HAL
open science

Ethiopia and Nubia in Islamic Egypt: Connected Histories of Northeastern Africa

Julien Loiseau

To cite this version:

Julien Loiseau. Ethiopia and Nubia in Islamic Egypt: Connected Histories of Northeastern Africa. Northeast African Studies, 2019, 19.1, pp.1-8. hal-02909941

HAL Id: hal-02909941

https://amu.hal.science/hal-02909941v1

Submitted on 31 Jul 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Special issue « Ethiopia and Nubia in Islamic Egypt. Connected Histories of Northeastern Africa », J. Loiseau (ed.), *Northeastern African Studies* 19 (2019): Introduction

Ethiopia and Nubia in Islamic Egypt: Connected Histories of Northeastern Africa*

Is a global history of northeastern Africa in the Middle Ages achievable? The global Middle Ages have been added to the agenda of medievalists about a decade ago.[1] In the case study of northeastern Africa, the long-term history of Christianity in the area alone seems to justify such a challenging undertaking. Christian kingdoms resisted the seventh-century Arab conquests and the pressure of the Islamic empire south of the first cataract of the Nile and maintained their presence in Nubia until the fourteenth century. As for the kingdom of Axum in northern Ethiopia and present-day Eritrea, its collapse in the beginning of the eighth century did not prevent the persistence of Christian monasticism and the reemergence of an Ethiopian Christian kingdom in the twelfth century. Furthermore, the adoption of the same doctrine by the Nubian and Ethiopian churches, the Miaphysitism, and their common rejection of the conclusions of the Council of Chalcedon (451), led them to maintain close relationships with the patriarchal See of Alexandria and the Coptic Church in Egypt. Christianity is indeed a framework available for the global history of northeastern Africa.

It is, however, surprising to note how few are the pieces of evidence of direct connections between the Christian societies of Nubia and Ethiopia in the Middle Ages. Their common faith and doctrine were voiced in different languages and scripts and did not favor the same figures of the holy history, even if some narratives did travel from one culture to the other.[2] The search for political interactions between the Christian kingdoms would have been in vain, without the single attestation of a letter received in Nubia in the 970s, by which the Ethiopian king requested his Nubian counterpart to intercede on his behalf with the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria.[3] This counterintuitive historical disconnection has been increased by modern scholarship due to the fragmentation of research along linguistic lines and national boundaries. As a result, the only thing Christian Ethiopia and Nubia have in common is to be portrayed as besieged fortresses facing Islam and its expansion in the Middle Ages. If a global history of the area is to be achieved, it has to follow a different path.

* The articles published in this issue were first submitted in the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (University of Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, 2012) with the support of the Institut Universitaire de France. They are part of the ERC COG project HornEast that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant Agreement No. 726206).

The connected histories gathered in this special issue of the *Journal of Northeastern African Studies* fall within the ERC (European Research Council) project HornEast headed by the present author (https://horneast.hypotheses.org/). HornEast intends to move scholarship's boundaries by fully integrating the disconnected narratives of Ethiopia and Nubia's history into the global history of the Islamic Middle East. In other words, the shortest way between the Middle Nile valley and the Horn's highlands in the Middle Ages might have passed via Cairo, Mekka, or Jerusalem. It is not a matter of saying that no border lay between Islamic lands and Christian kingdoms in northeastern Africa at that time: obstacles to connections and exchange were numerous, giving added value to any item that eventually crossed these boundaries. It is about assuming 1) that the formation of the Islamic empire and the dissemination of Islam (considered as a belief system and a body of knowledge as well as a material culture) did foster a global process of integration and 2) that this process not only favored the flourishing of Muslim communities in the area but also the capability of Christian neighboring societies to connect to the global medieval world.

The hypothesis mainly relies on the underexploited potential of Arabic source materials (be they narratives, inscriptions, or legal documents) for highlighting the history of medieval Nubia and Ethiopia. Arabic sources are familiar to historians of northeastern Africa when dealing with geographic depictions and travelogues written by Muslim authors foreign to the area.[4] But Arabic materials were also produced in Nubia and Ethiopia during the Middle Ages.[5] Arabic has also become the main language and script of Middle Eastern Christianity since at least the twelfth century. It is no surprise to find Arabic medieval graffiti on the walls of Lalibela's churches, one of the most revered Christian sites in Ethiopia.[6] As for the *Ta'amra Māryām* (Miracles of Mary), a collection of narratives incorporated into the Ethiopian Christian liturgy in the fifteenth century, its Western Latin origin should not overshadow the fact that it was translated to Ge'ez from expanded Arabic versions.[7] Chronicles, biographical dictionaries, and narratives of various natures written in Arabic in Egypt, Syria, Hijaz, or Yemen also have a great deal to tell us about Nubian and Ethiopian individuals, whose presence in the Islamic Middle East provides the best evidence of northeastern Africa's connection to the global medieval world.

Sporadic presence of Nubians and Ethiopians in the Islamic Middle East has been so far evidenced in two different situations. Either people from northeastern Africa traveled of their own free will or were they compelled to do. Christian clerics and pilgrims from Ethiopia and Nubia belonged to the first category. The attraction of Christian holy places in Egypt and Palestine, and of Jerusalem in particular, has done much to justify long and hazardous journeys to the Middle East. Ethiopian monks have been settled in Jerusalem since at least 1290.[8] Clerics and pilgrims coming from the Christian kingdoms of Nubia are more difficult to identify because they were often mistaken, at least by Latin witnesses, with their Ethiopian counterparts.[9] In addition to pilgrimage, the allegiance of the Churches of Nubia and Ethiopia to the patriarchal see of Alexandria has long been used to justify Nubian and Ethiopian clerics coming to Egypt. Monks

and envoys from the Christian kingdoms were to be encountered in Alexandria and later on in Cairo, after the transfer of the Coptic patriarchate to the newly established capital of the Fatimid caliphs.[10] In this first case, the presence of Nubians and Ethiopians in medieval Egypt, Palestine, and Syria was a legacy of Christianity and its early introduction into northeastern Africa.

A second situation has begun to receive increasing attention in modern scholarship: the displacement to various Islamic countries of Ethiopian and Nubian people, sold as slaves with no hope of return. Slavery as a legal and social practice goes back to earliest antiquity. It was not more or less developed in Islamic societies as it already was in Roman times. But the gradual ending of wars of conquest in the eighth century and provisions of the Islamic law, especially the principle of human beings' natural freedom and the protection of free individuals living under rule of the Sharia, soon induced the unprecedent development of long-distance trade bringing slaves from beyond the Islamic empire's boundaries.[11] The global slave trade was born. The history of the Islamic slave trade, dating back to the seventh century, has long been overshadowed by scholarship on the Atlantic slave trade, the latter developing beginning in the fifteenth century. Recent works have revived interest in this crucial issue, paving the way for a social history of slavery and slaves in medieval Islamic societies.[12]

Regarding the African slave trade, however, much still remains to be done to better understand in various contexts the balance among the various origins of slaves, as well as the diversity of positions to which they were assigned. The question of a possible progressive substitution of the Nubian slave trade by the Ethiopian slave trade during the Middle Ages is one of the hypotheses currently pursued by the team of the ERC project HornEast.[13] The slave trade and slavery are not only in the background of this special issue in connected history, they are crucial elements of two of the articles below. In this second case, the presence of Nubians and Ethiopians in medieval Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Arabian Peninsula was a consequence of slaves import from northeastern Africa into the Islamic Middle East.

In both cases, however, the mobility of individuals between northeastern Africa and the Middle East, be it one way or back and forth, has been considered a consequence of the latter's dominant position and the former's dependence on external sources of wealth and legitimacy. This asymmetry is further enhanced by the distribution of source materials, because most of our knowledge on the presence of Nubians and Ethiopians in the Islamic Middle East comes from Coptic, Arabic, and Latin sources written and preserved outside northeastern Africa. However, recent scholarship based on internal and external evidence has shown to what extent Ethiopian and Nubian societies were masters of their own destiny even regarding the slave trade, which was partly taken over by Christian kingdoms at the expense of neighboring pagan peoples.[14] The articles gathered below, in line with ERC project HornEast's objectives, are intended to further explore the agency of Nubian and Ethiopian societies and/or individuals by investigating situations of connections, mobility, and exchange between northeastern Africa and the Islamic Middle East.

The choice has been made to focus the present issue on the case study of Egypt as primary observatory of connections between Nubian and Ethiopian societies and their Islamic environment. The reasons are twofold. Egypt was not the only Islamic outlet of Ethiopia during the Middle Ages: Yemen and Hijaz were also major doorways to the Middle East for the peoples of the Horn. But the Nile valley was the unique channel of mobility and exchange between Nubia and its Islamic environment, even if evidence shows there were sporadic connections to the Red Sea basin through the Eastern desert. To focus on Egypt is a way to include Nubia in the inquiry along with Ethiopia, even if only one article refers to Nubian people when dealing with black soldiers' involvement in Fatimid armies. The second reason is related to the Arabic source materials produced and preserved in Egypt, whose richness and diversity have no parallel in the Islamic Middle East prior to the Ottoman era. The following articles do not illustrate the whole spectrum of sources available to historians of Islamic Egypt. They will provide, however, a good illustration of the various kinds of inquiries that can be conducted on the basis of apocalyptic, hagiographic, biographic, topographic, and annalistic narratives in Arabic.

The first article, by Sobhi Bouderbala (University of Tunis), explores the vivid memory, preserved among the first generations of Muslim scholars established in Egypt, of the threat posed in Yemen and western Arabia by the kingdom of Axum in the sixth century. This memory maintained by authors of Yemeni background might well explain the attention given to Ethiopians as figures at the end of the world in the oldest Muslim apocalyptic narratives, produced in Egypt in the early ninth century. The second article, by Abbes Zouache (CNRS, University of Lyon-2), provides a reassessment of a major issue in the study of warfare in the Islamic Middle East: the uninterrupted involvement of black soldiers in Egyptian armies, with the case study of the Fatimid *shiʿi* caliphate (tenth to twelfth century). Despite the racial bias and inaccuracy of Arabic and Latin chroniclers, the inquiry highlights the strategic importance of black contingents in Fatimid history. It also points out the ethnic and social heterogeneity of individuals collectively categorized in the sources as black soldiers, and raises the issue of their legal status as slaves, freedmen, or freeborn individuals. The third article, by Giuseppe Cecere (University of Bologna Alma Mater), investigates the life of a major figure of the Shādhiliyya Sufi brotherhood in fourteenth-century Egypt who appeared to be a former slave of Ethiopian origin. Despite several rewritings of his biography during Mamluk and Ottoman eras and his conflictive memory in Egyptian Sufism, the life and posterity of Yāqūt al-Ḥabashī offers an outstanding opportunity to address the issue of black slaves' social representation in the Islamic Middle East. The fourth and final article, by the present author, explores the attractiveness of Cairo for northeastern African societies through the coming of Ethiopian freeborn Muslim students and scholars and their provisional or permanent settlement in the Egyptian metropolis. The well-established presence of Ethiopian students in the venerable mosque of al-Azhar and their involvement in formal relationships and informal connections between the Mamluk kingdom and the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia illustrates the role of Islam's dissemination in the connection of northeastern

Africa to the global medieval world. These articles are the first results of an ongoing collective research program that aims to better understand the long-term changes experienced by northeastern African societies in their relationship with the Islamic Middle East.

Julien Loiseau
Aix-Marseille Univ, CNRS, IREMAM

---

[1] See, for instance, *Histoire du monde au XVe siècle*, ed. Patrick Boucheron (Paris: Fayard, 2009); "Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death," ed. Monica H. Green, inaugural double issue, *The Medieval Globe* 1 (2014). See also the various research projects gathered under the header of "Global Middle Ages" in the website globalmiddleages.org.

[2] Marie-Laure Derat and Robin Seignobos, "La femme éthiopienne de Moïse dans l'*Histoire des églises et des monastères d'Égypte* et la *Chronique* d'al-Makīn," in *Figures de Moïse. Approches textuelles et iconographiques*, ed. D. Aigle and F. Briquel-Chatonnet (Paris: De Boccard, 2015), 249–78.

[3] Stuart Christopher Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia and Alexandria: The Metropolitan Episcopacy of Ethiopia* (Warsaw, Poland: Zas Pan, 1997), 1: 130–38; François-Xavier Fauvelle, *Le Rhinocéros d'or. Histoires du Moyen Âge africain* (Paris: Alma Editeur, 2013), pp. 55-63.

[4] Manfred Kropp, "La Corne d'Afrique orientale d'après les géographes arabes du Moyen-Âge," *Bulletin des études africaines* nos. 17–18 (1992): 161–97.

[5] See Enrico Cerulli, "Documenti arabi per la storia dell'Etiopia," *Memorie della R Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* (ser. 6a, 4, fasc. 2), 1931, 37–101. The Arabic manuscripts on which Cerulli based his edition and translation have recently been identified by Alessandro Gori. They are currently studied by HornEast's team, whose members will soon provide a new edition and commentary of the texts usually known as *Shoa Chronicle* and *History of the Walasmaʿ*. Meanwhile, see Damien Labadie, "Le manuscrit 'Cerulli' Vatican Arabe 1792," https://horneast.hypotheses.org/publication-horneast

[6] Claire Bosc-Tiessé, Marie-Laure Derat, Emmanuel Fritsch, and Wadi Awad Abullif, "Les inscriptions arabes, coptes et guèzes des églises de Lālibalā," *Annales d'Éthiopie* 25 (2010): 43–53.

[7] Enrico Cerulli, *Il libro etiopico dei miracoli di Maria e le sue fonti nelle letterature del medio evo latino*, R. Univ. di Roma, Studi Orientali pubbl. a cura della Scuola Orientale, vol. 1 (Rome: G. Bardi, 1943).

[8] Enrico Cerulli, *Etiopi in Palestina. Storia della communità etiopica di Gerusalemme*, Collezione scientifica e documentaria 12 and 14, 2 vols. (Roma: Libreria dello Stato, 1943); Emmeri Johannes Van Donzel, "The Ethiopian Presence in Jerusalem until 1517," in *The Third International Conference on Bilad al-Sham* (Amman, Jordan, April 19–24, 1980): *History of Palestine*, vol. 1: *Jerusalem* (Amman: University of Jordan), 93–104; Kristen Stoffregen-Pedersen, *The Ethiopian Church and Its Community in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, Israel: 1996). According to Bar Hebraeus' chronicle in Syriac, an Ethiopian monk met the Jacobite patriarch of Antioch in Jerusalem as soon as 1237. Van Donzel, "The Ethiopian Presence," 94. But the earliest evidence of a well-established Ethiopian monastic community in Jerusalem dates back to 1290 with a letter intended for the monks by the Ethiopian king Yagbe'a Ṣeyon. Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir, *Tashrīf al-ayyām wa l-ʿuṣūr fī sīrat al-Malik al-Manṣūr*, ed. M. Kāmil (Cairo, Egypt: 1961), 170–73.

[9] Camille Rouxpetel, "*Indiens*, *Éthiopiens* et *Nubiens* dans les récits de pèlerinage occidentaux: entre altérité constatée et altérité construite (XIIe–XIVe siècles)," special issue, *L'Occident, la croisade et l'Éthiopie, XIIe–XVIe siècles*, eds. B. Weber & R. Seignobos, *Annales d'Éthiopie* 27 (2012): 71–90.

[10] Ayele Takla Haymanot, "The Egyptian Metropolitan of the Ethiopian Church: A Study on a Chapter of History of the Ethiopian Church," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 54 (1988): 175–222; Munro-Hey, *Ethiopia and Alexandria*.

[11] Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Shaun E. Marmon ed., *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1999).

[12] Shaun E. Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Shaun E. Marmon, "Domestic Slavery in the Mamluk Empire: A Preliminary Sketch," in *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East*, ed. Shaun E. Marmon (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1999), 1–24; Craig Perry. "The Daily Life of Slaves and the Global Research of Slavery in Medieval Egypt, 969–1250 CE" (Doctoral dissertation, Emory University, 2014).

[13] Two HornEast team members are currently working on the slave trade and slavery: Robin Seignobos (postdoctoral fellow, IFAO, Cairo), on Nubian slaves as part of his ongoing survey of Nubian people outside Nubia; and Shahista Refaat (PhD candidate, Aix-Marseille University), whose dissertation is focusing on Ethiopian slaves and freed men and women in the Mamluk Middle East.

[14] Marie-Laure Derat, "Chrétiens et musulmans face à la traite et à l'esclavage aux XVe et XVIe siècles," in *Traites et esclavages en Afrique orientale et dans l'océan Indien*, ed. Henri Médart et al. (Paris: Karthala, 2013), 121–48; Robin Seignobos, "L'Égypte et la Nubie à l'époque médiévale. Élaboration et transmission des savoirs historiographiques (641–ca. 1500)," (Doctoral dissertation, Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University, 2016), which includes an important reassessment of the history of the *baqṭ*, the covenant concluded in 652 CE between the Nubian kingdom of Makuria and Islamic Egypt.