

# **Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads**

GUDRUN DAHL

*Stockholm University, Sweden*

&

ANDERS HJORT-AF-ORNAS

*Linköping University, Sweden*

## **ABSTRACT**

The Beja, or Bedawiye, people speaking the Northern Cushitic language called “Bedawiet”, have literally since “time immemorial” occupied the Eastern deserts of Sudan, Egypt and possibly Eritrea. They today consist of the subgroups Ababda, Bishariin, Atmaan/Amar’ar, Hadendowa and sections of the Beni Amer. These subgroups are relatively loosely integrated confederations of endogamous lineages based on assumptions of shared descent and cohabitation in an ancestral territory. In this hot and arid land, where there is little evidence of large-scale climatic change the last 2500 years, they have eked out a livelihood presumably originally as hunters of wild game and gatherers of wild grain, later as herders of small stock in the drier areas and of cattle in the delta lands, combining pastoralism with some take-a-chance cultivation. Some centuries after Christ they also acquired camels and became mounted brigands, guides and sycasin relation to the caravan trade. The present paper is an attempt to trace what can be said about the way larger context of empires, trade routes and security impinged on their lives in pre-colonial times.

*Keywords: climatic change, Beja, pastoralism, caravan trade, Eastern deserts*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Beja, or Bedawiye, people speaking the Northern Cushitic language called “Bedawiet”, have literally since “time immemorial” occupied the Eastern deserts of Sudan, Egypt and possibly Eritrea. They today consist of the subgroups Ababda, Bishariin, Atmaan/Amar’ar, Hadendowa and sections of the Beni Amer. These subgroups are relatively loosely integrated confederations of endogamous lineages based on assumptions of shared descent and cohabitation in an ancestral territory. In this hot and arid land, where there is little evidence of large-scale climatic change the last 2500 years, they have eked out a livelihood presumably originally as hunters of wild game and gatherers of wild grain, later as herders of small stock in the drier areas and of cattle in the delta lands, combining pastoralism with some take-a-chance cultivation. Some centuries after Christ they also acquired camels and became mounted brigands, guides and sycasin relation to the caravan trade. The present paper is an attempt to trace what can be said about the way larger context of empires, trade routes and security impinged on their lives in pre-colonial times.

There are many reasons why the history of the Beja is difficult to capture. Firstly, they never were a political unit, and hardly even an “imagined community”. Local history relates mainly to the level of the lineage, which represents a striking degree of collective and corporate identification. Stories are thus not joined into any major unified narrative. Some stories are hitched to the above-named lineage confederations but the nature of Beja society is one of fission, fragmentation and feuding and consequently also of reformulation even in relation to the most important form of local history, which relates to ancestry. Secondly, a premium is put on information control, not the least against strangers. Travellers through the desert have been thoroughly dependent on Beja guidance and hospitality. The latter however have age-old strategies of sealing off external contacts. They constrain the access guests have to the Beja community with the help of the role of the hospitable, semi-urban specialist mediator. Few visitors over the years have been able to (or been interested in) sorting out the finer distinctions the Beja make among themselves. Thirdly, in many sources the category Beja is used for a wider number of people than the pastoral Bedawiet-speakers proper. The concept is expanded in the direction of the Eritrean border, where Khasa and Beni Amer have often been included. Fourthly, similar to what is the case with many other nomadic groups, the buildings, tools and utensils of the herding Beja household is light-weight, and materially ephemeral in the perspective of history. They do not leave many traces for the archaeologists.

Beja have been and are still depicted in popular, external representations as an extremely archaic and conservative society. The sources however do not actually say much about if and how the Beja society has changed internally during the millennia. To think of them as isolated, one would nevertheless have to rewrite the sources. For, in distinction to other African peoples, the Beja lived in the periphery of successive centres with literate traditions, but close enough for them to be mentioned over and over again over the millennia, even if in deplorable lack of detail. Their land, situated between the Red Sea and the Nile valley, provided a tempting door to riches of slaves and ivory further inland in Africa – and also had its own attractions, notably gold. Because of that, we have to acknowledge their position at the crossroads of history rather than as totally unconnected. The centres to which they were peripherally tied, however, changed, and their land was of varying interest to these successive centres, depending on changes in geopolitical structures spatially and temporally out of reach for local consideration. The available sources are rarely interested in them for their own sake, so tracing their history involves correlating what is mentioned en-passant by texts focussing on the surrounding kingdoms and major trade routes. The Beja nonetheless must have been affected by the waxing and waning of empires and by the redirection of trade routes<sup>1</sup>. It is not easy to

---

<sup>1</sup> One can surmise that this was also the case for people further into the African interior, in the traditional slave-supplying areas, but there identifiable references to particular groups are even more scanty

say whether these changes were for better or worse for the Beja pastoralists. Certainly different needs for defence against the slave trade and against the pillaging of herds and people, varying access to prestigious goods and opportunities for booty, and changing demands for desert and seashore produce must have left their traces on local forms of organization. Such conditions would reflect the larger regional contexts into which the Beja were inscribed during different periods. The present paper is thus concerned with what we can ascertain about the framework within which the Beja were situated, with the modest hope to at least raise some intelligent questions.

## 2. BEJA LANDS IN ANTIQUITY

Beja lands span the region between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea shore. Both are areas that have brought more interest to them than the Beja area itself, being located in outskirts from both viewpoints. We have to consider the conditions first to the west, then to the east of the latter.

Very roughly around 1000 BC a group of people, referred to in the archaeological texts as the "C-group", migrated from Lower Nubia (the area between present-day Aswan and Wadi Halfa) and settled in Upper Nubia (the Nile Valley north of Dongola in Sudan) where they developed the kingdom of Napata from about 750 BC. For some time this kingdom controlled Egypt too, supplying its 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Contemporary with them are the archaeological remains of another cultural group, "the pan-grave people". They have been suggested to have a likely direct link to the Beja of later periods, and been identified with the Medjayu of written sources (Bietak 1986: 17 f). Sites related to them have been found at Khor Arba'at and Erkowit in the heartland of present-day Beja (Arkell 1955: 78). The evidence suggests that only a minority of "the pan-grave people" lived in the Nile Valley, where they existed in small enclave communities among the Egyptians and C-group populations, being periodically used as desert scouts, warriors or mine workers (Bietak, *ibid.*) The majority were probably desert nomads, breeding donkeys, sheep and goats.

After 600 BC, the Napatan, C-group dynasty lost control over Egypt as well as the then rather desolate Lower Nubia. The latter area subsequently remained more or less without permanent settlements for four centuries. The main explanation offered by science for the hiatus of sedentary population from Lower Nubia has been a drying up of this part of the world (*ibid.*: 18–19), making river valley agriculture difficult. Due to climatic change, the level of the Nile had been lowered to a degree which could only be compensated for at the time of Christ, when the *sagia* waterwheel was developed (Carlsson and Van Gerven 1979: 55). Until then, the area was only sparsely populated by desert nomads. Politically, it was "a sort of no-man's land where caravans, unless they were provided with considerable escort, were delivered to brigands" (Török 1986: 15).

Antique references to brigands in these areas usually talk about the Noubadae and the Blemmye. The latter category, to which later several Roman texts refer, have been regarded as identical with the Beja. They were first mentioned in an inscription describing a raid undertaken at the time of King Anlamani (623–593 BC) (Stela Copenhagen NGC (1709) quoted by Wenig 1978: 81). In this raid, Blemmye women, children and cattle, but no men, had been captured.

What were then the conditions at the eastern side of the Beja area, the Red Sea shore? The Beja coast is characterized by several alternative small natural harbours. When the first Greek sources mention them, Egyptian, Himyarite and Sabaeen traders in spices and myrrh had already used them for many generations, sailing during monsoon time between Egypt and the Indian Ocean. The Red Sea however has strong northerly winds and dangerous reefs that make it difficult to sail. Because of this, external influences on the Beja coast were probably not very strong between 900 and 300 BC. It was better to transport goods by camel through the Arabian desert than by boat (Doe 1971: 13). The opportunities for the competing Phoenician, Egyptian and Greek powers to expand trade beyond the Red Sea were limited both by their navigational skills and by their naval technology. The small flat-bottomed vessels had to creep along the western (“Beja”) shore of the Red Sea in order to avoid storms, dangerous currents and pirates. However, the Ptolemies maintained a series of hunting stations and exports along the Southern Beja coast just below the Baraka delta, in order to procure African elephants and for ascending to Gezira and Kassala hunting for some inland products such as ivory, slaves and tortoise shells. Around year 0, the Greek and Roman merchants learnt to understand the monsoon winds. Progress in Arabian ship-building techniques developed the *sambuk* boat which was better suited to Indian Ocean conditions than what earlier crafts had been. These improvements in knowledge and technology increased the importance of the Red Sea link from north to south. Earlier sea traffic had either crossed the sea or been confined to keeping very close to the western shore (op.cit.: 54 f).

The Roman trade with the Orient boomed during the first two centuries AD. The ultimate reason for this was located elsewhere, in Mesopotamia where the Parthians had blocked the Spice Route from Europe to the Orient. Some small harbours on the Beja coast profited from these far-away insecure conditions, and were used as stop-over stations. The Romans however do not seem to have maintained any particular interest in the local resources available on the present Sudanese coast (Crowfoot 1911: 526). The author of the Periplus, for example, mentions one of the old hunting stations, Ptolemais, as the only harbour between Berenice (at the latitude of Aswan) and Adulis (close to present-day Asmara). Ptolemais was suitably situated for ascending towards the Kassala area, Gezira and Kordofan through Langeb and Baraka khors. Although the place must have already been a trading post in its own right in Ptolemaic times, the “Periplus” mentions that only tortoise shells and ivory in small quantities could be found there. At Adulis, however, a much brisker trade took place, exchanging African

goods for luxuries from India, Syria, Egypt and even Italy, to benefit the Ethiopian rulers. This trade would later form one of the bases for the rise of the Axum kingdom (ibid: 527, Doe 1971: 54 f.)

Even when the Mediterranean colonizers no longer were interested in goods from the southern Beja coast, Ptolemais was still a stop over port. Despite technological improvements, it was not possible to use the same kind of boat in the Red Sea as was used in the Indian Ocean. Hence, the cargo had to be reloaded in Aden. A pause was still necessary on the route to the destinal port at the northern end of the Red Sea, where the goods again were reloaded on camels and brought to the Mediterranean. For the latter purpose Tor, a port on the southern tip of Sinai, was one alternative. The loads could also be taken to Berenice and transferred by desert routes up to the Nile, a manoeuvre made advantageous by the difficulties of Red Sea navigation (East 1935: 26).

During the period when lower Nubia was in the hands of Rome, trade routes were also established in Upper Egypt between the Nile and the Red Sea, passing through what is now the northern end of Beja territory, the present-day habitat of the Mahmedab and Ashabab Ababda. To the Roman colonizers, the Blemmyes/Beja were a real problem. Repeated raiding is recorded between 250 and 297 AD. “They had developed from peaceful pastoralists into raiders and predators when they adopted the use of the camel” (Säve-Söderbergh 1979: OBS), something which is assumed to have happened about 200 AD. The Roman garrison was forced to evacuate its positions several times, until they finally had to completely abandon the area south of Aswan to the Blemmyes and Nobadae (Hassan 1967: 10).

The sources consistently differentiate the Nobadae and the Blemmyes from each other. The identity of the latter has not been discussed as much as that of the Nobadae, which is somewhat uncertain but generally taken to be “Nubian”. Nevertheless, it is possible that the category “Blemmye” was in itself no simple category. If Reinisch (1895: 47) was right in deriving the word from balami – desert dweller – the category might have included an ethnic mixture and not only Bedawiye proper.

In inland Sudan, the Meroeitic kingdom, Napata’s successor, gradually reoccupied the desolate Lower Nubia in the period between 200 BC and 250 AD (Adams 1977: 379 ff, Török 1986: 26–7). They were an important partner for the Red Sea traders. Their power was based on the Egyptian trade with Sudan, which followed the Nile route and relied on transport by donkeys and human carriers (Amin 1968: 36). In time, this centralized Meroeitic subordination of upper Nubia was put out of balance as a result of economic decline in Egypt, caused by the exorbitant taxes in corn that the latter country had to pay to Rome in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD Egypt (See Arkell 1955). When Egypt recovered, during the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, the basic conditions of the Red Sea trade had been undermined. The Roman trade boom through the Red Sea was also over. Again, these changes can be related to the conditions further east. Around the Spice Route, political conditions had stabilised as a result of the overthrow of the

Parthians by the Persian Sassanids<sup>2</sup>. With the restoration of peaceful conditions on the Spice Route, the Sudanese harbours with which Meroe traded also declined. Like many of the original elephant ports established by the Ptolemies, Berenice and Ptolemais fell into disuse. The Blemmye raiders worried the Meroites as they had worried the Romans. They have even been suggested as the real cause of the collapse of the Meroe kingdom. Török (1986: 51), however, emphasizes that the intensification of Blemmye raids in Nubia came later than the Meroe decline. At the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, they carried out raids even as far away as Sinai (Desanges 1978) and controlled part of the Nile Valley south of Elephantine route as well as the emerald mines in the desert.

A contributing factor to the changes in Sudanese power structures might also have been the before-mentioned introduction of the camel to Africa. It had made trade less confined to the Nile, bringing it right into the Beja desert areas, creating a demand for service in the form of camel care and supply, water provision and guidance (Dahl and Hjort 1991: 18). Because trade depended upon the shifting conditions, different parts of the Beja country became involved in the traffic at different times. Four general routes developed, whose exact delineation however varied somewhat over the centuries:

1. The Ababda-Bishariin route from Abu Hamad on the Nile via Murrat wells and Korosko towards Asswan
2. The Suakin-Ariaab- Berber route (in time dominated by Amar´ar)
3. The Tokar-Baraka-Kassala route alternatively Agig-Khor Langeb-Baraka, (in Hadendowa regions)
4. The southern Egyptian route from Aydhab to Qus (*ibid*: 20)

### 3. THE ERA OF CHRISTIAN NUBIA

There are few records of events in Upper Nubia during the centuries after Meroe´s decline. It is clear however, that there was a gradual development of three minor Christian Kingdoms, which were to remain as power-centres of waxing and waning influence for many centuries to come: Nobatia (later Al-Maris), Makuria (Al-Muqurra) and Alodia (Alwa). Olympiodoros, who came to Syene (Aswan) in 420 AD, was taken to its emerald mines with the explicit permission of the Nobatian king. These mines were situated in the present Beja areas, and he was brought there by the “spiritual and worldly leaders of the Blemmyes” (Kraus 1930: 21–2, quoting Olympiodor 1829: 465–66). At this time, these desert dwellers and the Nobadae were allied (Kirwan 1937: 53). In a text dating from the early 6<sup>th</sup> century, however, the king of Nobatia prides himself on having driven Blemmyes out from his country northwards from Ibrim to Shellal on the frontier with Roman Egypt (*op.cit.*: 54).

---

<sup>2</sup> For the economic and political revival of Iran during the rule of the Sassanids, see Christensen (1936) and Herrman (1977).

The Christian kingdom of Makuria was orthodox, while Nobatia and Alodia practiced Coptic monophysism. Nobatia, having its capital at Bajrash (Faras) just north of the present Egyptian/Sudanese border, contained a mixed population of “Nobadae” and “Blemmyes”.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century Justinianus, the Byzantine emperor, strove to encourage Egyptian traders to by-pass Arabia and to trade directly with India by the Red Sea Route (Vantini 1975: 121, quoting Bishop Agapius, Vantini 1981: 60). Byzans supported an Abyssinian invasion of southern Arabia, where the impact of the decline of the camel-borne spice trade had resulted in poverty, depopulation and mismanagement of old dam and irrigation works (Doe 1971: 59).

In 616, the Persians invaded Byzans, occupying Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Egypt as far as to its Nubian border. When in 638, the Arabs occupied Egypt, Nubian and Abyssinian contacts with Byzans were cut off. The Greek Governor is then said to have asked the Beja and Nubian “kings” for assistance, but due to conflicts between themselves, the latter failed to provide any help (Vantini 1975: 48 quoting Al-Waqidi, c.a. 790 AD). Thirteen years later, the Arabs sent an expeditionary force towards Dongola in Nubia. This attack had limited success in so far as it neither led to a definite defeat of the people in the area, nor to a permanent extension of Muslim lands south of Aswan (Holt and Daly, 1979: 15). From this time on, nevertheless, our sources for the Beja are mainly Arabic. They refer to the population of the Eastern Desert as “Beja”. The category may be more inclusive than our Bedawiet category. Writing about Beja in the Nubian context, Waqidi is likely to have been concerned with “true” Beja, i.e. people speaking tu-Bedawiye. As mentioned before, there existed in Nubia three Christian kingdoms: Nobatia, Makuria and Alodia. The status of the Beja “kingdom” referred to by Al-Waqidi is unclear, both in terms of its actual political character and of its religion<sup>3</sup>.

Nubia remained Christian for six hundred years, but in terms of political dominance, the Arabs soon asserted their rights to tribute. Up to the Ayyubid period (ca 1167–1250) the inhabitants had to pay tribute in black slaves to Arab Egypt under the terms of the “**baqt**” treaties, a duty against which they tried to revolt at regular intervals.

#### 4. THE BEJA IN EARLY ARAB TIMES

The accounts given by the Arab invaders about their relations with the Beja are the best sources for Beja history available. This section seeks to establish what can be said about Beja society on the basis of such sources. On its way home, the expedition that the Arabs sent to Nubia in 641 AD came across a group of

---

<sup>3</sup> Newbold 1935: 150 refers, without proper source annotations, to an old Amar’ar myth that at this time a Beja king, Mekshi, lived at Atbara. He took an army of elephants and horses to stem the Muslim advance, but was defeated and killed at Dongola. His son converted to Islam and made a treaty with the invaders.

Beja at the Nile. They did not take the trouble to engage in battle against them (Vantini 1975: 59). Later however, they subdued and nominally converted some Beja at Aswan (Hassan 1967: 31 quoting Ibn Al-Hakam 1920: 180 and Ibn Hawqal 1938: 5152, Vantini 1975: 59). Zaborski, who provides a good critical summary of Arab medieval writers, notes “For nearly 200 following years, the contacts between the Arabs and the Beja were limited to the frontier disputes caused by Beja raids against the settled population of Egypt, but the usual exchange of produce between the Beja nomads and Egyptian agriculturalists was peacefully conducted as well” (1965: 291). It was suggested in a first treaty with the Arabs – dating from the early 700s – that the Beja should supply 300 young camels yearly (Hassan, loc.cit.). The systematic breeding of camels must thus have been well established at that time. By the same treaty the Beja agreed to fines to be paid when individual Beja stole sheep or cattle, and they promised not to harbour slaves who had run away from Muslim owners and not to enter Upper Egypt except as merchants. The extent to which such an agreement would be representative of a larger contingent of Beja is difficult to ascertain. A similar treaty of 831 (Vantini 1975: 625–7, 1981: 92, after Maqrizi 1922) followed upon two decades of very intense raiding against Nubian towns. It rendered the Beja liable to payment of **zakaat**, Muslim charity taxes, and guaranteed the protection of mosques built at H.j.r. and S.n.j.a. The former place has not been identified with any certainty (but see Crawford 1951: 104–106 and Zaborski 1965: 291–2 for suggestions and discussion.) The latter location is probably Wadi Ceija at long.34°10′, lat.22°31′ (Kheir 1982: 296) a place described by Linant (1884) as a great mining centre. Vantini (1981: 92), Hassan (1973: 40) and Zaborski (1965) have all read this information to mean that at this time (831 AD), at least some Beja had come under the influence of Islam.

The treaty of 831 repeats several of the points made in the other treaty mentioned above, but also gives the chief of the Aswan Beja, Kannun bin abd-al-Aziz the nominal status of the caliph’s tributary king for all of the area between Aswan and the Dahlak islands off the Eritrean coast (Hassan 1967: 39 ff). This is an enormous area probably not feasible to realistically control in any particular efficient way, as is apparent if it is compared to the territories of present-day Beja tribal federations such as Hadendowa or the Bishariin. In 946 the gold and emerald mines in Wadi Allaqi which had been used by the Egyptians in Pharaonic and Ptolemaic times were rediscovered by the Arabs. The Beja made some initial resistance against the exploitation of these mines (Hassan 1967: 50 quoting Macrizi 1922 III: 260 along with Tabari 1879–90 III 1429–31 and Ibn Hawqal 1938: 53). A military expedition was sent against them in which an apparently not yet converted chief “Ali Baba” was captured (Baladhuri 1932: 234, Taghribirdi in Vantini 1975: 728–31 and Hawqal 1938: 53)<sup>4</sup>. One can note that to contemporary Beja, the moving of stones on the

---

<sup>4</sup> Newbold 1935: 150 refers, without proper source annotations, to an old Amar’ar myth that at this time a Beja king, Mekshi, lived at Atbara. He took an army of elephants and horses to

ground is seen as a symbolic challenge to property claims, and thus a grave insult.

The discovery of the mines led to a veritable gold-rush, attracting members of several Arabic groups from Hejaz and Al-Yamama, such as the Rabia, Mudar and Yaman. After harsh competition between the Arabs themselves, and armed conflicts between the Arabs and the Nubians of Makuria, al-Muqurra, (Hassan 1967: 51–6, Holt and Daly 1979: 16–17) the Rabia gained control over the mine region, partly through the manipulation of marital alliances with the Beja. Though dominated by the Arabs, the working of mines actually operated more or less independently of Arab administration in Egypt (See esp. Hassan 1967: 40–1, 50–63). Although the most important period of the Arab mining seems to have been the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, some mines continued to be exploited up to the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, by which time however most had fallen into disuse (*op. cit.* 58). During this time, Beja and Arab families intermingled. Many Sudanese Arabs have **nisbas** (written family trees) which begin with Beja names (Kheir 1982: 375) Bishar bin Marwan, who in the mid 10<sup>th</sup> century was the Rabia chief, married the sister of the two Beja chiefs Abdak and Kuwk, according to Ibn Hawqal (qu. by Hassan 1967: 59)<sup>5</sup>. One might ask how Beja-Arab ethnic relations articulated with the productive relations involved in mining. The Beja were probably better acquainted with the terrain, and had protective social networks in the area. Therefore, it is probably not so likely that the mines depended on them as subordinate workers, as the escape of such workers with the precious product would be a hazard to count on. It would be more likely perhaps that the labour for the mines consisted of slaves from other regions, parallel to the situation in the 1980's when the mines at Khor Arba'at were manned by migratory labour from other parts of Sudan, who would easily be lost in the terrain if they moved independently.

The little we know of the territorial and inter-ethnic organisation of the Medieval Beja has been distilled from a number of Arab writers who wrote in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, notably Yacubi, Awami and Ibn Hawqal. They offer descriptions of more southerly “Beja areas” than those referred to in for example the Roman descriptions of disturbances and Blemmye raids. It is apparent from the records that the notion “Beja” was now used by the Arabs as a term also covering Tigre-speakers (the Khasa) and para-Nilotic groups such as the Baria and the Kunama<sup>6</sup> in Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea (Crawford 1951: 106, see also Marquart 1913: 315 and Zaborski 1965). Still, certain facts can be deduced from the material.

---

stem the Muslim advance, but was defeated and killed at Dongola. His son converted to Islam and made a treaty with the invaders.

<sup>5</sup> Sandars (1933: 124) suggests that the name may be a corruption of the Beja name Olbab. “Ali Baba” was brought to the caliph in Baghdad, where he was treated as a tributary king. The sources give different versions as to whether or not he was actually a king (Holt and Daly 1979: 17, Hassan 1967: 51, Vantini 1981: 94)

<sup>6</sup> The Baria live north of Gash and the Kunama in the Barentu area between Setit and Gash

Yacubi, who relied for his description on hearsay, wrote some time between 872 and 891 (Newbold 1935: 149, Vantini 1981: 96). He gives a short description of five Beja “kingdoms”, which may of course not have been kingdoms at all in any highly elaborated sense. Judging from their names and how he describes them they refer only partly to Bedawiet areas. Scepticism concerning these “kingdoms” was shown by Crawford as early as 1951, but other later authors such as Darar (1965: 57) and Shaaban (1970) have taken them more seriously. One name which appears to refer unambiguously both the ethnic Beja and to the present Beja land is that of N.q.y.s. This kingdom extended from the limit of Muslim rule at Aswan to Khor Baraka, and had its capital at H.j.r (Hajar) 25 “marhalas “ from Wadi Allaqi. It comprised the district of the gold and emerald mines, and its population lived in peace with the Muslim mine-workers. They were divided into several branches, **butun** (Ar.)<sup>7</sup>. Hawqal visited the area between 945 and 950 (Vantini 1981: 96). He too mentioned some groups who appear to have been Bedawiet speakers. The most obvious cases are H.n.d.y.ba and among the subcategories of the Hadarab, names such as Arteiga, al S.w.t.badowa , al-H.w.t.ma, Hadendowa/hadandiwa and al-n.rendowa. Another unit is comprised by al-J.n.y.tika, al-Wah.tika and Gerib. The reason why we can safely assume these groups to be Beja proper is that they have obvious similarities to the names of Beja groups today (such as Arteiga, Hadarab, Hadendowa or Gerib) or that their names end with “end-dowa”, meaning tribe, or “tika” meaning men in Tu-Bedawiye (Zaborski 1965: 299,300, Reinisch 1895: 224).

Crawford (1951: 107–108) identifies his “Sitrab” with the inhabitants of the mountains and canyons of Sitrab, 20 to 30 miles west of Tokar, and links the H.nd.yba with Khor Handuba west of Suakin. More debatable is the claim that the Rigbat, presently part of Beni Amer, were a Beja group. They might not have spoken TuBedawiye, neither then nor later, and certainly do not do so now. Hawqal also mentions the Khasa, who are bi- or trilingual nowadays, with Tigre<sup>8</sup> as their dominant language. According to Zaborski, it is still a puzzle whether this group were originally Tigre or Beja (1965: 301)<sup>9</sup> The Khasa at Hawqal’s time was living in the hills and coastal plains around the mouth of Khor Baraka, and the Rigbat stayed close to Suakin. Ibn Hawqal further names some four as yet unidentified groups.

---

<sup>7</sup> Their names are given here according to Zaborski’s compilation and spelling, but alternative transcriptions offered by Crawford or Trimingham are: Hedareb, Hadarat; Hijab, Higav; ‘Ama’ir; Kadbin, Kawbar; Manasa, Rasifsa; Arbaba’ah, Arabab’a or Gharirigha; and Zanafig, Zanafaj. Vantin (1981) renders the names given by Yacubi as Aritika, Sutabaru, Hawtama, Junitika. Newbold 1935: 149 takes ‘Ama’ir to be the Amar’ar.

<sup>8</sup> Tigre (Khasa) is a separate language of Semitic origin related to Tigrinya and Amharinja. It is spoken by the Dahlak islanders and the population of the eastern lowlands and northern hills of Eritrea, for example by the Mensa, Marya, Ad Temariam, Ad Tekles, Habab and a majority of the Beni Amer. See Ullendorff (1973: 122).

<sup>9</sup> One may wonder why they would have had to be one or the other “originally” and not be conceived of as a blend.

Another of the present major tribal groups, the Bishariya or Bisharin, are not included in any of the lists of Beja kingdoms, unless N.q.y.s refers to “Umm Nagi”, one of the important contemporary Bisharin subgroups. They are however mentioned by Abu Nasr al-Maqdisi (d. 996) (Vantini 1975: 148). He claims them to be Christians, and living in tents. There is also mention of another tribe, the Balliyin, who according to Idrisi and al-Harrani (Vantini 1975: 276 and 449 respectively, see also 1981: 91) were Jacobite Christians. According to Khaldoun they originated from Sinai and Yahtreb in Arabia. Idrisi says that they were to be found at Aswan and roaming the desert as far as the land of the Habash, also coming into the country of the Nuba. The reason why the Balliyin are of interest is that several authors, including Paul (1954b: 64 f) and Hassan (1973: 14–15) have identified them with the Balaw, a group which ruled the southern Beja coast in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. These authors have seen them as the source of the Beja expression “Balawiet”, nowadays meaning non-Beja, primarily Arabic/Nubian. Whether this is correct, is hard to say.

Tribal names like these, even when they coincide with present-day names, cannot do more than hint at continuity in the identity of the existing groups. The fact of continuity in naming practices can on the other hand not be contested. Pastoral communities are usually assemblages of rather independent units, and their demographic fate may vary substantially. Kinship groups have duration beyond the lives of individual people, but they also grow and dwindle, merge and scatter and are rearranged in new ways. Though the Hadendowa/Hadandiwa and the Gerib were at one time separate groups, still the Gerib could be found at a later stage as a subgroup of the Hadendowa (as in fact they are today in that particular case). In theory, a subordinate splinter group may even grow and absorb its former super-ordinate as a subgroup. Nevertheless, even if the chances of reconstructing the true historical relations between tribal sections are limited, it is extremely rare in African ethnography that one can establish such time-depth in the current tribal names among pastoralists. In the case of Hadendowa and Arteiga, the dating of the name as stemming from at least the 10<sup>th</sup> century contradicts much later myths of origin current in the tribes.

The Beja of these early Arab years were clearly not just desert brigands, but also caravan guides. The volume of caravaneering through their area depended both upon factors affecting the sea traffic through the Red Sea and the political conditions in the successive Muslim empires on whose periphery they were situated.

## 5. TRADE THROUGH BEJA AREAS IN MEDIEVAL TIMES

After centuries of slack trade in the Red Sea, the fortunes of the Red Sea harbours turned in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. High prices of transport on the route to the Persian Gulf and the threat of piracy in the Gulf itself then brought trade back to

Egypt and the Red Sea. The Fatimid dynasty, expanding from North Africa in 969–72, had established an empire which at its zenith included all the area from Damascus, Mecca and Medina in the east to Morocco in the west. They encouraged long-distance trade via the Red Sea, seeing it as weapon against their Abbasid rivals. Local trade, carrying grain from Egypt or from the Fatimid allies in Yemen to the holy cities, was also important (Hassan 1967: 69). To get an entrepot in the Red Sea, the Fatimids seized control over the northernmost port-site along the Beja coast-line, Aydhab. They brought the hinterland of Aydhab under their influence, and thereby added to the supplies of gold available to the Arabs. This period corresponded to the “Golden Age” of Christian Nubia, during which the Nubians maintained very peaceful relations with the rulers of Egypt, who in their army are said to have had 50.000 Nubian soldiers. The inland routes from Aydhab went through traditional Beja land, skirting the northern Nubian borders.

The present-day areas of Amar´ar and Hadendowa were probably not so concerned by this development, but people living in the current territories of the Ababda and Bishariin must have been directly involved the caravan trades as syces and guides. According to Amin (1968: 36–9) ordered political rule in the Nile Valley generally had the effect of pushing the north-south trade towards the desert. The desert route was not only shorter than the route following the Nile bend, but also involved paying fewer taxes (perhaps, as was the case during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, political control by the Fatimids was a means of stopping the Bishariin and Ababda from taxing the trade too harshly).

The main port of this period was Aydhab. It was probably already established during Ptolemaic times. Paul (1936) gives a vivid description of its period of glory, and argues that it must have been used in the context of Arab mine exploitation from the 9<sup>th</sup> century. In 1050 a Persian visitor found it a small town of 500 people. It had its own mosque. The Beja of the surrounding area were “harmless and busy tending their cattle” (Hassan 1967: 69, quoting Khusraw 1945: 71–73). Khusraw emphasized how the finest type of camels came from the area around Aydhab – a tradition followed far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, conditions in the region were complicated by the crusades. Shortly after the overthrow of the Fatimids by Saladin in 1169, many of the troops in service of the Christian kingdoms were massacred. Saladin thought that Nubia would support the Christian cause, and its rulers may have hoped to do so. His warlords carried out several raids in Nubia (Vantini 1981: 157, 160–1, 184). Most of the time, however, areas south of Egypt were not directly involved in the hostilities, the most important exception being when Aydhab was plundered in 1182 by Renaud de Chatillon. Aydhab could prosper from its position at the periphery of the areas haunted by the crusaders. The Red Sea not only linked Europe and the Orient, but it also provided an important west-east link for the transport of pilgrims and slaves. When conditions permitted, North African pilgrims to Mecca found it easiest to travel through Sinai. During the period of the crusades, the intervention of the Christian armies

made Suez and Sinai dangerous both for pilgrim traffic and for Egypt's trade to the holy cities and India. The Nile down to Qus and the overland routes through upper Egypt provided outlets for people and goods (East 1935: 198, Hassan 1967: 68–9). Aydhab developed into a main port where Indian and Chinese goods were imported into Egypt in return for lead, copper and chemicals. Transport through the desert was in the hands of the Hadariba, who were led by a chief called the Hidirbi. Together with the Zanafi, the Hadariba provided guides, camels and escorts for the pilgrims and traders, and supplied them with water, milk, clarified butter and honey from the surrounding areas (e.g. Maqrizi 1922: 272). Idrisi (1864: 27) recounted information that further supports the view that the Beja were already commercially oriented at this time: he tells about the Beja village of Bukht, which had a large camel market and a surrounding population of camel nomads. The Hadariba also controlled the rather difficult crossing to Jiddah by **jallab** crafts. The category Hadariba or Hadarab were mentioned by Yacubi in 872 and reappear regularly in Beja history. There are alternative etymologies to the name, also recurrent among the Beja, one reading it as “From Hadramaut”, the other reading it as “hedareb”, i.e. “hospitable”, fulfilling the basic Beja values. At times the label appears to refer to an urban elite, at times rich cattle-breeders, at times it is used as an inclusive category (Dahl and Hjort 1991: 23 ff). Our knowledge of the history of early Arab times suggests that at that time, the Beja were a stratified local community, possibly based on patron-serf relationships and class-or- caste-like groupings of low status and nobility (op.cit. p 28). It is quite conceivable, however, that the Beja herdsmen allowed themselves then, as now, to be represented by urban-based merchant middlemen in order to skim the cream off passing trade, but did not let strangers interfere with their subsistence life or families.

Jubayr (1907: 65–73) wrote about his own experiences in Aydhab in 1183, and Maqrizi (1922: III: 272) recounted what he had heard from others about the conditions for pilgrims who had to rely on the assistance of the Hadariba. Expressing themselves in dramatic terms, they leave the reader in no doubt about the extortions poorer pilgrims would be subject to in the hands of those who had local knowledge and the control of food and means of transport in this harsh region. Around 1270 a Nubian king – perhaps for plunder, perhaps as Vantini (1981: 173) speculates, in support of the crusaders- raided and plundered Aydhab as well as Aswan. “The destruction of Aydhab” writes Vantini “dealt a blow to all commerce from India to the Mediterranean in transit through Egypt, with heavy losses to the Sultan's treasury”. Dongola was sacked in return, and Christian Nubia never recovered from the punishment (op.cit. p 178)<sup>10</sup>. With the reopening of the Sinai route for pilgrims in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century the basis for Aydhab's trade diminished. During the first part of the next century, Egypt prospered, but Aydhab had got competition from other harbours such as Suez, Tor and Suakin, and was not predominant any longer. According

---

<sup>10</sup> A joint Sudanese- French multi-disciplinary team surveyed Aydhab in 1979-81. Some findings are reported in Hakem (1979).

to Ibn Battuta, visiting Aydhab in 1326, the “Beja King” who controlled two thirds of Aydhab was on very bad terms with the Sultan, and he had the Turkish ships coming to the port plundered (Vantini 1975: 520 and 1981: 191).

Towards the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Aydhab town was affected by general conditions of great suffering in Upper Egypt. There were increased taxes on the trade, partly “to meet the increasing expenditures imposed by the Timurid danger” to other parts of the Turkish Empire (Hassan 1967: 79). There was drought and famine – and possibly, although none of our sources mention it, the Black Death of 1340–50 had contributed to the problems suffered by setting the population structure out of balance. Since 1260, Egypt had been ruled by the Mamluks. Despite that they also tried to consolidate control of the Sudanese coast, they were more eager to look after their interests in the eastern shore of the Red Sea. This caused them to encourage traders working with India to go to Jiddah, rather than to the western harbours. As a consequence, the potential profit from the transit traffic was lost to the Beja coast.

Nevertheless, Aydhab’s port continued to operate until 1426 when the Mamluk sultan of Egypt is said to have had it destroyed in retaliation for the alleged ransacking of goods destined for Mecca (Hassan 1967: 82, Paul 1936: 67)<sup>11</sup>. The inhabitants of the town fled to Dongola and Suakin. In the latter place they are said to have been massacred by the local people, assisted by a detachment of Turks. Hassan (1973: 88) rejects this theory on grounds of implausibility, as he thinks that the townsmen of the two ports must have been related: but kinship of course never rules out enmity completely.

Suakin was an old settlement, re-developed by the Arabs in the early centuries of their occupation of Sudan. It became important in the 13<sup>th</sup> century after the decline and abandonment of another port, Badi, which was situated close to the present-day Eritrean border (Hassan 1967: 82–91). Hassan suggests that it was used for ensuring supplies of water by the Karimi merchants, a group of traders importing Indian goods to Egypt<sup>12</sup>. In addition to its rivalry with Aydhab to the north, the town competed with the port on Dahlak islands (ibid: 84). The Mamluks who had taken power in Egypt 1256 established overlordship of Suakin in a campaign which had the double purpose of consolidating commercial interests and getting rid of the Christian threat from Nubia. In 1317, the ruler of Suakin confirmed his loyalty by offering 80 slaves, 300 camels, and 30 tusks of ivory annually (ibid: 85 qu. Nuwayri) to a Mamluk military expedition whose main target had been rebellious brigands disturbing the northern trade-route. The goods included in the tribute were typical of the export of the town, but the trade also provided camels for Arabia and Egypt, and durra and ghee to Mecca (Cf. O’Fahey and Spaulding 1974: 21–22). The latter fact again suggests commercial production by the pastoralists as well as by the

---

<sup>11</sup> Jean Claude Garcia, 1972, is said by Holt and Daly (1979) to have effectively challenged this accepted view.

<sup>12</sup> As a curiosity it can be mentioned that *karimi* as an Arabic term appears to contain the same reference to hospitality as *hedareb* in TuBedawiye.

farmers of the Gash. Suakin soon took over the leading role formerly exercised by Aydhab. They seem to have had the approval of the Mamluks in this, for the latter had had great trouble in pacifying the area between northern Nubia and Aydhab (Hassan 1967: 82 ff). The change from Aydhab to Suakin also represented a gradual change of political and commercial power in the Nile Valley from Makuria towards Dongola further south (O'Fahey and Spaulding 1974: 20. Cf Hassan 1967: 85).

Socially, Suakin was dominated by Arabs intermarrying with the Beja. These people were perhaps not identical with those Hadariba who had dominated Aydhab, but they were certainly not very different from them, being referred to by the same label (Hassan 1967: 89). "Hadareba" now appears to refer more unambiguously to an urban elite.

Al Dimashqi talks about the town as being the residence of a "king". In 1332 Ibn Battuta found that the "sultan" of Suakin was a son of a Meccan "Sharif" who had inherited his position from his maternal uncles, who were Beja. Visitors to the area also noted the presence of Kahil Arabs and Khasa (Battuta 1958: II: 362-3, Nuwayri n.d. I: 244). From the writings of Ibn Fadl Allah, who died in 1348 – the year of the Black Death – it is apparent that in spite of their nominal subordination to the Mamluk powers, the Hadariba from Suakin had an extensive influence in their own right over part of north-eastern Sudan during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, maintaining links to Nubia and raiding the southern interior for the luxury goods required for export (Fadl Allah 1927, quoted by O'Fahey and Spaulding 1974: 2, Vantini 1981: 193, Hassan 1967: 74). O'Fahey and Spaulding suggest that "some of the riverain captaincies seem to have been included, perhaps even Dongola" and that the Egyptian-Turkish sovereignty was little more than nominal. The Arab chieftains of Upper Egypt were requested by the Sultan to give their support to the Hadariba Sheikh of Suakin, Samra bin Malik. He had been appointed "Excellent Emir" over the area up to Qus. O'Fahey and Spaulding appear to think of this power as a "Hadariba state": this may exaggerate the continuity and degree of organization that existed. They also hint at a connection between this state and Abdalla, "the Gatherer", the legendary founder of the Abdallab dynasty, rulers of Alwa, quoting a tradition that Abdalla, early in his career, had been appointed governor by "the eastern king" (Ahmad 1969). In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Suakin was a very prosperous town, despite the attempts by the Turks to restrain its involvement in far eastern trade. After sending troops to take control in 1439, the Mamluks established themselves in the town about 1450 (Hassan 1967: 87). Visitors to Suakin in the following decades were impressed by its prosperity (Crawford 1958: 127, 143).

The Red Sea was only a link in a great economic network controlled by Muslim traders, connecting the Mediterranean Sea, the Persian Gulf and East Africa with Ceylon, Gujarat, the Malabar Coast and Malacca. Its importance was however enhanced at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to some benefit for Suakin. The reason for this was that wars in Persia and inner Asia had again upset conditions along the Spice and Silk Routes. The Mamluks lost control over the Red Sea to the Ottoman Turks, who had taken power in Constantinople in 1453

and conquered Egypt in 1517. Soon, though, an altogether new power arrived on the scene to compete for the Oriental trade – Portugal. At the regional level, a new political force, the Funj, came on to the scene in Sudan.

## 6. THE FUNJ AND THE BEJA

On the Nile, the Funj, in the early 1500s founded the Sinnar Sultanate, which came to be the major political force in Northern Sudan for three hundred years, until it was destroyed by Mehmet Ali in 1820. In 1504, the Funj, who were probably originally Shilluk, conquered the Nubian state of Alwa, reducing its rulers, the Abdallab, to viceroys of Southern Nubia. The Abdallab were both before and after this defeat closely associated with the Suakin route. A later Abdallab prince had a place in Beja history as the mythical ancestor of the Atmaan subgroup of the Amar´ar. Nubia north of the Third Cataract remained outside the control of the Funj; it was for a long time controlled by a Turkish garrison of Bosnian soldiers (Lobban 1980: 92).

In the sixteenth century, the Beja thus had Funj and Bosnians to their west and northwest respectively. To the east of them they also had Turks, with a very short interlude (1540–1) when the Portuguese held Suakin. The town was then taken back by the Turks, first nominally and then in a more firm way. The Ottomans took control of Suakin in 1557 and claimed the coast south of Suakin and extending into Eritrea (Hassan 1967: 134). They established themselves as a power in Massawa, and left a garrison, the soldiers which intermarried with the local Balaw, who themselves might have been a mixed population of some Arab descent (Crawford 1951: 111). From this alliance, the Balaw aristocracy was formed, a group which came to dominate the Eritrean coastline for some time and who were important in spreading Islam there (Talhami 1975: 102, 107, Trimmingham 1952: 156, 169). The influence of the Balaw leader, called the Naib, “the deputy” (of the Ottomans), grew until he, according to Abir (1968: 5) in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was considered the “most powerful ruler of the Ethiopian coast”. In ethnic terms, the Sudanese areas immediately controlled by the Naib of Massawa were probably mainly Habab and Khasa. The Beja majority, squeezed in between these various foreign powers, stuck to their mountains and inaccessible khors, and experienced relatively little interference in their daily routines of looking after livestock.

To get provisions for the town, the Turks had to depend on the Funj areas, which meant that the degree of regional control they could enforce was rather limited (Crawford 1951: 123). It was the Funj – or their Abdallab viceroys – who profited from the flourishing trade between Suakin and the interior, by means of the caravan routes through Beja lands, sharing the customs dues with the Hadariba (O’Fahey and Spaulding 1974: 26, quoting Barradas 1634 in Beccari 1903–17, IV, 108). Similarly, the Turks of Massawa became dependent on their Balaw “deputies” for drinking water, and the latter were allowed to take

tolls on the imports to Abyssinia and tribute from the surrounding nomads. When the Turkish administration moved to Suakin, the Balaw also sent representatives there (Crawford 1951: 131). Lobo (writing c.a. 1624) considered Suakin to be part of the Balaw kingdom. Around 1700 the relations between the Naib and the Turks were severed and the Naib instead divided the profits with the Abyssinian king.

The influence of the Balaw Naib of Arkiko on Suakin and the Sudanese coast was probably an “on-and-off” affair. The inland Beni Amer were Funj vassals from around 1600, the Abdallab “viceroy” Agib making claims on the whole area between Korosko, Massawa and Suakin (Paul 1954: 93, 1950: 224, Penn 1934: 63 f). The inland routes from Suakin at any rate were controlled by the Abdallab and the Hadariba

More specifically, these “Hadariba” of Suakin appear to have been the Arteiga, nowadays considered to be a Beja group. Oral traditions, quoted by Jackson (1926: 56) claim that “towards the close of the 15<sup>th</sup> century”, the Funj had already defeated the Arteiga as leaders of Suakin and made them their vassal rulers. This appears unlikely however, unless “Funj” is read “Abdallab” as a direct involvement by the Funj themselves in Suakin is not probable. In the 1980’s, not even the most knowledgeable of Arteiga elders in Suakin claimed any knowledge of the Funj except for what they had learnt in history books, so the Funj do not appear to have left any strong impression. The Arteiga continued to be influential in Suakin (Paul 1954: 140). They had trading contacts with the slave markets at Shendi and Mesellemia in the Gezira. The head of the Arteiga was the Emir of Hadariba, who lived on the mainland part of Suakin (ibid., O’Fahey and Spaulding 1974: 79).

In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the Funj were very dominant in Central Sudan, but the influence of the Funj sultan declined drastically during the last part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Civil wars tore the sultanate apart. A number of smaller political units tried to establish themselves (O’Fahey and Spaulding 1974: 96 f). The sultan had originally based much of his power on the gold trade, but the Hadariba had been able to break this monopoly (ibid., 78–82) and the eastward trade, controlled by the Hadariba, had during this period become more important than the northern trade towards Egypt. This may have had to do with the fact that the situation in Egypt was itself critical. The whole Ottoman empire had been weakened by a war, and its once very carefully balanced system of administration been upset (Gibb and Bowen 1950: 250). The merchants of Egypt were ruined and subjected to heavy taxation. Foreign businessmen were forced to offer very insecure loans to the Mamluk rulers (Abir 1968: 1–2, Shaw 1962: 5).

On the Nubian desert route, belonging nominally to the Ottoman areas, security conditions were poor in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, due to the decline of centralized power. The Ababda Beja were able to levy substantial “protection fees” on caravans passing through their area with slaves, camels, gum arabicum and other goods (Walz 1978: 10, 64, Girard 1818: 633, 637, Browne 1799: 184). If conditions became too bad, however, the trade switched over to the “forty

days route” to Egypt, further to the west, leaving little for the Beja to either protect or plunder. In peaceful times, Bishariin and Ababda “established themselves at either end of the route in Berber and Daraw, escorted caravans between these points and engaged in trade on an individual basis “ (Walz quoting Bruce 1804: 294–5, 443, 448, Burckhardt 1819: 153 rf, 195, Girard 1812: 83) The Ababda were paid both per camel (180 “nisf”) and per slave (360 “nisf”) (Walz 1978: 57 quoting Girard 1818: 637). Further south in the area around the Nile however, as the power of the sultan declined, “Beja” merchants according to O’Fahey and Spaulding (1974: 79) were “swelling the population of the new trading centres such as Berber and Shendi as well as the older town of Arbaji”. At Arbaji a Beja family had come to dominate about 1725, and they were half –recognized as “provincial lords of Sennar”. In this context it is worth noting that all merchants of non-Funj extraction used to be referred to as Hudur (sing. Hadari). The nature of these urban traders, whether Balaw, Hadareb or Hadari is ambiguous seen in ethnic terms, and perhaps ethnicity as such was not of such a central importance for their self-identification as family affiliation would have been. Relying again on parallels with the situation today, Beja groups were probably represented in town by successful traders who would act as intermediaries between Beja households in the more rural surroundings and trading networks in which Muslim culture provided idioms and institutions, and where Arabic was the *lingua franca*.

## 7. INTO MODERN TIMES

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Turkey who had ruled Egypt for over 600 years was no longer able to control it efficiently. A Mamluk elite dominated the country’s army and administration increasingly independently from the Ottoman rulers of Turkey. After a very brief occupation of Egypt by France, ending in 1801, the Albanian Mehmet Ali became the country’s relatively autonomous “vice-roy”. In 1811 Mehmet massacred the most important Mamluk leaders of Egypt and secured ultimate power over the country. He then re-conquered the Hijaz from the Wahhabis on behalf of Ottoman Turkey and kept it under his control until 1840. This enhanced the security of the Red Sea route, not the least for European powers wanting to trade in and through the Red Sea. Especially the European coffee trade with Yemen and the Meccan pilgrimage traffic across the sea prospered.

In 1820 Mehmet sent his son Ismail Pasha to recover upper Nubia (Holt and Daly 1979: 47) and the latter then went on to attack the Funj capital Sennar. This move made it possible to take control of the harbour towns of Suakin and Massawa. The driving force behind the attack was not maritime, but to be found in the search for gold and secure access to slaves for the Egyptian army (Schultze 1963: 279). The former quest was less successful and profitable than the latter, which continued up to the British involvement. Once in the Sudan,

however, the Egyptian rulers also took a fiscal interest in it. To the age old facts of partial colonisation in search of gold and penetration for trade, there were now new aspects to the interference of foreigners in the Beja territories. After having taken over Sennar, the Turks put the riverine peoples under harsh taxation. In the 1830's and 40's they extended this policy by launching expeditions against the Halenga and Hadendowa Beja for the same purpose, with the additional attempted trick to dam the Gash river to force the Hadendowa to submit. During this period Kassala town was founded, growing in the 1860s into a big garrison town of between 10.000 and 20.000 people. Mumtaz Pasha, the Egyptian governor of Suakin, further strengthened Egyptian presence in the area by the launching of a huge cotton scheme at Gash – formerly an important drought resort for the cattle breeders. Apart from the disturbances that can have been caused by gold extraction, this was the probably the first time that foreign invaders implemented serious changes into the land use patterns of the Beja. The Suez Canal was part of the same general modernization ambition as these schemes, but became the ruin of Egypt, and in the end made British dominance possible.

For Beja, Egyptian rule also implied that certain groups were able to negotiate control over specific desert routes, where they supplied service and rented out camels.. Exactly what this meant for the relation between the various Beja factions, who presumably did not share in these privileges on an egalitarian basis, is not known, only that there were severe conflicts between Atmaan Amar'ar and the Bishariin on the Berber-Suakin route. Conflicts over caravan routes continued into the strife associated with the Mahdist war, in which the Beja groups became heavily involved and divided between themselves. In the aftermath of the war, they were hit, like so many nomadic groups in Africa, by a doomsday-like disaster, caused by rinderpest, smallpox and cholera. Rinderpest, which among the Beja struck the Hadendowa in particular since they depended on cattle, had been introduced by contaminated stock into Eritrea, and it ravaged all over East Africa in the late 1880s. As the British took over, the Beja were already severely weakened. Cotton cultivation and modern systems of transport was about to change many of the basic conditions of their life.

## 8. FINAL WORDS

Modern technological change and systems of colonialism and capitalist organisation have meant a new distinct transformation of the contextual constraints of Bedawiet life. Nevertheless, the Bedawiet-speaking pastoralists roaming the Eastern deserts of Sudan were not untouched by the political and economical structures of far away places before the modern era: in particular, they must have been affected by those regional trends that regulated the trade in the Nile Valley on one hand and the much larger processes that located the flows between Europe or the Orient through the Red Sea or via the Baghdad route.

Writing the history of these local-global relations is a difficult task, constrained not only by a lack of information but also by the lack of narrability that comes from the fragmented nature of Beja society. At any specific time, there is little problem involved in treating any of their lineage groups as a unit of collective action, but the assembly of such groups – the people described by the category “Beja” - has had little coherence as an actor on the historical arena: today, although that is outside the scope of this paper, media provide the means for such a collective identity to become politicized. In retrospect, the Beja narratives can at best be stories of how some particular lineage unit have used their agency to skim off the profits or avoid the hazards associated with more intense involvement in long-distance trade. If thus the local actors escape a clear definition in our story, a view of the larger world-systems that they were affected by may be only slowly crystallizing in the light of historical analysis and retrospective reflection. Today, our relations with larger systems are always mediated by the preconceived images of them that come through the media. To what extent would the Beja living in these temporally contingent states of periphery in by-gone centuries have had access to information about the metropolises, let alone known about their networks in their totality? Would the Blemmyes know of Byzans? In what terms did the medieval Beja learn about the crusades? What was known about Baghdad in the Red Sea Hills? If the image of the Beja society conveyed to the world and saved for posterity is so vague, despite their geographical position at the crossroads, what was the knowledge available to them about the larger systems at various times? Their agency, if we take it in the sense of influencing history rather than in the sense of willingness to act, was certainly relatively limited in relation to these larger systems of trade which gained their momentum from far-away processes.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, William Y. 1977.  
*Nubia, Corridor to Africa*. London, Princeton University Press.
- Ahmad, al Rahim Nasr. 1969.  
*Ta'rikh alAbdallab, min kha'il ru ruwayatihim alsima`iya*. Khartoum.
- Amin, Mutwakil Ahmed. 1968.  
*Historical Geography of Trade Routes and Trade Centers in Northern Sudan 1500–1939*. Ph. D. Thesis (Thesis 138 749 'M/54), 266 pp.  
University of California.
- Arkell, A.J. 1955.  
*A History of the Sudan from the Earliest Times to 1821*. London,  
University of London and Athlone Press.
- Baladhuri, Ahmad b. Yahya al- 1932.  
*Futuh al buldan*. Cairo.

- Barradas, Manuel. 1996.  
*Tractatus Tres Historico-Geographici (1634). A Seventeenth Century Historical and Geographical Account of Tigray, Ethiopia.*  
**Aethiopistische Forschungen** Vol. 43. Translated from the Portuguese by Elizabeth Filleul, edited by Richard Pankhurst.
- Battuta, Ibrahim Ibn. 1929.  
*The Travels of Ibn Battuta AD between 1325–1354* (transl. H.A.R. Gibb) Cambridge: Hakluyt Society 1929 abridged version, full versions from Cambridge issued in 1958, 1962, 1971.
- Beccari, C. 1903–17.  
*Rerum Aethiopicarum Scriptores Occidentales Inediti a saeculo XVI ad XIX Rome*, 15 vols.
- Bietak, Manfred. 1986.  
The C-group and the Pan-Grave Culture in Nubia. In: *Proceedings of Sixth International Conference for Nubian Studies*. Prepublication of Main Papers, vol 1. Bergen: Klassisk Institutt and Society for Nubian Studies.
- Browne, W.G. 1799.  
*Travels in Africa, Egypt and Syria from the years 1792 to 1798.*  
London.
- Bruce, James. 1790 (1804).  
*Travels to discover the source of the Nile in the years 1768–73*. First edition of five volumes J. Ruthven for G.G.J. and J. Robinson, Paternoster Row, London, second edition of 1804 seven vols. Edinburgh esp. vol IV.
- Burckhardt, John Lewis. 1819.  
*Travels in Nubia*. London. Published by the authority of the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior of Africa. pp. ix, 439 esp. s. 148–151, 170 ff.
- Carlsson, David and van Gerven, Dennis P. 1979.  
*Diffusion. Biological Determinism and Biocultural adaptation in the Nubian Corridor.* **American Anthropologist** 81: 562–80.
- Christensen, A. 1944.  
*L'Iran sous les Sassanides.*
- Crawford, O.G.S. 1951.  
*The Fung Kingdom of Sennar: With a Geographical Account of the Middle Nile Region.* Gloucester John Bellows Ltd. reprint, New York. AMS Press 1978.
- Crowfoot J.W. 1911.  
*Some Red Sea Ports of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.* **Geographical Journal** 38: 523–50.
- Dahl, G. and Hjort-af-Ornas, A. 1991.  
*Responsible Man: The Atmaan Beja of Northeastern Sudan.*  
**Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology** vol. 27 (in coop. with Nordic Institute of African Studies).

Darar, Mohamed S. 1965.

*Tarikh el Sudan, al bahr el Ahmar, Iqlim elBescha Beirut.*

Desanges, J. 1978.

*Recherches sur l'activite des Mediterraneens aux confins de l'Afrique, Rome Dimashqi Shams alDin Abou Talib bin Abdullah Mohamed al Nukhbat aldahr fi'ib albarr wa'lbahr, (translated and edited by A.F. Mehren) Leipzig 1923.*

Doe, Brian. 1971.

*Southern Arabia.* New York, St Louis and San Francisco: Mc GrawHill.

East, W. Gordon. 1935 (reprinted 1966).

*A Historical Geography of Europe.* London, Methuen co.

Fadl Allah alUmari ibn. 1927 (reprinted 1993).

*Mâsalik al-absâr fi mamalik al-Amsar.* Transl. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, Paris (Islamic Geography, 142).

Garcia, Jean Claude. 1972.

*Jean Léon l'Africain et Aydhab.* **Annales Islamologiques** 11: 189–209.

Gibb, H.A.R. 1954.

*Aydhab.* Encyclopedia of Islam I:782.

Gibb, H.A.R and Bowen, Hardo 1950.

*Islamic Society and the West, I:1.* London: Oxford University Press.

Girard, P.S. 1818.

Memoire sur l'agriculture et le commerce de la Haute Egypte. In: *Description de l'Egypte. Etat Moderne, II vol XVII.* Paris 1824.

Hakam, Ibn `Abd al. 1920.

*Kitab, Futuh alMisr wa Akhbariha,* Leiden.

Hakem, Ali Ahmed al, et al. 1979.

*Preliminary Report of the Multidisciplinary Mission of the Joint Sudanese-French Expedition to the Red Sea Region 1981 (sic).* **Sudan Notes and Records** 60: 871–08.

Hassan, Yusuf Fadl. 1963.

*Penetration of Islam in the Eastern Sudan.* **Sudan Notes and Records** 44: 18.

1967 *The Arabs and the Sudan from the seventh to the early sixteenth century.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, reprinted 1973 by Khartoum University Oress.

1975 *Hijrat al-Rashayda ila al-Sudan* (The Migration of the Rashaida to the Sudan). **Dirasat fi ta'rikh al-Sudan** (Studies in the History of Sudan) 1: 173–200, (edited by Y.F. Hassan). Khartoum University Press.

Hawqal, Abu 'l Kassim Ibn. 1938.

Kitab surat alard. In: J.H. Kramers (ed.), *Opus Geographicum auctore Ibn Hawqal spec. tome I,* p. 50–56. Lugduni Batavorum.

Herrman, G. 1977.

*The Iranian revival.* Oxford.

- Holt, P.M. and Daly, M.W. 1979.  
*The History of the Sudan from the Coming of Islam to the Present Day*. Third edition. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Idrisi, Abu Abdallah Mohamed Ibn Mahommed Ibn Abdallah Ibn- 1866.  
*Description de l'Afrique et de l'Espagne par Edrisi*, text arabe, publié avec une traduction, des notes et un glossaire par R. Dozy et M.J. de Goeje. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Jackson, H.C. 1926.  
*Osman Digna*. London: Methuen Co.
- Jubayr, Abu Al-Husayn Mohamed Ibn. Ahmad Ibn- 1907.  
*Rihlat Ibn Jubayr. The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 2nd edition, M.J. de Goeje (ed.). Leiden (Reprint 1994 as *Islamic Geography* 172).
- Kheir, H. Mohamed. 1982.  
*Medieval Eastern Sudan and the Arabs: A study in the Evolution of Economic Relations, 640–1400 AD*. Thesis, University of Khartoum.
- Khusraw, Nasiri. 1945 (2nd ed. Beirut 1970).  
*Safar Nama, rahla Nasir Khusraw*. Translated from Persian into Arabic by Yahya al-Khashshab.
- Kirwan, L.P. 1937.  
*A Survey of Nubian Origins*. **Sudan Notes and Records** 20(1): 47–62.
- Kraus, P. Johann. 1930.  
*Die Anfänge des Christentums in Nubien*. Theological dissertation. Münster Wien: Missionsdruckerei St. Gabriel.
- Linant de Bellefonds, Louis Maurice Adolphe. 1884.  
*L'Etbye ou pays habité par les arabes Bichariehs*. Paris: Arthur Bernard.
- Lobban, Richard. 1980.  
*A Genealogical and Historical Study of the Mahas of the Three Towns*. **Sudan Notes and Records** vol. LXI, p. 89–109.
- Lobo, Jeronimo. d. 1678.  
*A voyage to Abyssinia: containing the history, natural, civil and ecclesiastical of that remote and unfrequented country*. Lost travelbook, written c.a. 1624, but published by Joachim LeGrand, *Voyage historique d'Abissinie*, Paris 1728. A version was transl. by Sir Peter Wyche 1669: "A Short relation of the River Nile, of its source and current, written by an eyewitness who lived many years in the chief kingdoms of the Abyssine Empire", London.
- Maqrizi, Ahmad bin `Ali al. 1907.  
Al Macrizis description of the Beja. In: J.W. Budge (ed.), *The Egyptian Sudan, Its History and Monuments* 12, p. 179–183.
- Maqrizi, Ahmad bin `Ali al. 1922.  
*Kitab almawa'iz wa'li`tibar bidhikr alkhitat wa'l athar*, G. Wiet (ed.), vol. 4. Paris and Cairo.
- Marquart, J. 1913.  
*Die Beninsammlung*. Leiden

Newbold, O.B.E. 1935.

The Beja Tribes of the Red Sea Hinterland. In: J.A. de C. Hamilton (ed.), *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan from Within*, p. 140–160. London: Faber and Faber.

O'Fahey, R.S. and Spaulding, J.L. 1974.

*Kingdoms of the Sudan*. London: Methuen & co.

Olympiodor (ed.). 1829.

Niebuhr, Bonn.

Paul, A.M. 1936.

*Aidhab: a Medieval Red Sea Port*. **Sudan Notes and Records** 36(1): 64–70.

1950 *Notes on the Beni Amer*. **Sudan Notes and Records** 31(2): 223–246.

1954a (repr.1971 with corrections by the authour). *History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*. Cambridge and London: Frank Cass.

1954b *A Study in Arab-Beja Relationships, the Hadaret*. *Sudan Notes and Records*.

Penn, A.E.D. 1934.

*Traditional Stories of the Abdullab tribe*. **Sudan Notes and Records** 17(1): 59–82.

Reinisch, Leo. 1895.

*Wörterbuch der Bedauyesprache*. Wien.

Sandars, C.E.R. 1933.

*The Bisharin*. **Sudan Notes and Records** 16: 119–149.

Schultze, J.H. 1963.

*The Eastern Sudan: Development between Desert and Rain Forest*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.

Shaaban, Soad. 1970.

*Die Hadendowa-Bedscha*. Reinischen Friedrich Wilhelms Universität zu Bonn, Ph D Thesis.

Shaw, Stanford J. 1962.

*Ottoman Egypt in the Eighteenth Century*. Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs VII. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Säve Söderberg, Torgny. 1979.

*The Scandinavian Joint Expedition to Nubia*, vol 8: 4. Köbenhavn, Munksgaard: Historisk-filosofiske meddelelser, Det Kongelige Danske Vetenskabernas Selskab.

Tabari, Abu Ja'far Mohamed bin Jarir al-. 1879–91.

Ta'rikh alrusul wa'lmulûk, ed de Goeje 15 vols., Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Taghribirdi, Abu l'Mahasin Yusuf Ibn-. 1975.

*Vantini's Oriental sources Concerning Nubia*. Heidelberg and Warsaw: Polish Academy of Science and the Society for Nubian Studies.

- Talhami, Ghada H. 1979.  
*Suakin and Massawa under Egyptian Rule 1865–1885*. University Press of America, Washington.
- Trimingham, J.S. 1952.  
*Islam in Ethiopia*. Oxford.
- Török, Laszlo. 1986.  
Meroe, North and South. *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference for Nubian Studies, Prepublications of Main Papers*, Uppsala 11–16 aug. 1986. Bergen: Klassisk Institutt and Society for Nubian Studies.
- Ullendorff, Edward. 1973.  
*The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Walz, Terence. 1978.  
*Trade between Egypt and Bilad as Sudan 1700–1820*. Cairo: Institut Francais d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire.
- Vantini, Giovanni. 1981.  
*Christianity in the Sudan*. Bologna: EMI.
- Vantini, Giovanni (ed. and transl.) 1975.  
*Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia*. Heidelberg and Warsaw: Polish Academy of Science and the Society for Nubian Studies.
- Wenig, Steffen. 1978.  
*Africa in Antiquity: The arts of Ancient Nubia and the Sudan*. Etnogr. Museet, Brooklyn Museum Bookshop.
- Zaborski, Andrzej. 1965.  
*Notes on the mediaeval history of the Beja tribes*. **Folia Orientalia** 7: 289–307.

**About the authors:** *Gudrun Dahl* is Professor of Social Anthropology, with particular emphasis on development studies. Her early production was concerned with contemporary social change among pastoral nomads in Kenya and Sudan and dealt with issues such as egalitarianism and stratification, gender roles and cosmology. She has also produced texts about the anthropology of childhood and anthropological research ethics. More recently she has mainly worked with questions about keywords and rhetoric fads in Swedish research policy, but also written about the Swedish love of nature as an idiom for nationalism. She is Dean of the Faculty of Social Science of Stockholm University. She is a member of the University Board and of the Committee for Peace and Poverty Research (Povpeace) at the Norwegian Research Council.

*Anders Hjort-af-Ornas* is Professor at the Department of Water and Environmental Studies, Tema Institute, Linköpings universitet. He holds an ME from Stockholm Institute of Technology and an Ass. Prof. in social anthropology from Stockholm University. His PhD concerned the interaction

between a small town and its role for the regional rural development in drylands. Among his current tasks can be listed being one off the 25 members of the scientific committee to the CST of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, research on the interface between poverty reduction and land degradation, and on social consequences of water and land resource management, such as hydropower development. He is the former director of the Nordic Institute of African Studies, and has participated in about ten projects over the past decade in Africa and in Vietnam. Current research includes the role of SMEs for rural development.