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Author(s): J. Martin Plumley

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## AN EIGHTH-CENTURY ARABIC LETTER TO THE KING OF NUBIA

By J. MARTIN PLUMLEY

DURING the 1972 Season at Qaṣr Ibrīm in Egyptian Nubia a number of papyrus scrolls were found (cf. *JEA* 60 [1974], 237). The largest scroll is 255 cm. long and 53·5 cm. wide and was constructed by the gumming together of a number of sheets of the finest quality papyrus. When found the scroll was tightly rolled and secured around the middle by a piece of string with a small mud seal (pl. XXVIII, 1). The seal itself was quite plain, there being no evidence of any impression. Only the recto of the document had been used to record sixty-nine lines of Arabic written in a large and beautiful hand (pl. XXVIII, 2). Undamaged except for two small holes in the first two lines, the manuscript is probably the finest early Arabic document of its kind yet found. Three other papyrus scrolls found with it are less well preserved. All of these are written in Sahidic Coptic in cursive hands. The largest and most complete of the Coptic scrolls is 95 cm. long and 48 cm. wide. It is probable that the original width of this scroll approximated to that of the Arabic scroll, for about 3 to 4 cm. of the whole of the left margin is now missing. The other two scrolls are represented by several large pieces and a number of smaller fragments. Some preliminary work has been done on the large Coptic scroll but the others will call for considerable work in relating the various fragments to one another. Since it is the present policy of the Egyptian Antiquities Service not to allow manuscript material to leave Egypt, all the initial work on manuscript material must be carried out by means of photographs or hand copies. Owing to the lack of electric lighting in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo the photographs had to be taken in very unfavourable conditions. The Arabic scroll, though in excellent condition and very clearly written, presented no less difficulties to successful photography. Fortunately Dr. Martin Hinds of the University of Cambridge and Professor Hamdi Sakkut of the American University of Cairo were in Cairo at the time. They were able to make hand copies of the Arabic text shortly after the scroll was unrolled in the Museum by the author.

The purpose of this article is to present a translation of the Arabic text pending a more detailed study so that its contents may be available as soon as possible. A few references are made to the associated Coptic scrolls so far as they have been interpreted where it appears that they bear on the Arabic text. The translation of the Arabic text is the joint work of Dr. Hinds and Professor Sakkut. The introduction and notes are the responsibility of the author.

The contents of the scrolls are of the first importance for the light which they throw on a period of Nubian history which hitherto has been poorly documented. Of special

interest is the mention of the *baqt* or treaty which had been established between the Nubians and the Arab rulers of Egypt shortly after the conquest of Egypt in A.D. 641. What has been suspected by some as being an invention of later Arab historians is now seen to be fact.

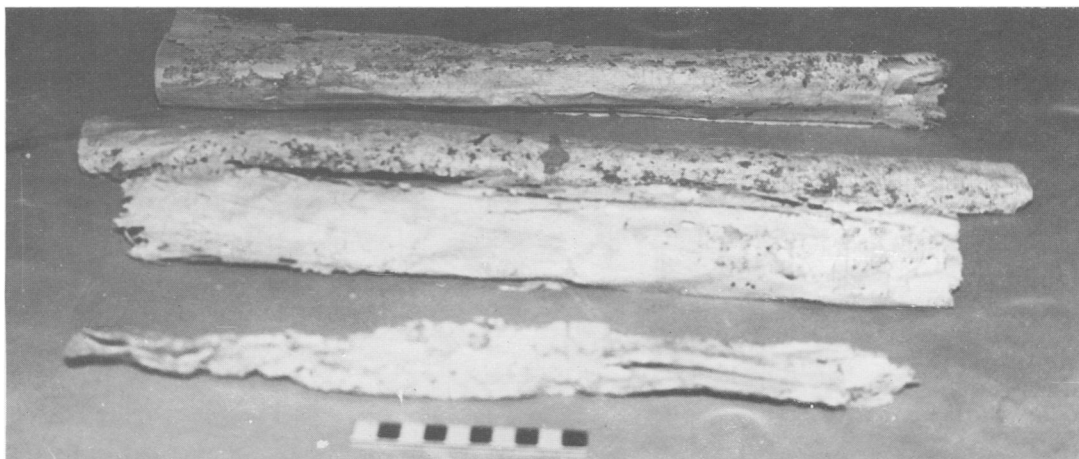
The Arabic scroll is an official letter of complaint from the Governor of Egypt, Musa Ibn Ka'b, to the King of Nubia, sent in the autumn of A.D. 758. Since the King of Nubia had his official residence at Dongola far to the south, the finding at Qaṣr Ibrîm of a letter addressed to him calls for some explanation. The nature of some of the complaints and the mention of the King's Deputy in the Arabic scroll plainly determined the King's action in referring the letter to the official at Qaṣr Ibrîm, the administrative centre of the most northerly part of his kingdom which bordered Aswân.

The associated Coptic scrolls, though none of them bear on the verso the names of either the sender or the intended recipient—are from their contents clearly letters to the king of Nubia. It is difficult to assume otherwise than that their ultimate author was the King's official at Qaṣr Ibrîm. Since none of the letters is addressed on its verso, it may be that they are copies of the original letters, retained at Qaṣr Ibrîm for archival purposes. On the other hand it is not impossible that they may be drafts. Certainly in the case of the largest and most complete of the Coptic scrolls the difficulties in providing a satisfactory translation are not so much the occurrence of new words and unusual constructions as the number of breaks in the thread of the argument. One is left with the impression that the scribe, having written out the usual opening formulae of greeting, gradually lapsed into a series of long, loosely connected notes.

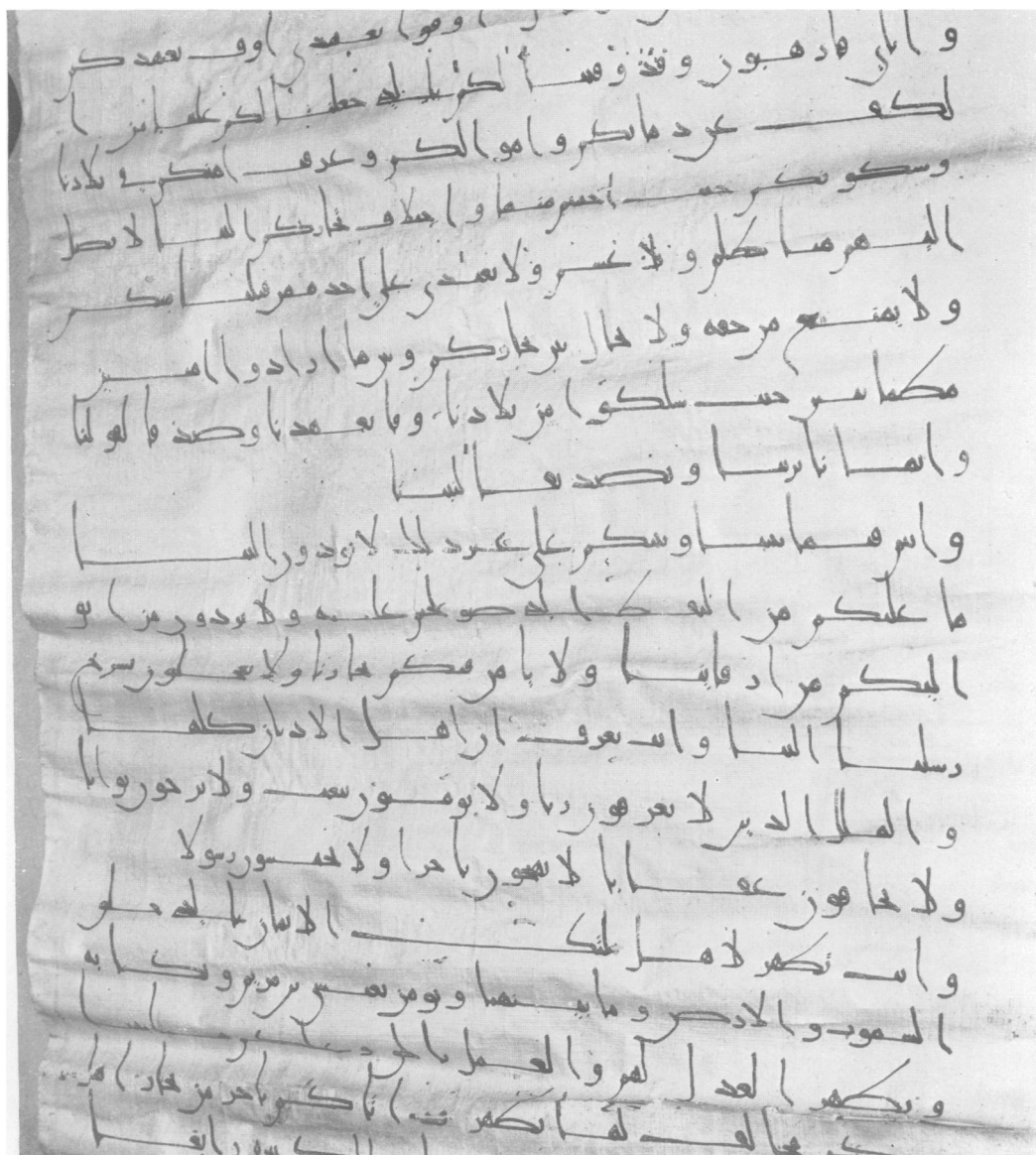
As the handwriting reveals, each of the Coptic scrolls was written by a different scribe. Two of the scrolls are so damaged that it has not been possible as yet to find any trace of a date. The large scroll, however, has a line of dating at the end of the letter, but the line is somewhat damaged and has not reproduced well on any of the available photographs. The reading of the complete date is therefore not certain. It does appear, however, that the year can be read as A.D. 759. That this is the correct reading is strengthened by the mention in line 5 of the Coptic scroll that the Governor of Egypt was Maamed Ibn Al Asath. It is known that he succeeded Musa Ibn Aa'b in 759 in accordance with the custom that as a rule the governorship was held only for one year.

### Translation

1. *In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful*
2. *From Mûsa b. K[a'b to] . . . . . master (ṣāhib) of Muqurr[a] and Nubia. Peace be upon*
3. *the friends (awliyā') of God and those who obey him . . . To them do I praise God,*
4. *other than whom there is no god.*
5. *To continue. You (sing.) know that about which an agreement was made with you and the fulfilment of it*
6. *which you took upon yourselves, so preserving your blood and property if*
7. *you fulfil [it]. God, blessed and exalted is He, says in His book 'Fulfil*
8. *the compact of God when you make a compact, and do not break the oath after*
9. *it has been affirmed and you have made God your guarantor; verily God*
10. *knows what you do'. And He said 'Fulfil my compact and I shall fulfil your compact and mine;*



1. The four papyrus scrolls. Top: the most complete Coptic scroll; second from top: the Arabic scroll with mud sealing



2. Detail of part of the Arabic scroll

11. *so fear me'. We have fulfilled for you that which we took upon ourselves for you in*
12. *turning away from your blood and your property and you (sing.) know your security in our land*
13. *and your dwelling wherever you wish in it and the repairing of your merchants to us; no oppression*
14. *or harm comes to them from us; no one of you who is among us is attacked by us*
15. *nor is he denied his right; no obstacle is placed between your merchants and what they want—[they are] safe*
16. *and contented wherever they go in our land, [this being] in fulfilment of our compact, in truth to our word,*
17. *in belief in our Lord and in trust in our Prophet.*
18. *You however, in that which lies between us, behave otherwise. You do not bring to us*
19. *that to which you are liable according to the baqt on the basis of which/about which agreement was made with you: nor do you return those of our*
20. *slaves who run away to you; nor are our merchants safe among you; nor do you hasten to permit*
21. *our messengers [to return] to us. You know that the people of all religions*
22. *and the persuasions (milal) which neither know a lord, nor believe in a resurrection, nor hope for recompense,*
23. *nor fear punishment, [even these] do not attack a merchant or detain a messenger.*
24. *You (sing.) make manifest to the people of your persuasion belief in Him who created*
25. *the heavens and the earth and what is between them, you (sing.) believe in Jesus the son of Mary and his book,*
26. *and you (sing.) make manifest to them justice and the doing of what is right, while what you do in that which is between you*
27. *and us is contrary to that which you make manifest. One of the merchants of the people*
28. *of our country, Sa'd by name, came to you with much wealth, having made off*
29. *with it from its owners, and you detained him among you, stood between him and the one who rightly pursued him*
30. *and protected him from him. [Secondly] a man of the people of Aswān, named*
31. *Muḥammad b. Zayd, sent to you a merchant of his, on his business and seeking rights for him.*
32. *You detained him and the wealth that he had with him, and my governor over Aswān*
33. *wrote to me, mentioning that he had written to your deputy*
34. *concerning him and that your deputy had written to him, asking him to send to him Muḥammad*
35. *b. Zayd, the master of that merchant, so that he might make over to him with the wealth which he (the merchant) had*
36. *with him. So he (the governor) sent him (Muḥammad) to him (the deputy) with a group of Muslims, and he (the deputy) gave him (Muḥammad) a bad*
37. *beating and broke his hand and detained him with him for three nights until he (Muḥammad) thought that he would kill him.*
38. *Then he (the deputy) let him go, and my governor over Aswān, Salm b. Sulaymān, asked him (Muḥammad) for evidence*
39. *of the arrival of his merchant to you and of that which your deputy had done to him.*
40. *He (Muḥammad) then brought to him a group of Muslims, witnesses of probity ('udūl), from the inhabitants of Aswān, and they bore witness*
41. *to him (Salm) of what he (Muḥammad) had mentioned in the matter of himself and the matter of his merchant. He (Salm) then wrote to me about all of this*
42. *and sent to me Muḥammad b. Zayd, the master of that merchant. He came at the time of the*
43. *arrival of BṬRH (Peter), your messenger to me, so I brought them together. With Peter*
44. *[was] a group of your persuasion, and they mentioned*

45. *that they thought, when they took him (the merchant), that he was one of the Beja who make attacks on them.*
46. *I then instructed 'Awn b. Sulaymān, qādī of the people of Miṣr, to look into their affair;*
47. *then were you made to bear the like of the right and justice which the people (al-nās, i.e. Muslims?) are made to bear,*
48. *for he judged that Peter should return that merchant, together with the wealth that is*
49. *with him, if he is alive, and if he is dead, you are liable to blood money of*
50. *one thousand dinars.*
51. *Salm sent to you a messenger of his nine months ago, and a messenger four months*
52. *ago, and you detained them, together with those slaves of the people of Islam and of the people*
53. *protected by us who are with you, as well [being liable to] that to which you are liable in the baqt. It has been mentioned to me/He (Salm) mentioned to me*
54. *that you are liable to the baqt of [several] years, which you have not fulfilled; as for that which you have sent in accordance with the baqt,*
55. *you have sent that in which there is no good—the one-eyed, or the lame, or the weak old man,*
56. *or the young boy.*
57. *So look (sing.) into that about which I have written to you (sing.) and hasten (sing.)*
58. *the dispatching to us of your remaining liability according to the baqt for the years for which*
59. *you owe and do not send (sing.) that in which there is no good, for we do not accept it; and send (sing.)*
60. *to us the merchant of Muḥammad b. Zayd and the wealth which was with him, unless*
61. *he has been killed, in which case send (sing.) the thousand dinars, his blood money, together with*
62. *the wealth which was with him; and send (sing.) to us Sa'd the merchant who is among you and be not tardy (sing.)*
63. *in that in any respect if you wish us to fulfil for you our compact*
64. *and to continue as we did in dealing correctly with you. Hasten (sing.)*
65. *that and do not delay (sing.) it. If you (sing.) do not obey, I shall have*
66. *my view concerning what is between you and me, God willing. I have wanted to exceed the usual bounds in exhorting you*
67. *and to take proof against you. Peace be upon the friends of*
68. *God and those who obey him. Written by Maymūn on Sunday*
69. *the twelfth night remaining in Rajab in the year 141.*

### Notes

2. '... Master of Muqurr(a) and Nubia'. Owing to damage in this line the name of the King is lost. For the title cf. Abu Salih *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt* (ed. B. T. Evetts), 261 n. 2, in which a ninth-century Arab writer Yahut is cited as stating that the King of Nubia called himself the King of Muqurra and Nubia. At the height of the power of the Nubian kingdom the King, living in Dongola, ruled over three once-independent kingdoms, Nobadia, Muqurra, and Alodia. Nobadia was the most northerly of the kingdoms, stretching from the borders of Aswān in the north as far as the region of the Third Cataract in the south. At some time in the first half of the seventh century an amalgamation took place between Nobadia and the neighbouring kingdom of Muqurra, the southern boundary of which lay some distance south of the point where the river Atbara joins the Nile. The most southerly kingdom of Alodia, though nominally independent, was under the suzerainty of the King in Dongola. Later the name Nubia, which seems to be used to denote the united regions of Nobadia and Muqurra, was often replaced by the name Maris, derived from the Coptic word meaning 'south', or in Coptic manuscripts by ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲥ.

19. 'the *baqt*'. For a translation of the terms of the *baqt* cf. J. L. Burchardt *Travels in Nubia*, 511–12. Not surprisingly, there is no mention of the *baqt* in the Coptic scrolls.

20. 'our slaves who run away to you': The largest Coptic scroll not only acknowledges the presence of fugitive slaves in Nubia but even states that some have found refuge in the palace of the King.

21. 'messengers'. In the Coptic the messengers from Egypt are described as Beretarios, i.e. the Latin *Veretarius*, 'courier'. One of them is named, but since the left-hand margin of the scroll is missing, only part of the name can now be read: '. . . and the son of Abdeiusa'. Two of the messengers sent from Nubia are named in the Coptic scroll: Jacobos and Petros. The second messenger is also named in line 43 of the Arabic scroll. According to the Coptic scroll he held the office of Notary and during his audience with the Governor of Egypt was threatened by him with imprisonment, pending satisfaction being received from Nubia.

33. 'Your Deputy'. Presumably the reference here is to the high official at Qaṣr Ibrīm. As the Deputy of the King of Nubia his title was the Eparch, itself a Byzantine title of an office, the duties of which included the supervision of public order, the administration of justice, the collection of taxes, and the control of trade and industry. Frescoes from Faras and Abd el-Gadir show that the Eparch wore a richly decorated robe and a special kind of head-dress consisting of a helmet having horns on each side, surmounted by a half moon on a vertical bar, and bearing on the front either the emblem of the skull of an ox or the Shield of David. The number of these officials is not known, but possibly each of the three kingdoms had an Eparch presiding over it as a Deputy for the King of Nubia. Other important centres may also have Eparchs. A number of Old Nubian documents found at Qaṣr Ibrīm were addressed to the Eparch of Nobadia. Some bear the personal names of the Eparch. A small number of documents mention the Eparch of Terp (*sic*). The last is an abbreviated writing and possibly refers to some locality at present unknown. In the large Coptic scroll the writer, who can hardly be referring to himself, sends greetings to the Great Eparch. Possibly it is to this official that several addresses on letters in Old Nubian, found at Qaṣr Ibrīm, refer under the abbreviation *Eparch(os) Krat(istos)*. Preliminary study of documents from Qaṣr Ibrīm would seem to indicate that the Old Nubian equivalent of the Greek title was *Migin soñog̃*.

38. 'My Governor over Aswān, Salm ibn Sulayman': In the Coptic Scroll his office is described as Amir, but he is not named. The title Summoul (σύμβουλος) is reserved for the Governor of Egypt.

45. 'The Beja'. In the Coptic scrolls the Beja are called the Blemmyes, an important and conclusive piece of evidence for the identification of a desert people who for many centuries had been a thorn in the side of successive governments in Egypt. Under the name of Blemmyes they were known in Ptolemaic times. They proved a constant threat to the Romans. During the fourth and fifth centuries they were in control of a stretch of Nubia from Qaṣr Ibrīm in the south to within a short distance from Aswān. Towards the end of the fifth century they were defeated and expelled from the Nile Valley by the Nobadian king, Silko. They continued, however, to be a serious nuisance for many years afterwards, raiding both Nubia and Southern Egypt. The Coptic scrolls mention several instances of their raids upon various localities and their persistent interference with travellers. At the time of the writing of the scrolls it would seem that the scale of their raiding was on the increase. Eventually the rulers of Egypt were forced to take strong measures against them, for in A.D. 831 the Caliph Mamūn, grandson of Harūn el-Rashid, sent an expedition against them under 'Abdullah Ibn Jihām. A treaty signed by the defeated Beja remained in being for less than twenty years, for in A.D. 854 they slaughtered the Arabs working in the mines in the Eastern Desert, refused the payment of the tribute, and raided as far as Qena in Southern Egypt, inflicting great destruction as they went. A carefully prepared expedition under the command of Muḥammed 'Abdullah Ibn Gami' was sent against them by the Governor of Egypt, Ansaba Ibn Ishak. Brought to battle near Gebel Zabara in the Eastern Desert, the Beja were completely defeated. From that time onwards the Beja ceased to present a serious threat to Egypt, though it is probable that they continued smaller raids into Nubia and thereby contributed to the eventual downfall of the Christian Kingdom.