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# Arabic Documents from Medieval Nubia

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## 11. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION REFLECTED BY THE DOCUMENTS

Here I shall bring together various strands in the foregoing descriptions of the contents of the documents with the purpose of summarising what the corpus reflects with regard to the society and economy of Lower Nubia.

There is some confirmation in the corpus of the description given by al-'Aswānī of an open trade zone for Muslim merchants in Lower Nubia between the first and second cataracts. This applies especially to document **45**, which indicates that Muslim traders were not permitted to navigate in their hired boat beyond the second cataract. One should be cautious, however, of comparing this zone in Lower Nubia with the 'port of trade' in Dahomey described by Polanyi (1966), as several historians of Nubia have done, without qualification.

The phenomenon of the Dahomey port of trade has a generic parallel with the open trade zone of Lower Nubia. The corpus, however, indicates that the boundary between Egypt and Lower Nubia was more porous on various levels than the Polanyi model would suggest. Rather, this boundary appears not to have been a sharp transition from one political entity to the next, but rather a gradual interpenetration of the adjoining communities on the social, economic, linguistic and indeed political levels. This, in fact, was typical for boundaries in the medieval Islamic world (Hourani 1992, 145; Brauer 1995, 13).

We have seen that the documents reflect the settlement of Nubians in Upper Egypt and the settlement of Muslims in Lower Nubia. Nubians were in the service of Muslim merchants operating in Nubia, reflected in particular by the Nubian names of the merchants' slaves. The legal document 47 refers to a Nubian *mawlā* 'freedman, client' of a prominent Muslim judge, who appears to have been based in Aswan.

Muslims, moreover, appear to have worked in the service of the eparch in Qaṣr Ibrīm. One clear example is the secretary (*kātib*) of the eparch Uruwī, who, according to letter 27, had the Muslim Arabic name 'Ubayd Allāh 'Alī.

Document 44 refers to a Nubian resident in Lower Nubia who served as a Fatimid military officer with an estate (*'iqṭā'*) in Upper Egypt.

As we have discussed, however, in various places above, there was not a clear binary division between service and allegiance to the representatives of the Muslim government, on the one hand, and service and allegiance to the Nubian eparch and king, on the other. Rather, Muslims operating in Nubia appear to have served and owed allegiance to both the Muslim and the Nubian authorities. In addition to the evidence for this that has been cited already, this situation seems to be reflected by passages such as the following:

As for the slaves of the Master of the Horses (*'abīd ṣāhib al-kayl*), please take care of them and provide them with their needs. (16r:10–11)

Here a Muslim merchant is asking the eparch to protect people who are apparently in the merchant's service, but they are

simultaneously described as the ‘slaves of the Master of the Horses’.

Another case that can only be understood on the assumption that there was dual allegiance is that of the Nubian called Merki whose activities are described in 23. As far as can be established from the letter, Merki is working with the Muslim writer of the letter to supply the eparch with military equipment but he has also taken upon himself the responsibility of operating as an agent of the Nubian authorities in the suppression of a rebellion.

This dual allegiance is likely to have applied also to the Nubian Fatimid military officer mentioned in 44. He had an *‘iqṭāʿ* in Upper Egypt, near the border with Nubia, but originated from a village in Lower Nubia. The fact that the document was found in Qaṣr Ibrīm suggests, moreover, that he was resident in Nubia. The Shiʿite Fatimid dynasty appointed Christian Nubians to important positions in the Fatimid court and army (Vantini 1981, 129–30; Lev 1987; Zouache 2019; Tsakos 2021, 18). This is likely because the régime felt vulnerable within the population of Egypt, the majority of the Muslims of which were Sunni (den Heijer et al. 2015, 334). They also needed new alliances to counterbalance the traditionally Sunni régimes of the Middle East.

Some of the Muslims working for the eparch may have been converts. Although the name of the eparch Uruwī’s secretary, ‘Ubayd Allāh ‘Alī, suggests that he was a Muslim, the letters issued by Uruwī (17 and 18), which were presumably written by this secretary, are carelessly written with many oddities in the Arabic. It appears that the writer did not have a good knowledge

of Arabic nor was he schooled in epistolary style that was used by educated Muslims in the Fatimid period (see §12.4). This correlates with the statement of al-'Aswānī that the Muslim residents in Lower Nubia that he met during his travels did not speak good Arabic (al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāṭ*, I:352). The Muslim settlers in Nubia evidently underwent a cultural and linguistic assimilation to the environment in which they lived.

There was economic integration between Egypt and Nubia through the extension of the Egyptian monetary system into Nubia (Ruffini 2019). There are references in the corpus to the use of money in transactions and, in some cases, in gift exchanges (§6).

Document **46** recto records a legal partnership between Kanzī Muslims, at least one of whom was a resident of Lower Nubia, and a Nubian woman in the ownership of landed property in Lower Nubia. It is not clear where the document was drawn up, but the fact that it was discovered in Qaṣr Ibrīm suggest that the parties were resident in Nubia. The document on the verso of **46** records the purchase of property in Lower Nubia by a Kanzī resident of Lower Nubia. The dossier of documents relating to the marital affairs of the Christian Nubian Maryam ibnat Yuḥannis (**49–53**) shows that her marriages with Nubian men were administered legally in Muslim courts in Upper Egypt. The documents, however, were found in Qaṣr Ibrīm, suggesting that, at least in later life, she was a resident of Nubia. This juridical administration of Christian Nubian affairs by Muslim courts is reminiscent of the way Jews made contracts of various kinds in Muslim courts in medieval Fuṣṭāṭ, as we see in the Genizah documents (Khan

1993a). One of the motivations for Jews to carry out their legal affairs in Muslim courts was to strengthen the legal force of their cases. We know that in some circumstances they used both Muslim and Jewish courts for double security. There may have been a similar motivation for the Nubian Maryam to apply to Muslim courts. The same applies to the drawing up by a Muslim notary of the documents in **46** relating to property, including a partnership between Muslims and a Nubian. All this reflects a merger rather than a sharp separation of Muslim and Nubian spheres of juridical authority.

It is significant that some of the witnesses of the Arabic document of sale **46** verso have Nubian names. In order to avoid exposing documents drawn up by Muslim notaries to the danger of invalidation due to the rejection of the suitability of the witnesses, the institution of a permanent body of professional accredited witnesses (*ʿudūl*) arose in Islamic law. The suitability of these witnesses was verified by a Muslim judge and their testimonies and depositions could not be rejected.<sup>1</sup> It is not clear, however, whether this requirement was strictly applied outside the main urban centres. Medieval Arabic legal documents from peripheral areas were often witnessed by men with non-Muslim names. One clear case of this is the Khurasan corpus of documents (Khan 2007), many of which mention witnesses with local Iranian names. Some of these Iranian witnesses, moreover, appear also in the contemporary corpus of Bactrian documents from the region.

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<sup>1</sup> This institution was established in Egypt in 174 AH/790 AD by the *qāḍī* Ibn Fuḍāla (al-Kindī, *Kitāb al-Wulāh*, 386, 612).

The question arises, therefore, whether the Nubian witnesses in **46** verso had been accredited as *‘udūl* by a Muslim judge. One possibility is that the Arabic document was drawn up in Nubia by a Muslim notary and local Nubians who would have been in principle acceptable as witnesses of Nubian documents were called to witness it. This would be a further case of the integration of Muslim and Nubian juridical practice.

The Nubian partner in **46** is a woman, Pāpāy, the daughter of Ampātā. Numerous medieval Arabic documents written in Egypt record the purchase of property by women, e.g., APEL 56 (Edfū 239 AH/854 AD), in which a woman buys a house from her husband. The Arabic Papyrology Database contains many more examples. There are many references in the Genizah documents to women owning property, usually as a secure source of income from rent (Goitein 1983, 85). Several extant Nubian documents record land sales in which one or more parties are women (Ruffini 2012b, 61, 77, 125, 236, 237).

At the end of letter **17** (r:13) sent by the eparch Uruwī, there is a note that conveys greetings to the addressee from Uruwī's 'two wives'. If my reading and interpretation are correct, then this indicates that Uruwī practiced polygamy, which was a Muslim practice but was not, as far as I am aware, customary in Nubia. Perhaps this is a reflection of convergence of Nubian and Muslim legal practice.

Document **30** alludes to a business partnership between Muslims and Nubians:

I have brought into partnership with him my wife and my slave boy, Ramaḍān and Rāšid, the mariner, who is with



him and those of the Nubians [ ] upon them the greeting of Ja‘far. (30r, margin, 6–9)

Several of the letters of the corpus reflect an economic crisis that affected Lower Nubia. Allusions to this are found in the letters of the Kanzī merchant Lāmi‘ ibn Ḥasan, e.g.,

The lofty, most glorious and munificent presence, may God establish his happiness, has graciously released the boats, in the knowledge of what the country is undergoing with regard to the rising of prices, for the travellers have experienced hardship and (the prices) have risen to the disadvantage of the merchants, so that they have acquired goods at high prices. (3r:5–8)

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. So, I took some hair-cutters (and opened sacks of produce) and gave relief to the people and the first of them were the people in your land. If it was not for me, they (i.e., our people) would not have found produce, nor did anybody dare send (produce). (5r:5–11)

The lack of produce this year has not been concealed from you and the condition of the people. No ship would have been sent this year, had I not opened the store and sold to the people of your land. (36r:6–8)

I then went to your slave boy and consulted him concerning his sale and sold him for five *dinārs*, on the grounds that there is nobody in the land and none of the people have anything. (9r:9–11)

Lāmi‘ ibn Ḥasan and the other merchants of the corpus were writing in the late Fatimid period, which was characterised by economic hardship. As we have seen, the economic weakness

is reflected by the severe debasement of coinage at this period, which is attested in some letters (§6).

One cause of this was the political instability arising from power struggles of Egyptian viziers and the threat of invasion by the Crusaders and external Muslim forces. Political instability impacted also on Upper Egypt. Al-Maqrīzī, for example, reports in his *ʿIttiʿāz al-Ḥunafāʾ* that in the year 556 AH/1161 AD “The King of the Nubians marched against Aswan in twelve thousand horsemen and massacred a great multitude of Muslims” (Beshir 1975, 21).

Such instability in the region is alluded to in letter **24**:

If it was not for the news we have heard from the north 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)

Another cause was the incidence of recurrent famines due to the impact on agriculture of excessively high or excessively low Nile floods at this period (Hassan 2007). When the Nile flood was sub-optimal, famines could occur because of predictions of a bad harvest in the next year, which created a buyers’ market and drove the prices of grain up beyond the reach of many (Lev 2013).

Famines could be relieved by government intervention and the control of government grain stores, if well-managed (Shoshan 1981; Lev 2013). In the citations from letters **5** and **36** above, Lāmiʿ ibn Ḥasan states that he responded to shortages in grain experienced by people in the land of the eparch by opening grain stores. Letter **3** alludes to the release of boats to ameliorate

economic hardship. So, both the Kanzī Lāmi<sup>c</sup> ibn al-Ḥasan and the eparch assumed responsibility for relieving grain shortages in Lower Nubia. There are several extant Nubian documents containing disbursement orders of grain issued by the eparch (e.g., P. QI II 23, P. QI III 49, P. QI IV 94), which were apparently from public stores or the eparch's personal store (Adams 1996, 226–27). The passages cited above from our corpus indicate that the supply of grain to Lower Nubia was also administered by the Banū al-Kanz, reflecting shared responsibilities of economic administration in this region of Nubia.

The corpus also shows that there was not a hard boundary for Muslims at the second cataract. According to al-ʿAṣwānī, this could be passed with authorisation of the eparch as far as Maqs al-ʿAḷā and travel beyond this required permission from the king (al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāṭ*, I:353). Several letters refer to the travel of Muslims or their slaves to the king's court in Dongola or to Soba. In such cases the main purpose of the visits appears to be the supply of military equipment for the Nubian army or for diplomatic missions. Moreover, there is evidence of a Muslim community in Dongola and Soba in the Fatimid period (§1, §4.3). This reflects another level of integration of Egypt and Nubia.

