

REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EGYPT AND NUBA DURING EARLY MAMLUK PERIOD

Kamaruzaman Yusoff

Contact between the Muslims and the Nubians had begun as early as the first century A.H. when 'Amr b. al-'As sent Nafi' b. 'Abd al-Qays al-Fihri to occupy Nuba in 21/641-2.¹ In 25/646-7, more troops were sent to Nuba under the leadership of 'Abdallah b. Sa'd b. Abi Sarah 'Uthman's governor in Egypt. A treaty which regulated relations in respect of security and trade was drawn up between the Muslims and the Nubians in 31/652.² It was from this time that the so-called *baqt* (tribute) was introduced as a tribute paid from time to time by the Nubian Christians to the Muslims rulers.

Baqt differed from other tributes. The Nubians had to send slaves together with other gifts to the Muslims.³ This fulfilled the needs of the Arabs for slaves and *baqt* therefore became one the most important source of obtaining slaves especially from Nuba. On the other hand, the Muslims were also obliged to send wheat and other grains as well as textiles to Nuba.⁴

Thereafter, the Nubians, who were Christians, continued to send tribute to the Muslim rulers in Egypt albeit reluctantly. Towards the close of the Umayyad period, however, they revolted against their Muslim neighbour in Egypt.⁵ Except for a few odd occasions, however, relations between the Nubians and the succeeding Islamic dynasties, the Tulunids (254-92/868-905), the Ikhshidids (323-58/935-69) and the Fatimids (297-567/909-1171) had been generally serene. This was probably the result of a recognition on the part of the Christian leaders of the requirement send regular gifts and slaves to the other party.

When the last Fatimid caliph was overthrown by the Ayyubids in 567/1171, the Nubians began to show signs of the aggression. This resulted in retaliations on the part of the Ayyubids and the occupation of Nuba by al-Malik al-Salih's son, Turan Shah in 568/1172.⁶ His army seized Ibrim, the capital of the kingdom of al-Maris.⁷ Later on, the Ayyubids left Nuba unattended as they were preoccupied with the internal conflict in Aswan.

In Mamluk times, Nuba consisted of three major kingdoms: al-Maris, al-Muqurra and 'Alwa.⁸ Al-Maris with its capital Ibrim

lay in the northern most part of Nuba. In the centre was the kingdom of al-Muqurra with its capital Duncula. Further south lay 'Alwa, with its capital, Suba.

Relations between the Mamluks and the Nubians began in the time of Baybars when in 667/1268, King Dawud of Nuba sent mission to Cairo. Accordingly, Baybars ordered the former to present him with the *baqt*. For all that, the sultan busied himself with other problems and was quite unconcerned with the affairs of Nuba. It was perhaps owing to this that King Dawud ignored Baybars' demand for *baqt*.⁹ In 671/1272, the king infringed the mutual understanding for peace with Baybars when he killed a number of Muslim merchants during his raid against Aydhab, a port on the coast of the Red Sea.¹⁰

In 674/1275, another Nubian prince, Shankanda sought Baybars' help to overthrow King Dawud. This opportunity was taken up by Baybars who wished to retaliate against King Dawud's imprudence by sending his army to Duncula.¹¹ As a result, Shankanda gained the throne and he later signed a truce with the sultan.¹² The principal terms of the treaty were firstly that Shankanda had to send half of the Nubians' revenues to the sultan every year together with other gifts.¹³ Secondly, Baybars was given the power to govern al-Maris, the northern part of Nuba.¹⁴ At the same time, Baybars sent two assassins to act as watch-dogs over the new ruler of Nuba. In the rest of Nubian territory the indigenous princelings had a more or less free hand.¹⁵

During the first year of Qalawun's reign (678/1279), Shankanda was killed by one of the assassins and Barak, another prince, gained power in al-Muqurra.¹⁶ Later, he showed signs of wishing to break free from Qalawun's rule. Consequently, the Sultan despatched Sanjar al-Mansuri to overthrow Barak. In his place, Shamamun, another Nubian prince, was given the mandate to rule Nuba¹⁷ on condition that he sent *baqt* to Cairo annually.

In Ramadan 685/October 1286, King Adur of 'Alwa, the ruler in the south of Nuba, sent a mission to Qalawun with gifts such as elephants and giraffes. He also complained about the King of Duncula's hostility towards the Mamluk representative. When Shamamun was notified of his visit he too sent gifts to Cairo to pacify Qalawun. Accordingly, in the same year, two ambassadors, 'Ilm al-Din Sanjar and 'Ilm al-Din al-Husni, were sent to Abwab and Duncula respectively to look after the affairs of the two states.¹⁸ After completing his investigation, Sanjar was captured by Shamamun on his way back to Egypt. 'Ilm al-Din al-Husni return-

ed safely to Cairo and brought back evidence of Shamamun's undesirable conduct.¹⁹

Qalawun inflicted reprisals on Shamamun by sending an army from Cairo and Qus as well as tribesmen from Upper Egypt, namely Banu Abu Bakr, Banu Sharif, Banu Shayban and others,²⁰ to lay siege to Dunqula. This army was divided into two groups. Aydamur led the soldiers on the east bank of the Nile, whereas on the other side, the troops were under the leadership of 'Ilm al-Din Sanjar al-Khayyat. As expected, Shamamun was outnumbered by the Mamluk contingents and he fled to the south.

When Qalawun was notified of this success, a nephew of King Dawud, Sa'd al-Din, a newly converted Muslim, was sent to assist the Egyptian ambassador in Dunqula. Once the latter reached Qus, he chose to remain there instead of going to Dunqula.²¹ Presumably Sa'd, who knew Shamamun well, was terrified of the possibility that Shamamun would reappear and inflict punishment on him for supporting the sultan. The throne of Dunqula was then filled by Shamamun's nephew and a treaty was signed by him and Qalawun. This treaty is recorded by al-Qalqashandi in his *Subh al-A'sha*²² The newly elected leader swore in the name of God, the Bible and the Virgin Mary. In addition, the king is also promised to send one half of the country's income to Egypt. He also had to collect a poll-tax of one dinar from every adult in his country to give to the sultan. In conclusion, he was prepared to receive any punishment from God if he broke his oath. Aydamur was instructed to remain in Dunqula whereas the rest of the army journeyed home bearing a large amount of booty.²³ In the same year, shortly after his defeat, however, Shamamun reappeared in Dunqula, routed the Mamluk garrison and reinstated himself on the throne. The leader of the garrison and the Nubian king fled to Cairo and informed the sultan of the incident.

Three years later, in Shawwal 688/October 1289²⁴ the Egyptian army once again raided Nuba. The army was again divided into two groups, each following the two banks of the River Nile. However, when the Mamluks reached Dunqula, the Mamluk sources relate that the capital was devoid of people except for an old man who told them that Shamamun had fled far from Dunqula.²⁵ The Egyptian army gave chase and upon reaching Shamamun's hideout, they ordered him to surrender but the latter refused to back down. As a result, he was fiercely attacked and took flight. The Egyptian army met with hardly any opposition. The victors entered Dunqula and crowned Prince Budamma as the new ruler. Budamma took an oath of allegiance and promised fealty to the sultan. Except for

a Mamluk garrison, the rest of the army returned to Cairo. Rukn al-Din Baybars al-'Izzi was left in command of the army in Dunqula. According to Qalawun's biographer, Ibn 'Abd al-Zahir, the Egyptian troops in this expedition had penetrated into areas where no Muslim army had previously entered.²⁶

No sooner had the Muslim troops left than Shamamun once again made an appearance in Dunqula. A similar fate befell Budamma when he was overcome by Shamamun. This time, the shrewd man changed his tactics by sending a letter to Qalawun promising to pay a larger amount of tribute to the sultan.²⁷ However, Qalawun was intent on attending to more pressing matters in Syria with the advancing Crusaders and he was also aware of Shamamun's unreliable attitude and promises. For this reason he ignored the latter's request to be his vassal. This gave Shamamun the opportunity to remain in power in Nuba.

All in all, Qalawun failed to instal his representative and establish a permanent presence in Nuba. Although he succeeded in defeating the local leader in his two great expeditions,²⁸ his army was forced to leave Nuba and Prince Shamamun was able to reestablish himself on the throne, where he stayed until the end of Qalawun's reign and beyond.

One might wonder why the Muslims in general and the Mamluks in particular were so keen to occupy Nuba. It was probably for commercial reasons that the Muslims penetrated into Nuba, although politically it was also an added advantage to conquer this territory. Since early times, Nuba had been renowned as a source of slaves. As already mentioned, periodically the Nubian leaders send *baqt* to the Muslim leaders in Egypt in the form of slaves. These slaves were used as domestic servants, labourers and custodians of families and they were also acquired to be recruited into military service. Slaves could also be bought from the slave market in Muslim towns. It was said that Muslim merchants stole Nubian children and sold them as slaves. The slave trade which brought slaves from Nuba and expanded to the rest of the Muslim world existed up to the early tenth/sixteenth century.²⁹

Apart from the slaves who were acquired through tribute and the slave trade, there were also those who were captured by the Mamluks during their expeditions. Ibn al-Furat mentions that in 687/1288, Sanjar al-Mansuri and his troops entered Cairo. They captured one of the leaders of Nuba and his slaves. The sultan distributed the slaves and a number of them were sold at cheap prices.³⁰

Secondly, there were gold and emeralds in Nuba which attracted

the Muslims, especially those from Egypt and encouraged them to encroach further south. These mining activities had begun as early as in the third/ninth century. There is a certain amount of evidence which indicates that there were large numbers of Arabs working in this "Land of Mines" in 240/854.³¹

The presence of natural harbours on this African coast facing the Red Sea was also a contributory factor which attracted the Egyptians. To control Nuba would mean that they would have access to international trade routes. The famous ports in Nuba were Badi, Aydhab and Sawakin.³² These ports were under the control of Arab merchants. In Badi, the merchants were usually engaged in exchanging combs and perfumes for Ethiopian ivory tusks, ostrich eggs and other products.³³ Aydhab, which linked Egypt and the east was famous for its trade in gold.³⁴ Sawakin, on the other hand, emerged as an important port after the fall of Badi in the sixth/twelfth century.

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

NOTES

¹ Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam, *Kitab Futuh Misr wa akhbariha*, Leiden, 1920, p. 173.

² From then onwards, the Nubians started to send slave as their tribute. Cf. *Ibid*, pp. 169-70, 174; Sir E.A. Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia*, London, 1928, vol. I, p. 103.

³ EI (2), art: "Bakt", vol. I, p. 966.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ Yusof Fadl Hasan, *The Arabs and the Sudan*, Edinburgh, 1967, p. 29.

⁶ Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kamil fi'l Tarikh*, Beirut, 1979, vol. XI, p. 386; see also William Y. Adams, *Nuba: Corridor to Africa*, London, 1977, p. 456.

⁷ Ibn al-Athir, *op. cit.*, vol. XI, p. 387; see also Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

⁸ Al-Mas'udi, *Muruj al-Dhahab*, Beirut, 1404/1984, vol. I, p. 289; Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁹ Hasan *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, see also Qutb al-Din Abu' l Fath Musa b. Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Yunini, *Dhail Mir'at al-Zaman*, Hyderabad, 1380/1960. vol. III, p. 2; Ibn al-Dawadari, *Kanz al-Durar wa Jami' al-Ghurur*, Cairo, 1391/1971. vol. VIII, p. 167; Ibn 'Abd al-Zahir *al-Raud al-Zahir fi Sirat al-Malik al-Zahir*, Riyad,

1396/1976. p. 416 (henceforth called *al-Raud*); Ibn Shaddad, *Tarikh al-Malik al-Zahir*, Wiesbaden, 1983. pp. 52-3, 129.

¹¹Ibn 'Abd al-Zahir, *Tashrif al-Ayyam wa'l 'Usur fi Sirat al-Malik al-Mansur*, p. 154 (henceforth called *Tashrif*); see also Ibn al-Furat, *Tarikh Ibn al-Furat*, Beirut, 1966, vol. VII, p. 45.

¹²Ibn al-Furat, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, pp. 45-6; see also al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-Suluk li Ma'rifat Duwal al-Muluk*, Beirut, n.d. vol. I, p. 973; see also Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹³Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 109; see also al-Maqrizi, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 973; see also Ibn Shaddad, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹⁴al-Maqrizi, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 974, Ibn Shaddad states that at this point al-Muqurra became one of the sultan's provinces. Cf. Ibn Shaddad, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

¹⁵EI(2), art: "Bakt", vol. I, p. 966.

¹⁶*Tashrif*, p. 154.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, see also Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

¹⁸Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 112; see also Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-'Ibar wa'l Diwan al-Mubtada' wa'l Khabar*, Bulaq, n.d. vol. V, pp. 400-1; see also A.J. Arkell, *A History of the Sudan*, London, 1961, p. 198.

¹⁹Sa'ad 'Abd al-Fattah 'Ashur, *al-'Asr al-Mamaliki fi Misr wa'l Sham*, Cairo, 1964, p. 84.

²⁰al-Maqrizi, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 737; see also Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 113; Ibn Khaldun, *op. cit.*, p. 401; Budge, *op. cit.*, vol. VIII, p. 52; Baybars al-Mansuri, *Zubdat al-Fikra fi Tarikh al-Hijra*, British Library, MS Add. 23325. fol. 161b.

²¹al-Maqrizi, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 743; see also Ibn al-Furat, *op. cit.*, vol. VIII, p. 67.

²²al-Qalqashandi, *Subh al-A'Sha fi Sina'at al-Insha'*, Cairo, n.d. vol. XIII, pp. 290-1.

²³al-Maqrizi, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 743; see also Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 113; Ibn Khaldun, *op. cit.*, vol. VI, p. 401; Ibn al-Furat, *op. cit.*, vol. VIII, pp. 53, 67.

²⁴al-Maqrizi, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 743, 749; see also Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 114; Budge, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 106; Ibn al-Furat, *op. cit.*, vol. VIII, p. 83.

²⁵al-Maqrizi, *op. cit.* vol. I, p. 750; see also 'Ashur, *op. cit.*, p. 88; Ibn al-Furat, *op. cit.*, vol. VIII, pp. 83-4.

²⁶*Tashrif*, p. 155; see also Ibn al-Furat, *op. cit.*, vol. VIII, p. 92.

²⁷Hasan, *op. cit.* p. 114; see also P.M. Holt, *The Ages of the Crusades: The Near East from the Eleventh Century to 1517*, Singapore, 1986. p. 134; Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 527.

²⁸Holt, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

²⁹Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 44; see also Ivan Hrbek "Egypt, Nuba and the Eastern Deserts", in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, ed. Roland Oliver, Cambridge, 1977, vol. III, p. 70.

³⁰Ibn al-Furat, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 69.

³¹Al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-Rusul wa'l Muluk*, Leiden, 1879-90. vol. III, p. 1429;

see also Ibn Hawqal, *Kitab Surat al-Ard*, (ed. J.H. Kramers), Leiden, 1938-9, p. 53.

³²J.W. Crowfoot, "Some Red Sea ports in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan" in *Geographical Journal*, London, 1911, vol. XXXVIII, pp. 528-9.

³³Yaqut al-Hamawi, *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, Leipzig, 1866-70, vol. I, p. 147; see also Ivan Hrbek, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 70.

³⁴Al-Ya'qubi, *Kitab al-Buldan*, Leiden, 1891, p. 335; Ivan Hrbek, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 72.