īsū
21	'Abd Allāh ibn 'Alī ibn al-Zubayr	The Ikšīl, Master of the Horses
22	'Abū Maṣṣūr 'Ajil ibn Hilāl al-Dawla, Kanz al-Dīn	Master of the Horses
23	The Master of the Shipmasts (ṣāḥib al-sawārī)	The Ikšīl
24	—	['Abū] al-Ḳayr
25	—	—
26	The commander Kanz al-Dawla	Al-Bazīl, the deputy of the Master of the Horses, the Ikšīl, 'Abū al-Ḳayr Darmā
27	'Ibrāhīm ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān	'Ubayd Allāh 'Alī, the secretary (kātib) of the Master of the Horses



### 3.5. The Content of the Correspondence with the Eparch

#### 3.5.1. Courtesy and Equality

Many passages in the correspondence express mutual respect, courtesy, gratitude and an acknowledgement that the power relationship between the Muslims and the eparch was one of equality, e.g.,

Letters sent by Muslims to the eparch:

Whatever kindness and good he (the Ikšil) does in his (the bearer of the letter's) regard, I shall appreciate and be thankful for. (8r:12–13)

There is no greater generosity performed by the Ikšil than what the Ikšil will have done with regard to the duty of showing respect, kindness and polite hospitality for the leader Sa'āda. (10r:7–10)

As for the merchants, the Master of the Horses does not require instruction from me regarding their situation. Your reputation is good among the people. (2v:3–4)

As for the statement of the Ikšil—may God cause his support to endure—that I have shown neglect for his status and have not inquired about him, the situation is not like that. I recognise his eminence, and am steadfast in my love for him and my gratitude to him in all circumstances. (15r:6–8)

Moreover, I know how I am loved by you. (2v:6)

Letters sent by the eparch to Muslims:

The Master of the Horses kisses your honourable hand and makes a request to your honour. What is requested from

my lord is that you do goodness and kindness to your slave (the Master of the Horses). His (i.e., of the Master of the Horses) two wives send their best wishes. You are always so kind. (17r:11–13)

Your slave (i.e., the writer) kisses your hand and legs, and warmly welcomes a letter from your honour. (18r:12–13)

Whatever it may be (that you need), I shall hasten to ensure that people take it and come to you, and I shall send it—they will do it. I shall write to keep you informed. I am your slave in the land. (18v:1–2)

This spirit of courtesy and equality is expressed also in the addresses of many of the letters, e.g.,

(Sent) to the brother, the Master of the Horses (22v)

(Sent by) one who is grateful for his munificence, Muḥammad ibn Ramaḍān, the pilgrim (15v)

(Sent by) one who is grateful to him and his friend Lāmi<sup>c</sup> ibn al-Ḥasan al-Kanzī (12v)

(Sent by) one who is grateful for his kindness, the Master of the Horses and vizier of the king, Uruwī, governor of the land of Marīs (17v)

### **3.5.2. Request for Protection**

The main purpose of many letters in the corpus is to request the eparch to offer protection and correct treatment to the bearer of the letter, and to ensure that they are able to carry out their business without impediment, e.g.,

I [request] that... you ensure that he (the bearer of the letter) proceeds safely to his colleagues, and that you then take care of this colleague of mine and protect him, and also his colleagues in the armed garrison post. (19v:5–6)

In several cases, the letter requests the eparch to protect a servant of the sender and carry out business with him, e.g.,

The bearer of this (letter) is my loyal and respectful companion, Oua, who is my servant (*kādim*).... Please treat him well and correctly and provide him with his requirements. (6r:3–5)

I have sent my slave boy (*gūlām*), who is called Šarīf, with a brown camel to his honourable presence. I want you to receive it from me. I have not written you a letter or sent to your presence anything before today, and I praise God for that. So take the camel and do not let him (Šarīf, the servant) be detained by a single day. Then send him to Papa, my servant (*kādim*), who carries out my business, for I shall be cut off from him, if there is a delay. (7r:3–9)

The statement below in letter 3 apparently refers to the fact that the operation of the merchants' boats in Nubia required authorisation from the eparch:

and the lofty, most glorious and munificent presence, may God establish his happiness, has graciously released (*'aṭlaqat*) the boats. (3r:5–6).

In several cases, the writer makes it clear that the protection of the Muslim bearer of the letter was a duty of the eparch, i.e., under the terms of the non-aggression pact between the Muslim government and the Nubian king. The Muslims had no executive authority, but rather the executive authority was with the Ikšīl. The Ikšīl was expected to exercise his executive authority to protect and care for Arab merchants, e.g.,

The Ikšīl cannot show them opposition in anything small or big, but should show honour to the aforementioned

leader and care for him and for his companions who are travelling with him. (1r:6–7)

The Ikšil, therefore, needs to protect them and care for them in accordance with their rights, and all the more so since they belong to those whose right (to protection) is obligatory and the service of whom is a compulsory requirement. (3r:9–10)

The Ikšil knows what is required with regard to the restraint of his companions and the imposition upon them of obligations and the prevention of those who oppose him with harm and damage. (3, margin, 3–5)

(I report) the arrival of the carrier of (this letter) to the land of the Nubians.... He is somebody who should be treated correctly, protected and cared for. He has a right to your customary protection, so that he is able to have access to the administrators and others of your slaves and servants, because it is incumbent upon your honour to protect and care for him in your customary way until he returns... since he has a good reputation. (14r:3–7)

The Ikšil does not need my recommendation with regard to him or my reassurances to show him respect and treat him well. (8r:8–10)

(I inform) that the bearer of these lines is the Head (*al-raʿīs*), may God decree his safety, and he must be shown favour and respect. (26r:3–5)

The writer of 3 requests the eparch to grant him the executive authority to provide protection to the bearer of the letter:

Please arrange for his letter to be sent to me with authorisation for me to offer the leader Saʿāda respectful treatment until it (his work) is finished. (3v:3–4)

In letter 16, there is a reference to a man with the title of *kalīfa* ‘agent’ claiming his salary from the deputy of the eparch. This official belonged to the community of Muslim merchants and so the payment of his salary was entailed within the protection and support for Muslims that the eparch was expected to offer:

I would like a letter to be sent to all the administrators requesting them to protect the places of Lāmi‘ and his slaves and likewise my places and my slaves. You know that they all perform good services to the king and to you. The agent (*al-kalīfa*) mentioned that he has instructions and he adhered to all of these. He wrote to Ibn ‘Imrān, the deputy (*nā’ib*) of your honour, asking him about his salary and he gave him his usual salary. (16r:13–16)

In letter 11, the request for the eparch’s protection relates to financial support of the bearer, who is a son-in-law of the writer:

My son-in-law, who is called ‘Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, the merchant, has come (to you). He has suffered the loss of a debt owed to him by some spendthrift people known as the sons of Kajja.... You have an obligation to him, for my money is with your majesty. (11r:3–4, 11r, margin, 5)

In the absence of the eparch from Ibrīm, the writer of letter 27 asks his secretary to draft a letter for him that will put an end to malicious gossip against him. He reinforces his request by paying a respected elder to intercede for him with the secretary. The writer also appeals to the precedent of the eparch’s father’s favourable treatment of him:

The slave will ask my master the elder ʿUbayd Allāh to encourage him (the secretary) to draft a letter for me and send it to me with the Master of the Shipmasts. This is what I need the most from my master (the eparch). In the days of his father, my master the Master of the Horses, nobody opposed me in anything.... I have sent (this letter) to him with the Master of the Shipmasts and we shall request him to pay one *dinār* as cash commission to my master the elder ʿUbayd Allāh. (27r:17–v:8)

### 3.5.3. Permission to Leave Nubia Safely

If the bearer of the letter is a servant, the writer sometimes requests that the eparch does not detain him, indicating that the servant required permission to leave Nubia, e.g.,

When the bearer of this letter reaches you, release him and send him away quickly, so he can reach me, if God wills, because I want to send him to the north to carry out some errands for me. (2r:6–8)

A passage in letter 3 suggests that the permission of the eparch is required for the boats of the Muslims to leave Nubia:

The lofty, most glorious and munificent presence, may God establish his happiness, has graciously released (*ʿaṭlaqat*) the boats. (3r:5–6)

The writer of letter 4 requests the eparch to ensure that his colleagues return from Nubia downriver safely:

Let the people go down (the river) without fear. We have released (*ʿaṭlaqnā*) the people (apparently meaning: we have authorised them to travel). (4v:7)

### 3.5.4. Protection of Property

Several of the Muslim writers of the letters had landed property within Nubia. The writer of 16, Lāmiʿ ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī, requests the eparch to protect his properties (*mawāḍiʿ* ‘places’) and ‘his slaves’ (*ʿabīdihī*), i.e., Lāmiʿ’*s* administrative staff:

I would like a letter to be sent to all the administrators requesting them to protect the places of Lāmiʿ and his slaves and likewise my places and my slaves (*ʿabīdī*).  
(16r:13–14)

Al-ʿAswānī refers to Muslim residents (*qāṭinūn*) in Lower Nubia (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḳiṭaṭ*, I:352). According to al-Masʿūdī (*Murūj al-Dahab*, III:40–43), during the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 198–218 AH/813–33 AD), some Muslims living in Aswan owned estates located inside Nubia. These estates had been bought from Nubians during Umayyad and earlier Abbasid times. Muslim gravestones, mainly dating to the ninth–eleventh centuries AD, have been discovered between the first and second cataracts (Edwards 2019, 968–69). Ruffini (2012b) demonstrates from a study of Nubian documents that private land tenure existed in medieval Nubia. He adduces parallels with modern Nubian society, in which the acquisition of land is associated with Nubian identity. If this is retrojected back into the Middle Ages, then the acquisition of land by Muslim Arabs could reflect an assimilation into Nubian society, or at least a recognition of the equipollent relationship of Nubians and Egyptians in the spirit of the *baqt*.

### 3.5.5. Communications with the Nubian King

Al-ʿAswānī indicates that the northern region of Nubia (Marīs) between the first and second cataracts of the Nile was open to Muslims (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḳiṭaṭ*, I:307):

It is a district open to Muslims who have property in the nearer part and trade in the districts beyond where some of them are domiciled.

In the legal document of the corpus 45r:7, this region that is open to Muslims is referred to as *al-islāmiyya*.

The region south of the second cataract was closed to Muslims (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḳiṭaṭ*, I:307):

At the beginning of the cataracts of the country of Nubia lies a village called Taqwā (modern Wādī Ḥalfa) on level ground where the Nubians' boats ascending from al-Qaṣr on the borders of their country stop. No boats are allowed to pass this place, nor is any Muslim or any other allowed to ascend the river further except by permission of the Master of the Mountain.

In the letters of the corpus, the town of Aswan is called a *tāgr* 'border' (19r:3; 45:19), since it was the urban administrative centre that lay closest to the border of Nubia. According to al-ʿAswānī, the border of Nubia in the north was at the village of al-Qaṣr, on the east bank of the Nile just south of Bilāq (Philae). In this place there was an armed garrison (*maslaḥa* or *musallaḥa*) post (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḳiṭaṭ*, I:307). It was situated one mile south of Bilāq and six miles south of old Aswan (al-Masʿūdī [d. 345 AH/956 AD], *Murūj al-Dahab*, I:133; Lane 2000, 462).

In letter 19v:6, the writer requests the eparch to protect the people 'in the garrison post' (*al-maslaḥa/al-musallaḥa*) and this is



likely to be referring to the garrison of al-Qaṣr. The letter shows that the garrison was within Nubian territory and so under the authority of the eparch. According to al-ʿAswānī, the Nubian king George requested the Abbasid caliph al-Muʿtaṣim (r. 218–27 AH/833–42 AD) to remove the garrison post from al-Qaṣr, since the garrison was on Nubian soil (al-Maqrizī, *Kitāṭ*, I:372). Two mosques were built around the middle of the eleventh century just south of the fortress (Bloom 1984; Gascoigne 2008). These were under Muslim control, though a church upon which one of the mosques was built seems to have been under Nubian control, judging by the following description by ʿAbū al-Makārim (d. 1208 AD; *Taʾrīḵ al-Kanāʾis wa-l-ʿAdyira*, 100b; translation by Evetts, 274):

There is a church of the glorious angel Michael (*Mikāʾīl*) which overlooks the river, and is situated between the land of Nubia and the land of the Muslims; but it belongs to Nubia. Near it there is a mosque which has been restored; and also a castle which was built as a fortress (*ḥiṣn*) on the frontier between the Muslims and Nubians, and is at the extremity of the Nubian territory.

References to al-Qaṣr disappear after the Fatimid period and the fortress may have ceased to be used. Remains of the fortress have survived to modern times in the site known as Ḥiṣn al-Bāb ‘fortress of the gate (to Nubia)’, which has been excavated by archaeologists (Gascoigne and Rose 2012).

The documents in our corpus demonstrate that the southern boundary of the open region between the first and second cataracts was in principle observed by the Muslims in the Fatimid period. This is shown clearly by the legal document 45 (566 AH/

1170 AD), which records the lease of a boat by two Muslims from a Christian to travel upstream from Bilāq (Philae) to Nubia for the sake of trade. The document specifies that the stopping place in the south must be the Island of Michael (*jazīrat Mikāʾīl*).<sup>13</sup> This was the island known in Nubian as Meinarti, which lay just north of the second cataract, a short distance upstream of the modern town of Wādī Ḥalfa. Excavations of levels of Meinarti datable to the Fatimid period have revealed spacious houses, reflecting prosperity. One house was presumably the residence of an important official and had four store rooms (Adams 2003; Welsby 2002, 124–27). The site is believed to have been the occasional residence of the Nubian eparch of Nobadia and to have played an important role in the control of trade to points further up the Nile. Two Greek funerary inscriptions that were discovered there include the title *koiak-eikšīl*, one of which refers to an eparch. (Ruffini 2012a, 49–50)

Many of the letters of the corpus show that the eparch acted as an intermediary between the Muslims and the Nubian king in Dongola, which was necessary due to the restriction on travel beyond the second cataract.

The second cataract, however, was not a hard border for Muslims. According to al-ʿAswānī, no boats, of Muslims or others, could cross the second cataract without the permission of the eparch. A further border was situated at Maqs al-ʿAʿlā, “six stages” (*marāḥil*) south of the second cataract, beyond Baṭn al-Ḥajar,

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<sup>13</sup> In the document the name is spelt with *kāf* (*Mikāʾīl*), whereas in ʿAbū al-Makārim’s text it is spelt with a *kāʾ* (*Mikāʾīl*). These are two variant forms of the name in Arabic.

possibly to be identified with the modern town of 'Akaša (Seignobos 2010, 20). To cross this border, permission was needed from the king (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḳiṭaṭ*, I:353). So, travel south of the second cataract was in principle possible for Muslim merchants so long as they had the necessary permission.

Several of the letters indicate that the Muslim merchants travelled to the court of the king in Dongola with authorisation from the eparch.

The writer of letter **13** requests the eparch to send him a letter to facilitate the conduct of trade with the king:

If God wills, I shall travel to the king after the festival. I ask for your kindness to write a letter to the slave of the king requesting him to deliver to me the consignment that he promised me. Please could this be done through your agency.... Send your letter to me, so that a group of merchants can enter (to see the king) with me, for you would thereby help them in their livelihood. (13v)

It appears from the following passage in **13** that the eparch was not always comfortable about Muslims travelling to the king:

As for what he has (i.e., you have) mentioned about the situation of the journey to the king and his (i.e., your) saying that he is (i.e., you are) afraid, well, praise be to God the Exalted, I am not a soldier of the king's army that I should be feared. I am a man who is a merchant, I am his slave and his servant. (13r:4–9)

On several occasions, the letters mention the dispatch of messengers (generally referred to as *ḡulām* 'slave boy') to the king to carry out the business of their Muslim masters. It is likely that the journey to Dongola was difficult. The third cataract and Baṭn al-Ḥajar were not navigable by boats during the low water season

of the Nile and this may have been why merchants preferred not to make the journey themselves:

The slave boy of the ruler has set off together with my slave boy to the king. (22r:9–10)

I was intending to send a messenger to the king with the merchandise that I have bought for him for ten dinārs and the horse that I have prepared for him, and equipment that he requested from me. (9v:7–9)

The writer of letter 9, Lāmiʿ ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī, reports that his slave boy was impeded at the court of the king by an apparently rival Muslim merchant called Ibn al-ʿAsqalānī, who is probably the same as the writer of letter 13, Ḥiṣn al-Dawla ibn al-ʿAsqalānī:

My slave boy arrived humiliated and wronged by Ibn al-ʿAsqalānī.... For is Ibn al-ʿAsqalānī the king and we his slaves and his grovellers? (9v:9–17)

On some occasions, the writers of letters request the eparch to convey letters to the king on their behalf. The writer of letter 22, a Muslim *ʿamīr*, refers to the provision of military aid in the form of the delivery of horses by the Fatimid ruler to the Nubian king. The *ʿamīr* requests the eparch to convey a letter to the king with regard to this shipment rather than sending a letter directly to the king:

As for your saying that the ships conveying the horses have stopped, I was intending to (send them) until the order of the ruler, may God make his reign eternal, reached me by the hand of his brother, the governor of our land, together with a letter to the king informing him (the king) that if he (the king) needed an army (*ʿaskar*), he (the ruler) would

send it to him, but he (the ruler) has prohibited me from sending to you the first instalment of the horses until these messengers (i.e., my slave boy and the slave boy of the ruler) arrive (at the king). For the slave boy of the ruler has set off together with my slave boy to the king. Please, please allow them passage, after showing them due honour and respect, to the king, and request him in your letter not to delay them for a single hour. (22r:5–9)

Letter 21 casts important light on another dimension of relations between Muslims and the Nubian king. The writer, ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Qāḍī al-Rašīd ‘Alī ibn al-Zubayr, informs the eparch that he has sent two of his sons to Nubia:

I sent two of my sons, called Qāsim and ‘Abū ‘Abd Allāh to Erkinun in order for them to dwell there, as your guests and the guests of the king, may God preserve his life. I did not send them for trade nor for benefit through selling and buying. Rather, I sent them to be at the disposition of the king and (stay) in his land until God permits. I shall convey to them cloth for them to send to the king, may God preserve his life, so that they can see his crown (i.e., have an audience with him) and become one of his subjects (literally: slaves). (21r:3–8)

The town of Erkinun may be possibly identified with the modern village of Argīn (also spelt Argîn and Arqin) in Lower Nubia on the west bank of the Nile just north of Wādī Ḥalfa (Şabbār and Bell 2017, 27; Salvoldi and Geus 2017, 82). So the sons were not sent directly to the king in Dongola, but rather used this as a base in Nubia. The writer goes on to say that various members of his family, including his father “the rightly-guided judge,” his grandfather and his cousin, the judge ‘Abū al-Faḍl, had a similar relationship of service to the Nubian king.

His father and cousin are said to have been envoys of the Fatimid ruler. It was his father who strove to make a peace treaty between the Fatimid ruler and the Nubian king David at a time of political instability. The writer, ‘Abd Allāh, says that, when he was young, he himself travelled to visit the Nubian king with his cousin. Moreover, another son of his, Hibat Allāh, also visited the court of the Nubian king on a previous occasion.

As remarked above (§3.4), ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Qāḍī al-Rašīd ‘Alī ibn al-Zubayr was a member of an influential family, many of whom held high offices in the Fatimid administration. It would have been expected, therefore, that the Fatimid ruler sent them on diplomatic missions to Nubia. According to 21r:18, the family owned property in Nubia “from which we have a livelihood.”

There is, however, another factor in the relations of the Banū al-Zubayr with the Nubian king. ‘Abd Allāh’s brother, al-Qāḍī al-Rašīd ‘Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī, was executed by the vizier Šāwar on suspicion of attempted rebellion; cf. al-‘Idfūwī (d. 748 AH/1347 AD), *al-Ṭālī‘ al-Sa‘īd*, 98–102, 364. It is possible, therefore, that ‘Abd Allāh was seeking asylum for himself and his children in Nubia with a view to shifting his allegiance to the Nubian king (Sartain 1993, 25–26). ‘Abd Allāh requests the eparch to act as intermediary with the king in order to make the necessary arrangements for this, including the provision of dwelling places in Lower Nubia:

If you would do the kindness of sending a letter to the king, may God preserve his life, informing him of everything I have mentioned and my wish to come to his country, then please do so. Also obtain for me from him a letter from the king to the Master of the Horses /to you/ instructing that

he treats me and my sons well and treats me in the same way as my forefathers, and instruct you in the letter to provide me with a house in Ibrīm, a house in Adminna and a house in Erkinun, so that I can build them and I can live in whichever of these houses I wish together with my sons. (21r:21–26)

One should, however, be cautious about drawing conclusions about shifts of allegiance to the king from statements about service. In several letters, sent by men who seem otherwise to be loyal to the Fatimid ruler, the writers make statements such as the following:

As for what you have said with regard to the service of the king, we are all his servants and slaves of the crown (i.e., his subjects). (22r:4–5)

I am the servant of the king and his deputy. (9r:27–margin, 1)

The following passage in letter 9 indicates that the writer's service to the king, provision of supplies and commitment to the protection of the eparch's subjects has formed a close relationship between him and the eparch. Moreover, this closeness has come about "in the presence of the bishop:"<sup>14</sup>

Does not the Master of the Horses think that what brings me and you together close in the presence of (*bi-ḥuḍūr*) the bishop is that I provide him with provisions and I remain in the service of the king and the protection of your companions? (9r, margin, 11–v:1)

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<sup>14</sup> There were four bishoprics in Lower Nubia, including Qaṣr Ibrīm, Kourte, Faras and Sai (Łajtar and Derda 2019; Tsakos 2021, 10).

The phrase “in the presence of the bishop” gives the act of ‘coming close’ a legal sanction, just as a legal act is frequently stated in medieval Arabic legal documents to have been conducted in the presence of witnesses or of a judge. This procedure evidently formed the legal basis of the relationship between Muslim merchants and the Nubian authorities. The passage suggests that, as with legal contracts, the obligations were contracted between individual parties, rather than being based exclusively on a government-level pact, as is generally thought to have been the case with the government-level *baqt* of the earlier Islamic period.

One possibility is that the reference to the writer’s loyalty and service to the eparch and the king like a loyal Nubian subject reflects that the writer’s primary residence was in Nubia. This, however, is not necessarily the case. It could rather reflect a security measure imposed on the merchants. A further reflection of the loyal allegiance of the merchants to the Nubian authorities while operating in Nubia is seen in the following wording in letter 20:

May he (the Master of the Horses) not cease to allow me to act as his agent (*ʿināba ʿanhu*) in trade, to carry out his needs and for any service. (20r:12–margin, 1)

The implication of this is that the merchant is acting on behalf of the eparch. Again, this does not necessarily reflect that the merchant owed overall exclusive loyalty to the Nubian eparch, but rather that while operating in Nubia he had the status of being in service to the eparch.

Regarding ʿAbd Allāh ibn Zubayr’s request in 21 for houses in Nubia, this also does not necessarily reflect a shift in



allegiance. ‘Abd Allāh alludes to the fact that his family already had property in Nubia, from which they derived an income:

Our property (*ʿamlākunā*), from which we have a livelihood, is in their country. (21r:18)

We know from other sources that Muslims had acquired land in Nubia (see, for example, §3.5.4). Moreover, there is evidence that there was a mosque in Dongola in the Fatimid period and a Muslim funerary stela datable to the Fatimid period has been discovered there. This indicates that there was a Muslim community in the town already at this period (Seignobos 2016, I:70–75). The request of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Zubayr in 21 for houses in Nubia, therefore, should be seen in the light of this incipient Muslim settlement in Nubia. It is probably significant that the location of all the houses that ‘Abd Allāh specifies is in Lower Nubia, north of the second cataract, where other Muslim settlements were concentrated. The Nubian king made the boundary of the second cataract a constraint not only on mercantile travel but also on Muslim settlement.

A passage in letter 23 appears to be referring to the quashing of a rebellion by Nubians in Aswan against the Nubian king, which reflects loyalty to the king:

When they heard that the Nubians had rebelled against the king, he (the servant of the writer) killed them. (23r:7–8)

These passages evidently express loyalty and respect for the authority of the king rather than a shift of allegiance. Note also the title *al-ḥaḍra al-maḳdūma* (literally ‘the served presence’) in 16r:5, which seems to be referring to the king.

The following passage from letter 2 appears to be alluding to a Muslim commander's commitment to protect the land of the Nubian king:

The commander has written that he will arrive and he will give instructions for your sake and for the sake of the carrying out of your requests. He also mentions (the need) to safeguard the subjects and protect the merchants who are travelling to you from among the merchant community (and mentions) the country of the king and its guarding and protection. (2r:13–16)

In letter 21, 'Abd Allāh mentions three Nubian kings, viz. *باسيل* and *مويس*, داوود. The first two may be identified with the kings David and Moses George, whom scholars have identified from other Nubian sources as having their reigns in the twelfth century.<sup>15</sup> In some Nubian documents, Moses George is referred to by the single name Moses, as in, e.g., the Nubian letter P. QI III 31. The name Mūyis appears to be a variant form of the name Moses, corresponding perhaps to the attested forms of the name Mōēs and Mōēsēs.<sup>16</sup> In the Arabic document 1974\_V08\_24–24A, which is not included in the present corpus and is apparently a pen exercise, various addresses are written describing the eparch Īsū as the 'vizier of King Mūyis' (*wazīr al-malik Mūyis*).

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Kings>, accessed 1 March 2024. The reading of *مويس* as *مويس* and its identification with King Moses George was proposed by Robin Seignobos.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Names>, accessed 1 March 2024.

According to the extant Nubian sources, the chronological sequence of kings was David followed by his nephew Moses George. David's reign predated 1155, which is the date of the proclamation of King Moses George (P. QI III 30). The reference to a peace treaty (*ṣulḥ*) between the Fatimid ruler and the Nubian king David at a time of political turbulence and instability (21r:11–12) may be referring to a raid that is reported by al-Maqrīzī (*'Itti'āḡ al-Ḥunafā' bi-'Akbār al-'A'imma al-Fāṭimiyyīn al-Ḳulafā'*; Beshir 1975, 20) to have been made by the Nubian king in 501 AH/1107 AD and its aftermath. The ruler of Egypt at the period was the vizier al-'Afdal Ṣāhanṣāh:

And in it (this year) came the news that the King of the Nubians mobilised by land and water and decided to march against Upper Egypt. Al-'Afdal sent an army to Qūṣ and ordered the governor of Qūṣ to march himself to the borders of the country of the Nubians. But there came the news of the rising of the King's brother against him and his murder. The strife among them intensified until the members of the royal household were exterminated and a boy was installed in the monarchy. His mother sent begging al-'Afdal's forgiveness and asking him not to send against them someone to raid them. He 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.

Letter 21 suggests that the king Basil mentioned there preceded Moses George and David, since the king whom the grandfather of the writer visited was Basil, whereas the father of the writer and the writer himself visited Mūyis (Moses George). This

earlier Basil may have been a king of Alodia at Soba,<sup>17</sup> since the letter (21r:10–11) could be interpreted as referring to the visit to Basil by the writer's grandfather in Soba. At that period Alodia had not been united with Makuria (see below). There was, however, a king Basil on the throne of Makuria in 1089, which may have been the king that the writer's grandfather saw (Vantini 1981, 128; Welsby 2002, 89, 260). This Basil was succeeded by a king George in 1132, who in turn was succeeded by King David.<sup>18</sup>

The Nubian proclamation dated 22nd August 1155 issued by King Moses George (P. QI III 30) confirms that this king was on the throne at that time. The text states that it was written in the third month since he became king, succeeding his uncle King David, and he seems to have ruled until around 1190 (Ruffini 2012b, 247–48). The name of the eparch to whom 21 was sent is not specified in the address. Since the writer refers to his visits to King Moses George, it is likely that this was the king that was ruling at the time the letter was written. As we have seen (§3.2), the reign of Moses George appears to have overlapped with the term of office of the three eparchs mentioned elsewhere in the

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<sup>17</sup> This was the interpretation of Adams (2010, 252).

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Kings>, accessed 1 March 2024. According to Michałowski and Gerster (1967, 37), Basil was the grandfather of Moses George. It is not clear, however, what their source is for this. They mention it in connection to an inscription on a wall painting in the cathedral at Faras, but according to the latest interpretations of this, it does not contain a reference to Basil (Łajtar 2009, no. XIII; Jakobielski et al. 2017, 432).

corpus, Uruwī, Darmā and Īsū, so it is not possible to be certain about the identity of the eparch addressed in the letter.

In the description of the visits by the writer of **21** and his family to King Moses George (Mūyis), it is stated that in some cases the king was in Soba and in some cases he was in Dongola:

My cousin, the judge 'Abū al-Faḍl travelled to visit the king Mūyis as a messenger of the ruler to Soba. I myself travelled with my cousin when I was young to Soba to visit king Mūyis. I was received by him very well. My son, Hibat Allāh, travelled to the just king Mūyis, while he was in Dongola, and was received very well by him and he bestowed gifts of honour upon him. (**21r**:13–16)

Soba was the capital of the kingdom of Alodia ('Alwa), situated on the north bank of the Blue Nile, a few miles above its confluence with the White Nile. This passage suggests that at this period Makuria, Nobadia and Alodia were all united under King Moses George. The court of the king seems to have been itinerant between Dongola and Soba. This itinerant court of a Nubian king is alluded to also in letter **39** of the corpus, which was written by a merchant who had travelled to Soba:

If the king had come to us in Soba, we would not have stayed in the country more than a month or two months, but... we are with the merchandise that we have for the king and his army, but we have found that there is only little (business) in the land. (**39r**:8–11)

The implication is that the writer was expecting the king to come to Soba, but his travel had been delayed. So this also would be evidence of an itinerant court. Moreover, the Nubian eparch must have had the power to grant permission to Muslims to travel

to Alodia as well as to Makuria. It is possible that the king left Soba for Dongola in the rainy season between June and September, and so would have been expected to be back in Soba by the time the merchant wrote letter 39 on 10th Šawwāl 485 AH/13th November 1092 AD (the exact date is mentioned in the letter). The king may have followed the old ‘king’s road’ in the Bayuda, which in the Kushite period used to connect the towns of Meroe and Napata (Lohwasser 2013, 425–28).

This unification of the kingdoms is confirmed by some Nubian and Greek inscriptions that describe King Moses George as the ruler of Makuria and Alodia (Łajtar 2009; Van Gerven Oei 2011, 253–55; Jakobielski et al. 2017, 434). He is given this title also in an unpublished Coptic letter that was discovered at Qaṣr Ibrīm.<sup>19</sup> King George (d. 1157), the predecessor of King David, is described in a Nubian memorial inscription discovered in Wādī al-Naṭrūn as ascending to “the throne of the two dominions” on 28th June 1132 AD, the two dominions apparently being Makuria and Alodia (Van Gerven Oei 2011, 235–36). Adam Łajtar has informed me that he is aware of an unpublished Nubian document (74.1.30.6), which refers in its protocol to a ruler of Makuria and Alodia. Włodzimierz Godlewski discussed the unification of the kingdoms in several of his papers (e.g., Godlewski 2008; 2010). He speculates that this may have arisen through marriage alliances between the royal families of Makuria and Alodia.<sup>20</sup> This was the culmination of an increasing rapprochement

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<sup>19</sup> The English translation of this appears in Adams (1996, 227–29).

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to Adam Łajtar for drawing my attention to these references.

between the two kingdoms since the Arab invasion of Nubia in the seventh century. By the eighth century, Makuria had shifted from the Chalcedonian creed to the Coptic creed, in conformity with Alodia's church (Welsby 2002, 34–35). In the eighth and ninth centuries, there is evidence of Makurian influence on the architecture and pottery of Soba (Danys and Zielińska 2017, 182–83). Inter-marriage between the royal families of Makuria and Alodia had begun already in the tenth century (Welsby 2002, 89). By the middle of the twelfth century, Nubian sources refer to the Nubian state by the native term *Dotawo*, the earliest being the proclamation of Moses George (P. QI III 30) dated 22nd August 1155, where it refers to the united kingdoms of Makuria and Alodia (Łajtar 2009, 94; Ruffini 2016b, 550). In the early thirteenth century, the region of Alodia was overrun by raiders from the south called *Damādim* and Soba was destroyed (Gerhards forthcoming).

### 3.5.6. Trade

A passage in letter 24 indicates that the Muslim writers are dependent on the goodwill of the eparch's director of administration (*mutawallī*) without the latter putting capital into business transactions in a partnership (*qarīḍa*). The allusion seems to be to the dependence of the Muslim merchants on the authorisation of the eparch and his administrators to carry out trade:

His slaves [kiss the ground] before him and report to him that it has not been concealed from him that his slaves (i.e., the writers) were dependent on the administrative director in his presence without being in financial partnership. (24r:4–6)

Many letters mention commodities of trade. In most cases, these are items of trade between the Muslim writers and the eparch. As has been shown in §3.5.5 above, some letters refer to trading by Muslim merchants with the Nubian king, either directly or through the intermediary of a messenger.

Commodities that were delivered to the eparch by the Muslim merchants include herbs and spices, vinegar, clothes and textiles, furniture, containers, bitumen, military equipment and horses (see §8 for details). Archaeological finds in the region provide evidence of imports of pottery, including glazed wares, glass, textiles and paper (Adams 1996, 95–99; 2010, 69–72; Welsby 2002, 183–201; Edwards 2019, 969–70). The delivery of horses was in some cases clearly intended for military purposes. This applies, for example, to letter **22**, which refers to a complaint by the eparch that the supply of horses (*kayl*) for the Nubian army by the Fatimid authorities has stopped. In some cases, however, a horse was sent as a diplomatic gift to the eparch, e.g.,

I have sent you a mare of excellent quality (*farasan jay-yidatan*) from my horses (*kaylī*) for your personal benefit by the hand of my slave boy Yaḥyā. (22r:17–18)

In letter **7**, the writer tells the eparch that he has sent him a camel, apparently as a diplomatic gift rather than as an item of trade:

I have sent my slave boy (*ḡulām*), who is called Šarīf, with a brown camel to his honourable presence. I want you to receive it from me. (7r:3–5)

The most frequently mentioned items that were received by the Muslim merchants from the eparch are slaves. In the



medieval period, the Nubians retained control of the sourcing of dark-skinned slaves, most likely in the Upper Nile valley, Kordofan and Darfur, although they no longer controlled the sources of luxury items such as ivory and ebony, since access to these had retreated too far to the south (Ruffini 2019, 106).

The generic term for slaves that appears in the letters is *riqq* or *raqīq*. When a specific number of slaves is intended, these terms are often combined with the numerical classifier *ra's* 'head', e.g., *al-ra'sayn al-raqīq* 'the two (heads of) slaves' (4r, margin, 3; 9r, margin, 8–9), *al-ra's al-raqīq* 'the (head of) slave' (24r:7). In 25v:11, 'two slaves' are denoted by the phrase *al-ra'sayn* alone. Alternatively, the writers refer to specific slaves by the terms *waṣīf* (male) and *waṣīfa* (female), which designate slaves that were destined for domestic service (Goitein 1967, 131; Rāḡīb 2006, II:23–25). The letters also mention slave girls as items of trade, which are referred to by the term *jāriya*.

Letter 18, sent by the eparch Uruwī, refers to the delivery of wheat (*ḥabā'ib al-qamḥ*) to the merchants by the eparch. In letter 17, also sent by Uruwī, the eparch says that he has sent a lantern (*sirāj*) to the merchant for the merchant's mother.

Letter 9, referring to trade with the king, indicates that the Muslim merchant received, or expected to receive, horses and servant women and cash from the king:

I am owed by the king two horses. He has sent me two good-for-nothing, aged slave women (*jāriyatayn 'ajāyiz*) and six dinārs. (9r:25–26)

This passage indicates that the term *jāriya* did not necessarily always refer to young girls.

The range of goods received by the Muslims from the Nubians is considerably more restricted than the lists of commodities that are recorded by the historiographical sources. In addition to slaves, these latter sources refer to ivory, leopard skins, dates, ebony for furniture manufacture, spears, emery, alum, exotic live animals such as monkeys, lions, leopards, elephants and giraffes and especially cattle and camels (Beshir 1975; Spaulding 1995, 588).

It is significant that only small numbers of slaves and slave girls are mentioned in the correspondence. As discussed already (§2.5.4), these are best interpreted as diplomatic gifts. There is no evidence of the merchants being the agents of a mass delivery of slaves by the Nubians to the Fatimid authorities, such as the “three hundred and sixty head of slaves” that was required of the Nubians in the earlier *baqt* treaty. Furthermore, there is no mention of the *baqt* in the documents of the corpus.

The letters reflect a semi-monetary economy in Lower Nubia. The units of money mentioned include *dīnārs* and *dirhams*. Gold *dīnārs* constituted the standard money and silver *dirhams* were of lower value. A cash payment is referred to as *ḥaqq* ‘*ayn* (literally: ‘what is owed of cash’). For more details about coinage, see §6.

Terms of capacity and weight used in correspondence with the eparch include *raṭl* ‘litre’ (vinegar 15v:3), *ʾirdabb* (wheat 18r:5) and *ʾūqiya* ‘ounce’ (15v:3, 5).

Some letters indicate that the merchants sold the slaves that they received from the eparch for cash. The following passage from letter 9 indicates that the merchant sold a slave for cash in

order to purchase scented goods for the eparch. There was, therefore, an intermediate monetary transaction in the exchange of merchandise between the merchants and the eparch:

As for the purchase of the goods that you mentioned (in your letter), allocate the expenditure to the elder 'Abū al-Ṭāhir.... When your slave boy informed me that you needed the goods, I delivered him (the slave) to the broker and he auctioned him and acquired (the offer of) five *dīnārs*. I then went to your slave boy and consulted him concerning his sale and sold him for five *dīnārs*, on the grounds that there is nobody in the land and none of the people have anything. We have dealt with the orders for scented goods. (9r:5–12)

Letter 25 refers to the sale of a slave girl and two slaves:

The slave girl was inspected and the price paid for her was ten *dīnārs*, but they found that she was crippled and they returned her. I had offered her for sale to a woman for twelve *dīnārs* and seven *dirhams* in a private transaction. (25v:7–8)

As for the two slaves (*al-ra'sayn*) who are with them, they paid to me for them thirty-two *dīnārs*, for an equivalent exchange of thirty-six, each *dīnār* (having this exchange value). They have also paid more, at a rate of a *dīnār*, two and three. (25v:11–12)

The following terse statement by a Muslim merchant in letter 37 suggests that the merchant writers of the letters were also buyers of slaves in the markets in Aswan:

As for slaves (*al-raqīq*), there is nothing in Aswan. (37v:4–5)

The following passage from letter 4 suggests that the Muslims sometimes used slaves received from the eparch to pay debts in lieu of monetary payment:

Then I wrote to you concerning the condition of the two slaves who are to be sent to my creditor 'Abū al-Ḍubā', but you have not sent them to me and I do not know whether your servant has given us a share. (4r, margin-v:1)

There is evidence in the letters also of direct monetary transactions with the eparch. Letter 20, for example, refers to the receipt of cash from the eparch for the purchase of commodities:

His slave boy, Bišr, arrived on Wednesday as I was leaving for the land of Nubia. I found in it (the letter) that the Master of the Horses sent three dinārs. (20r:4–5)

These were presumably Egyptian dinār coins that were in circulation in Nubia rather than gold bullion.

In the following passage from letter 9, the writer instructs the eparch to assign the payment to another merchant:

As for the purchase of the goods that you mentioned (in your letter), allocate the expenditure (*al-nafaq*) to the elder 'Abū al-Ṭāhir. (9r:5–6)

The letters sometimes refer to the sending by the merchants of cash to the eparch, e.g.,

I have sent to you dirhams, two pieces in cash (*ḥaqq 'ayn qit'atayn*), two boxes, a leather bag and bitumen. (9v:19–20)

There is no reference, however, to the Muslims purchasing slaves from Nubia with money. Letter 24 refers to a slave (*raqiq*) that the eparch bestowed (*'an'amathu*) upon the writers. The

choice of the verb *'an'ama* 'to bestow' indicates that the Muslims did not purchase the slave for money, but rather the slaves were transferred to the Muslims as a diplomatic gift. As argued in §2.5.4, however, the gifts were based on the comparison of abstract values of a monetary standard established by a market economy. The fact that the writers complain that the slave was sick in the passage below indicates that the Muslim merchants treated the receipt of slaves as part of a reciprocal exchange of diplomatic gifts. Reciprocity would be impaired if the gift was defective in some way and of reduced monetary value:

They inform him that the slave (*al-ra's al-raḳīq*) whom he bestowed (*'an'amathu*) upon his slaves (*mamālīkihā*, i.e., the writers of this letter) through the agency of Bazilī was sick (*marīḍa* sg.f), and that his slaves (*mamālīkihā*, i.e., the writers) wanted to return her. (24r:6–8)

In letter 17, the eparch Uruwī says explicitly that he is sending a slave girl as payment for what is owed:

I have sent a slave girl (*jāriya*) with 'Ibrāhīm (as payment) for what is owed together with her two children. (17r:5–6)

The passage below, from letter 4, is further evidence for the practice of exchanging slaves from the eparch for goods supplied to the eparch by the Muslims:

I have taken note of it and the fact that he stated that he (the eparch) has sent to me a female slave, and has sent to me a slave girl with Jawhar (the name of a slave boy), and that I have only been able to send to him two turbans with difficulty and a seat. As for the first (i.e., the aforementioned) female slave, she has not reached me in his consignment so that I may take possession of her, my honour, Master of the Horses, and I shall not correspond with you

nor give you consignments of cloth as gifts until what you send is at my disposal. (4r:3–8)

The writer of letter 9 says that he bought aromatic herbs, spices, sugar and butter for the eparch from a market, since he was not able to find these commodities “in the land” at market prices. The term ‘the land’ without qualification seems to be used by the merchants to refer to Aswan and its environs. The ‘market’ referred to, therefore, is likely to have lain further afield:

We have dealt with the orders for scented goods. We did not find in the land anything of these that the merchants reckoned to be at market prices. Moreover we did not find the (sufficient) outlay for the goods. So, I sent your slave boy together with my messenger to the market (*al-sūq*) and he bought... (9r:11–14)

The writer of 15 states that he had to send to Qūṣ to buy commodities since they were not available locally (presumably in Aswan):

As for the situation of the trade consignment, since your honour requested it, when I reached the land, I asked about it, but did not find any of it. I did not want to neglect this and so I sent somebody to Qūṣ to buy it. (15r:9–12)

It is relevant to note that, from the late eleventh century, there was a decline in the importance of Aswan and a concomitant growth of Qūṣ as a garrison and centre of administration and trade (Garcin 1976, 79–84).

Letter 16 mentions the market of the cloth-merchants:

He has just written a letter saying that he cannot make it to the market of the cloth-merchants (*sūq al-bazzāzin*). (16v:3–4)

The merchants often used middlemen for the purchase of commodities for the eparch, as seen, for example, in the following passage from letter 20, which refers to the payment of commission to the middleman:

I asked on your behalf for bitumen (*zift*) to be bought for you before I left the land. I collected three dirhams commission (*ḥaqqan*) in order for him to buy for him (i.e., the Master of the Horses) the bitumen. (20r:4–6)

Letter 9 refers to the use of the services of a broker (*simsār*) by a merchant:

I delivered him (the slave) to the broker (*al-simsār*) and he auctioned him and acquired (the offer of) five dīnārs. (9r:8–9)

Prices of commodities were subject to inflation, as seen in this passage from letter 9:

If the goods become more expensive, we will not sell them to those taking refuge in the houses with the women due to the inflation. No goods remain in the market. The price of all the spices in the market that I have mentioned has doubled. (9r:19–22)

The writers of letters to the eparch refer in some cases to the trade in coins, involving varying exchange rates, e.g.,

Let them send to me in this final hour of mine these nineteen dīnārs and eight dirhams, at the rate of five for every dīnār. I have made inquiries about the exchange rate on my side and I found it to be seven, but I traded them at the better rate of six and a half. If I do not go ahead with this transaction, the exchange will be more, and you will lose due to a higher exchange rate. I have acquired gold dīnārs. I have sent at the time (of the transaction) a mail relating

to it with Yūsū as payment of the amount in coin. But there is nothing that would suit you. If there were anything at all, here or elsewhere, I would have sent it to you. However, cash is something that we cannot control (i.e., we have no control over its value) and we have not found an executive officer. (25r, margin-v:5)

In some cases, the writers apologise for not having ready cash (*ḥaqq ‘ayn*) to pay to the eparch and so they exchange other commodities, e.g.,

I ask forgiveness, since I have written this letter from Dendur. If I were in Aswan, I would have sent him cash, so that trusting friendship may accompany what this (letter) says, if God wills. (20v:1–2)

I have sent a piece of an Iraqi striped garment (*ṣuqqat burd ‘irāqī*) in lieu of a cash payment (*bi-rasm ḥaqq ‘ayn*). Please forgive me. (21r, margin, 1)

This indicates that a monetary transaction was expected in these circumstances, but coins were in short supply.

Although only very few coins datable to this period have been excavated by archaeologists in Nubia, there are ample references to coins and monetary payments in extant Nubian documents and accounts (Ruffini 2012b, 171–80; 2016a; 2019; see also Vorderstrasse 2012).

Letter 9, referring to trade with the king, indicates that the Muslim merchant received, or expected to receive, *dīnārs* from him:

I am owed by the king two horses. He has sent me two good-for-nothing, aged slave women (*jāriyatayn ‘ajāyiz*) and six *dīnārs*. (9r:25–26)



This appears to conflict with the following statement of al-ʿAswānī, who claims that Upper Nubia was demonetised (al-Maqrīzī, *Kiṭāṭ*, I:353; translation by Vantini 1975, 604):

Here (south of the second cataract) neither the *dinār*, nor the *dirham* are of any use because they do not use money in their transactions, except with the Muslims beyond the cataract. They do not buy or sell with money, but carry out their transactions by the exchange of slaves (*raqīq*), cattle, camels, iron tools and grains.

The passage in letter 9 is at the very least evidence that *dinārs* were in the possession of the king in Dongola. It is not clear whether they had the function of money for market exchanges or for diplomatic gifts of gold.

The standard means of transportation of goods by the merchants that is mentioned in the letters to the eparch is the river boat, referred to generically as *markab* (pl. *marākib*). The following passage from 25 shows that navigation of the river was impeded in the cold season due to the wind:

Cold will be upon me (soon) and I shall not be able (to carry out my business) and the Marīsī wind will not allow me to arrive. So, tell them to hurry up to carry out my requests and deliver the slave to me. (25r:14–15)

In general, sailing upstream to Nubia was difficult, as stated in letter 25:

You know that going downriver (to Aswan) is easy and going upriver (to Nubia) is difficult. (25v:6)

The Muslim merchants prefer to avoid travelling during the fast of Ramaḍān:

I have desisted from journeying to the king only in consideration of the fact that Ramaḍān is a difficult month and I am anxious about travelling on the road before breaking the fast. If God wills, I shall travel to the king after the festival. (13r, margin, 2–v:1)

### 3.5.7. Complaints

A number of letters express complaints to the eparch. Some of these relate to issues concerning trade. The writer of letter 4 complains about the lack of delivery of slaves:

As for the aforementioned female slave, she has not reached me in his consignment so that I may take possession of her, my honour, Master of the Horses, and I shall not correspond with you nor give you consignments of cloth as gifts until what you send is at my disposal. (4r:5–8)

Then I wrote to you concerning the condition of the two slaves (*al-raʿsayn al-raḳīq*) who are to be sent to my creditor ʿAbū al-Ḍubāʿ, but you have not sent them to me and I do not know whether your servant has given us a share. (4r, margin, 3–v:1)

The writer of letter 25 complains to the eparch that a Muslim ʿamīr has not fulfilled his requests relating to a slave, since he requires authorisation from the eparch. The writer requests the eparch to send the necessary authorising letter:

As for the commander (*al-ʿamīr*), I visited him one day and he said to me “We shall carry out your requests,” but I have not seen him again since and they do not allow me to visit him.... He said to me “When the letter comes from the Master of the Horses, I shall carry out your requests.”... Write your letter to the commander that this slave belongs

to the king and that he should bring it down (the river) so that the requests of the king be fulfilled out of respect. (25r:6–13)

In some cases the writer complains about the condition of the slaves that have been delivered, e.g.,

They inform him that the slave (*al-ra's al-raḡiq*) whom he bestowed upon his slaves (*mamālikihā*, i.e., the writers of this letter) through the agency of Bazilī was sick, and that his slaves (i.e., the writers) wanted to return her, but the messenger (*al-rasūl*) whom she accompanied became ill, and that the slave girl (*al-jāriya*) and her son, Rāhim, your slave boy (*ḡulāmaka*), were examined before purchase three times, and that she and her son have died. (24r:6–10)

The writer of letter 24 reports that the eparch's carrier has absconded and asks him to recover the goods that have been lost:

Your carrier has absconded. Please arrange for your command to be issued to some of your slaves to extract forcibly from him what is appropriate, God willing. (24v:5–7)

Some letters complain about the treatment of the writer's colleagues or servants in Nubia, e.g.,

Every year a large number of boats travel to your land and your colleagues badly mistreat them. This year the people from the port (of Aswan) were hindered in two ways. One of these is the injustice done to them by the people of the land and the other is the lack of produce.... I have sent two boats and everything in them is mine. I would like the Ikšīl to ensure that nobody obstructs them. (5r:4–8, margin, 1–3).

I wrote to you concerning the condition of my servants (*ʿabīd*) but you did not reply. (4r, margin, 2)

The writer of letter **9** complains to the eparch about the treatment of his servant at the court of the king and defective merchandise delivered by the king, it not being possible to complain to the king directly:

What I wish to inform the Ikšīl of is that my slave boy Kablām has arrived at the court of the king, but he (the king) has shown little gratitude for what I have undertaken for him. I am owed by the king two horses. He has sent me two good-for-nothing, aged slave women and six dīnārs.... my relationship with you has been spoiled since the king treats my slave boy in such a bad way. (9r:23–26, margin, 6–8)

### 3.5.8. Political Events

Some of the letters to eparchs mention political events. The clearest example of this is letter **6**, which reports the news of the killing of the vizier Šāwar by Šīrkūh. This took place in the year 564 AH/1169 AD, so the letter must have been written shortly after this:

As for the news, God has protected us from the evil of Šāwar and he has been killed by the hand of Šīrkūh, the military commander, may God protect him, and has taken on the viziership to bear the burden of evil that is to come. (6r:6–8)

The writers of letter **24** tell the eparch that the news they have heard about disturbances in the north (i.e., north of Nubia) has prevented them from coming to Nubia:

If it was not for the news we have heard from the north (*al-ʿaḳbār al-baḥriyya*) and the strife of the land, your slaves (i.e., the writers) would have made sure to present

ourselves before you to kiss the ground and to perform their obligations. (24v:1–3)

Letter 4 contains an obscure reference to the outcome of a battle:

The commander Treasure of the Dynasty (*Kanz al-Dawla*) arrived after victory, slaughter and God's victory. (4v:2–3)

### 3.6. The Structure of the Letters

#### 3.6.1. Opening

Many of the letters to eparchs open, after the *basmala*, with the verb اعلم *u'limu* 'I inform'. This takes as its object the eparch, who is referred to by his titles, and, after various blessings, is followed by the content of the report, e.g.,

اعلم الاكشيل وصاحب الخيل ووزير الملك... توجه القائد سعادة

'I inform the Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, vizier of the king... that the leader Sa'āda has set off.' (1r:2–3)

اعلم الاكشيل وصاحب الخيل ووزير الملك... انه يعلم ما وصل كتابه الى  
به في حال المسافرين من المراكب وغيرهم

'I inform the Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, vizier of the king... that his letter to me has referred to the condition of the travellers from the boats and of others.' (3r:2–4)

اعلم الاكشيل وصاحب الخيل ووزير الملك... ان متحملها صاحبي  
ومحسن تكرمتي اوه وهو خادمي

'I inform the Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, vizier of the king... that the bearer of this letter is my loyal and respectful companion, Oua, who is my servant.' (6r:2–4)

اعلم الاكشيل صاحب الخيل ووزير الملك متولى اعمال بلاد المريس...  
اننى سيرت ولدين من أولاد

'I inform the Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, vizier of the king, the governor of the districts of the land of al-Marīš,... that I sent two of my sons...' (21r:2-3)

اعلم الاكشيل ووزير الملك وصاحب الخيل... توجه موصل هذا الكتاب

'I inform the Ikšīl, vizier of the king, Master of the Horses... that the bearer of this letter has set off.' (2r:2-5)

[١] اعلم الاكشيل وصاحب الخيل... انه يعلم ان فى كل سنة...

'I inform the Ikšīl, Master of the Horses... that he knows that every year...' (5r:2-4)

اعلم صاحب الخيل [ووزير الملك]... وصولى الى ثغر اسوان حماه الله

'I inform the Master of the Horses [and vizier of the king]... of my arrival at the border of Aswan, may God protect it.' (19r:2-3)

In some letters, the titles of the eparch are preceded by an honorific term of address consisting of the word *ḥaḍra* 'presence'. After such openings, the eparch is generally referred to in the body of the letter by a 3sg.f pronoun, which agrees with *ḥaḍra*:

اعلم الحضرة السامية الاجلية الاكشيل وصاحب الخيل... توجه صهرى

'I inform the exalted and glorious presence, the Ikšīl and Master of the Horses... that my son-in-law has set off (to you).' (11r:2-3)

اعلم حضرة مولاي صاحب الخيل... وصول كتاب على يده غلامها ايس

'I inform the presence of my lord, the Master of the Horses... of the arrival of a letter by the hand of your slave boy Ipsi.' (16r:2)

In letter 14, the initial *u'limu* اعلم has been omitted by mistake:

<اعلم> حضرة مولای الاجل صاحب الخيل ووزير الملك... وصول  
متحملها الى بلاد النوبة

‘(I inform) the presence of my majestic lord, the Master of the Horses and vizier of the king... of the arrival of the bearer of this letter to the land of the Nubians.’ (14r:2–3)

The opening with *اعلم* is used also in 26, which is addressed to a deputy eparch:

اعلم البزيل النائب عن صاحب الخيل بقلعة ابريم... ان متحمل هذه السطور  
الرئيس

‘I inform al-Bazīl, the deputy of the Master of the Horses in the fortress of Ibrīm... that the bearer of these lines is the Head.’ (26r:2–4)

Letter 7 opens with the formula *معلماً له* ‘I have written... informing him’:

كتبت... معلماً له... انى قد وجهت غلامى يسمى شريف

‘I have written... informing him... that I have sent my slave boy, who is called Šarīf...’ (7r:2–4)

Several letters contain the obeisance formula ‘the slave kisses the ground’ in the opening:

عبد حضرة مولای الاكشيل ووزير الملك... المملوك يقبل الارض والذي  
يريد علمه ان

‘The slave of my honourable lord, the Ikšīl and vizier of the king... the slave kisses the ground and what he wishes him to know is that...’ (23r:2–4)

مملوك الحضرة السامية ال[ا]جلية الكريمة... يقبل الارض بين يديها وينهى اليها... الذى يريد علمه ان وصلنى كتابك وقراته وفهمت ما فيه

‘The slave of the lofty, most glorious and munificent presence... kisses the ground before him and reports to him... that what he wishes him to know is that your letter has arrived and I have read it and I have understood what is in it.’ (25r:2–5)

سبب اصدار هذه المناجاة... حضرة مولاي الاكشيل صاحب الخيل وزير الملك... مما ليكها [يقبلون الارض بين يديها وينهون اليها انها

‘The reason for sending this message,... my honourable lord, the Ikšīl, Master of the Horses, vizier of the king,... his slaves [kiss the ground] before him and report to him that...’ (24r:2–5)

Within the body of letter 24, the writers refer to the act of obeisance to the eparch by kissing the ground in a potential audience with the eparch:

If it was not for the news we have heard from the north (*al-ʿakbār al-baḥriyya*) and the strife of the land, your slaves (i.e., the writers) would have made sure to present ourselves before you to kiss the ground (معوّلين علي المثل بين ) (يديها لتقبيل الارض) and to perform their obligations. (24v:1–3)

Letter 27, which is written to the secretary of Uruwī, requests the secretary vicariously to kiss the hand of the eparch:

العبد يسئل حضرة مولاي الشيخ الاجل الكاتب... قبول يدى مولاي الاجل صاحب الخيل روى بن مولاي الاجل [ ]

‘The slave asks my honourable master, the sublime elder, the secretary,... to kiss the hands of my sublime master,



the Master of the Horses, (U)ruwī the son of my sublime master.’ (27r:2–3)

Letter 8 opens directly with the report of the departure of a colleague with the verb *tawajjaha*:

توجه... متحملها القائد حسن بن القائد شجاع الدولة اسحق متولى الباب

‘The bearer of this letter, the leader Ḥasan, the son of the leader Šujā‘ al-Dawla (‘the Courage of the State’) ‘Ishāq, the administrator of the gate, has set off (to you).’ (8r:1–4)

Some letters to eparchs open with the verb *waṣala* ‘to arrive’ in a phrase that reports the arrival of a letter from the addressee. This is also the opening of the letter sent by the eparch to the Muslim merchant ‘Abū al-Ṭāhir (17). The letters with these openings, therefore, are responses to letters:

وصل كتاب الاكشيل وصاحب الخيل... ووقفت عليه

‘The letter has arrived from the Ikšīl and the Master of the Horses... and I have taken note of it.’ (4r:2–3)

وصل كتاب صاحب الخيل ووزير الملك... وكتاب اخر الى الشيخ ابو الطاهر  
بن تريك

‘The letter of the Master of the Horses and vizier of the king... has arrived and another letter for the elder ‘Abū al-Ṭāhir ibn Tarīk.’ (9r:2–4)

وصل كتاب مولاي الاكشيل صاحب الخيل... ووقفت عليه وقوف مسرور  
بوروده مبهج بوفوده

‘The letter of my master the Ikšīl, Master of the Horses,... has arrived and I have read it, happy at its arrival and delighted at its delivery.’ (13r:2–4)

وصل كتاب صاحب الخيل ووزير الملك... ووقفت عليه وسررت بوصوله

‘The letter of the Master of the Horses and vizier of the king... has arrived, and I have taken note of it and am pleased with its arrival.’ (20r:2–3)

وصل كتاب حضرة مولاي صاحب الخيل... اما ما ذكرته عن

‘The letter of your honour, my lord, the Master of the Horses... has arrived. As for what you have said with regard to...’ (22r:2–4)

وصلتني كتب حضرة مولاي الاكشيل وزير الملك... ووقفت عليها واحطت  
علما بما لديها

‘The letters of my honourable lord the Ikšīl, vizier of the king... have reached me and I have read them and taken note of their contents.’ (15r:2–4)

This opening formula is found also in **17**, which was sent by the eparch Uruwī to the Muslim merchant ‘Abū al-Ṭāhir. The addressee is not given any honorifics:

وصل كتاب ولدي... وقراته وفهمت مضمونه

‘The letter of my son... has arrived and I have read it and noted its contents.’ (17r:2–3)

The title of the eparch is followed by a blessing that opens with the formula اطلال الله بقاءه ‘may God prolong his life’. A variant of this is found in **10**, in which the object of the verb is the title of the eparch:

اطال الله بقاء صاحب الخيل

‘May God prolong the life of the Master of the Horses.’  
(10r:2)

In openings in which the eparch is addressed by the honorific term *ḥadra* ‘presence’, the blessing contains a 3sg.f pronoun:

حضرة مولای صاحب الخیل اطل الله بقاها

‘the presence of my lord the Master of the Horses, may God prolong his life’ (22r:2)

حضرة مولای الاکشیل ووزیر الملك اطل الله بقاها

‘the presence of my lord, the Ikšīl, vizier of the king, may God prolong his life’ (23r:2)

Letter 7 is exceptional in having a 2nd person pronoun in the formula:

کتبت اطل الله بقاءک

‘I have written, may God prolong your life’ (7r:2)

The wish for the prolongation of life is followed by other blessings, which are more variable in form but typically open with the verb *وادام* ‘and may He (God) cause to endure’, e.g.,

وادام حراسته ونعمته

‘and cause his protection and wellbeing to endure’ (1r:3)

وادام عزه وهلك عدوه وضده

‘and cause to endure his strength, and cause his enemy and opponent to perish’ (2r:3–4)

وادام حراسته ونعمته

‘and cause to endure his protection and well-being’ (3r:3)

وادام عزه وکبت عدوه

‘and cause his power to endure and crush his enemy’ (4r:2–3)

وادام حراسته وسلامته ونعمته

‘and cause his protection, safety and wellbeing to endure’  
(5r:3)

وادام تاييده وحراسته وسلامته ونعمته

‘and cause his support, protection, safety and wellbeing to endure’ (6r:3)

وادام عزك ونعماك وتمكينك وكبت اعداك

‘and cause your strength, your wellbeing and your power to endure, and suppress your enemies’ (7r:2–3)

وادام تاييده وسعادته وسلامته ونعمته

‘and cause his support, happiness, safety and wellbeing to endure’ (8r:3)

Letter 7 has 2nd person pronouns:

وادام عزك ونعماك وتمكينك وكبت اعداك

‘and cause your strength, your wellbeing and your power to endure, and suppress your enemies’ (7r:2–3)

The formula opening with اعلم ‘I inform’ in the present tense and the obeisance formula المملوك يقبل الارض ‘the slave kisses the ground’, or variants thereof, are strategies of the writer to express that he is in the virtual presence of the addressee. Such formulas, which present the writer as having a virtual audience before the addressee, are a feature of petitions and other documents addressed to the Fatimid rulers (Khan 2008, 893–95). The obeisance formula was introduced into petitions during the reign of al-ʿĀmir (495–524 AH/1101–1130 AD). It is not found in petitions to earlier Fatimid caliphs (Khan 1990, 24–26). The introduction of the formula at the time of al-ʿĀmir appears to reflect a development

in Fatimid court ceremonial protocol in his reign, whereby the custom of kissing the ground in the presence of the caliph was reintroduced after having been discontinued for some time. This is alluded to in the chronicle of the vizier Ibn al-Ma'mūn al-Baṭā'iḥī (Fu'ād Sayyid 1983, 21):

اجتمع امرا الدولة لتقبيل الارض بين يدي الخليفة الامر على العادة التي قررها  
مستجدة

'The *'amīrs* of the state gathered to kiss the ground before the caliph al-ʿĀmir according to the custom that he had re-established.'

There are, however, some differences from documents addressed to Fatimid rulers. Petitions and documents addressed to Fatimid rulers do not use the verb اعلم in their openings. Furthermore, blessings opening with the formula اطل الله بقاءه are not used in documents addressed to Fatimid rulers. It is, however, used in letters addressed to Fatimid dignitaries below the rank of ruler (Khan 1993a, 310), e.g., T-S 28.8 (ALAD 98, two petitions to Fatimid judges) and T-S Ar.4.10 (ALAD 97, a petition to a Fatimid dignitary). Absent from the blessings is the verb خَلَّدَ 'may He make eternal', which is a distinctive feature of the blessings on Fatimid viziers, who became the *de facto* rulers in the late Fatimid period (Khan 1993a, 308–9), e.g., خلد الله تعالى ملك المجلس 'may God, the exalted, make eternal the rule of the lofty seat' (T-S Ar.39.391, ALAD 82, petition to the vizier Ibn al-Sallār)

The openings of letters to the eparch, therefore, exhibit some characteristics of letters to Fatimid dignitaries and rulers.

It is worth noting that contemporary Nubian letters often open with the expression of obeisance ‘I pay homage to you’ as if the writer were in a virtual audience (Ruffini 2016a), indicating that the Arabic formulas of obeisance would be what was expected in Nubian society.

Some of the letters do not present the address to the recipient as a virtual audience in the spatio-temporal situation of the addressee, but rather open the letter with a verb in the *qatala* form, which is idiomatically translated by an English present perfect, e.g., وصل ‘has arrived’, توجه ‘has set off’. The deixis of such verbs is not to a virtual audience before the addressee, but rather to the spatio-temporal situation of the writer. They thus express physical separation from the addressee. This is a characteristic of most letters that are not addressed to the eparch in the corpus (§4.6.1).

### 3.6.2. Closure

The letters to and from the eparch typically close with formulaic expressions of politeness, including the following.

#### 3.6.2.1. Offer of Service in Return for a Request

So may his (the Ikšīl’s) letter be dispatched to me with (instructions) for me to execute (a service) for his sake, for I am ready to execute that for him. I am grateful to him for this, if God wills, the Mighty and Magnificent. (1r:8–1, margin, 1)

If you have any need, write to me concerning it, if God, the Mighty and Glorious, wills. (5v:2)

If you have any need, write to me and let me know about it, if God, the Exalted and Majestic, wills it. (6r, margin, 1–2)

So, may the Ikšil (send) a letter and do not omit to ask me in it to carry out his needs. (8r:14)

Is the Ikšil not in need of something? Let him give instruction for it to be carried out and I would be grateful (for the opportunity to do the service), if God, the Mighty and Magnificent, wills. Praise be to God alone. (10r, margin, 1–5)

Whatever needs your illustrious honour has, I am committed to carrying out your needs and obeying your instruction. (16v:1–2)

Whatever request you have, write to me, and I shall carry it out and perform my duty, whether it be small or large. (20r:11–12)

Whatever need you have, you would please me by allowing me to carry it out. (22r:18–margin, 1)

### 3.6.2.2. Request for the Sending of News

Send me your news. (9v:21)

Do not delay sending letters to me about your news. (16r:16)

Your slave (i.e., the writer) kisses your hand and legs, and warmly welcomes a letter from your honour. (18r:12–13, letter from Uruwī)

I request that he writes—for which I would be most grateful—concerning his news and his situation. I would be glad of that and delighted, if God wills. (19r:7–8)

### 3.6.2.3. Sending of Greetings

I send to you warmest greetings and also to those within your care greetings.' (7r:9–10)

I send the honourable Master of the Horses the warmest greetings, the purest love and respect, wishes for future good, if God wills. (15v:5–7)

### 3.6.2.4. Closure Formulas

Such expressions of politeness are then generally followed by various formulaic elements. These include:

- (i) The *ḥamdala* (الحمد لله وحده 'praise be to God alone')
- (ii) Blessings on the Prophet Muḥammad (with slight variations), e.g.,

وصلواته على سيدنا محمد نبيه واله وسلام

'and His (God's) blessings be upon our Lord Muḥammad, His prophet, and his family, and peace' (2r, margin, 1)

وصلواته على سيدنا محمد نبينا وسلامه

'and His blessings on our Lord Muḥammad, our prophet, and His peace' (4v:6)

وصلواته على سيدنا محمد نبيه وسلامه

'and His blessings on our Lord Muḥammad, his prophet, and His peace' (5v:3–4)

وصلواته على محمد ومن خلفه وصحبه وسلم تسليمًا وسلامه

'and His blessings be upon Muḥammad, those who succeeded him and companions, and may He save (them), and His peace' (19r:9)



- (iii) The *ḥasbala* (حسبنا الله ونعم الوكيل) ‘Our sufficiency is God. What a fine keeper is He!’). This is omitted in **26** (letter to al-Bazīl, the deputy of the eparch Darmā).

### 3.6.3. Postscripts

Several letters contain postscript notes after the formulaic closure, e.g., 2v:1–8; 4v:7–8 (separated from text above by a check mark); 16v:3–4; 17v:1–4; 24v, margin, 1–2.

