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Bāb al-Nūbī: Urban Toponymy and Nubians in Medieval Baghdad (Notes on Medieval Nubian Toponymy 1)

Robin Seignobos

This contribution is the first of a series of articles dedicated to the study of Medieval Nubian place names. This topic will be approached through different perspectives ranging from historical geography (editions or re-editions of unknown sources, discussions concerning the identification or the localization of a place, etc.) to toponomastics strictly speaking understood as the study of the ways and reasons by which places are named.¹

Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, I have chosen to start this enquiry on medieval Nubian toponymy by turning my attention to place names located outside the Middle Nile Valley, but connected to Nubia through their etymology, real or imaginary. Here, my study focuses on an urban micro-toponym used for one of the gates of the palatial complex of the Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad. This contribution should thus be read as a counterpart to that of Alexandros Tsakos, who has worked with the inverse case study analyzing the names of foreign places mentioned in Old Nubian texts.²

Bāb al-Nūbī (“the gate of the Nubian”) was, along with Bāb al-‘Amma (“the gate of the people”), one of the two main gateways leading into the interior of the sacred enclosure (*ḥarīm*) within the palatial complex of the Abbasid Caliphs (*Dār al-Ḥilāfa*) which became the new focal point of Caliphal authority following the return to Baghdad of the Caliph al-Mu‘tamid in 892 CE. This gate was used

1 For this kind of approach, see in this volume VAN GERVEN OEI & TSAKOS, “The Etymology of the Toponym ‘Pourgoundi’ (Notes on Medieval Nubian Toponymy 5)” pp. 269–74. I would like to thank Alexandros Tsakos, Adam Simmons, and Giovanni Ruffini for their valuable comments and their help with the translation of my contribution. Any mistake remains my own.

2 TSAKOS, “On Place Names Used by Nubians for Places outside Nubia,” this volume, pp. 231–40.

by foreign princes and ambassadors, who were also obliged to kiss the threshold of the gate before entering the sacred enclosure, when they were received by the Caliph.³ It is certainly from this custom that the name “Bāb al-‘ataba” (“the gate of the threshold”) becomes associated with that of Bāb al-Nūbī.⁴ As well as the entry of individual high-ranking visitors, Bāb al-Nūbī also hosted other public events: it was there, for example, that criminals or dissidents were paraded, humiliated, or tortured.⁵ It was also on the threshold of Bāb al-Nūbī that the golden cross which the Latins had placed on top of the Dome of the Rock had been buried in such a way that the passers-by could trample and spit on it following its capture after the victory of Hattin in 1187 CE.⁶ Thus, the place occupied a significant position in the ceremonial and urban rituals of the Abbasid Caliphs; but what could be the connection between this gate and far-away Nubia?

Unlike the four gates of the round city of al-Manṣūr, all named according to the provinces of the empire towards which they were oriented (Bāb al-Šām to the west, Bāb Ḥūrāsān to the east, etc.), Bāb al-Nūbī – which should be translated as the “Gate of the Nubian” and not the “Gate of Nubia” – cannot be a geographical reference since it was located on the eastern part of the wall surrounding the palace. In fact, as already noted by G. Makdisi,⁷ Bāb al-Nūbī is named after one Sa‘īd (or Sa‘d) al-Nūbī, to whom a brief note in the obituaries of the *Muntaẓam fī Ta’rīḥ al-mulūk wa-l-umam* of Ibn al-Ġawzī (d. 1200) is dedicated under the year 314/926:

Sa‘īd al-Nūbī: *ṣāḥib* of Bāb al-Nūbī at the Sultan’s palace (*Dār al-salṭana*, to be understood as *Dār al-ḥilāfa*). He died in the month of safar and was replaced by his brother Faḍl.⁸

The title of *ṣāḥib*, which is attributed to Sa‘īd al-Nūbī, may be invested with multiple meanings according to the context (master, lord, owner, etc.). In this case, it obviously designates the official in charge of the guard of the afore-mentioned gate. This is how this

3 YĀQŪT AL-RŪMĪ, *Mu‘ġām al-buldān*, vol. 2, p. 651; LE STRANGE, *Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate*, pp. 274–75.

4 YĀQŪT AL-RŪMĪ, *Mu‘ġām al-buldān*, vol. 2, p. 651.

5 See, for example: VAN RENTERGHEM, *Les élites bagdadiennes au temps des Seldjoukides: étude d’histoire sociale*, p. 78n101, p. 293, p. 316, n. 208.

6 ABŪ ŠĀMA, *Kitāb al-Rawḍatayn fī aḥbār al-dawlatayn*, ed. Ibrāhīm Šams al-Dīn. vol. 4, pp. 39–40; LE STRANGE, *Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate*, pp. 274–75. Sources are not in agreement concerning the exact nature of this cross, as conceded by Abū Šāma himself. According to some, this artifact was actually the great cross-shaped reliquary containing a fragment of the True Cross carried into battle by the Frankish troops. MAKDISI, “The Topography of Eleventh Century Bagdād: Materials and notes (II),” p. 287, n. 7.

7 Ibid.

8 IBN AL-ĠAWZĪ, *Al-Muntaẓam fī ta’rīḥ al-mulūk wa-l-umam*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, vol. 13, p. 257.

term had been understood by al-Ḍahabī (d. 1348) who substituted the polysemic term *ṣāhib* with that of *bawwāb* (gate keeper).⁹ This last function is attested elsewhere, since we know about a gate keeper (*bawwāb*) of Bāb al-Nübī named Ğa‘far who was active at the time of the failed coup of al-Qāhir in 929.¹⁰ However, the reading of *ṣāhib* should probably be corrected to *ḥāǧīb* (chamberlain), a term for which the ductus can be very similar to that of *ṣāhib*. The function of the *ḥāǧīb* of Bāb al-Nübī (or simply *ḥāǧīb al-bāb*) is, in fact, well-attested for later periods. Far from being a simple porter, this official occupied the highest echelons of the social and administrative hierarchy at Baghdad during the Seljuk era (1055–1152), as has been recently underlined by Vanessa van Renterghem:

One should distinguish amongst the *ḥāǧīb*-s, the private chamberlains of the Caliph [and] the *ḥāǧīb al-bāb* (or “guard of the gate”), also known as *ḥāǧīb* of Bāb al-Nübī, in reference to the main gate of the Caliphal palace, or as *ḥāǧīb al-ḥuǧǧāb*. This *ḥāǧīb* had a reserved bench (*dikka*) adjoining the gate. In cases of crisis, he was responsible for the Dār al-Ḥilāfa and its safety. During the first years of the Seljuk domination, the *ḥāǧīb al-bāb* was one of the most important Abbasid functionaries to the extent that the nominations to this post were mentioned in the chronicles. The *ḥāǧīb al-bāb* are regularly mentioned throughout that period, alongside the other dignitaries of the Caliphal administration. The eminence of their status is evident when reading the chronicles, and we meet them alongside other notables of Baghdad, like the *qaḍī al-quḍāt*, the *ṣayḥ al-ṣuyūḥ*, the vizier, or others of high status during social events of importance.¹¹

The fact that Ibn al-Ġawzī chose to devote a note on Sa‘īd al-Nübī bears witness to the importance of the function of *ḥāǧīb al-bāb* during the period prior to the take-over of Baghdad by the Buyid princes in 945. As for Sa‘īd himself, scrutinizing the sources relating to the reign of al-Muqtadir and his immediate predecessors does not offer any more information than that provided by the short note by Ibn al-Ġawzī, although the information was repeated with some

9 AL-ḌAHABĪ, *Ta’riḥ al-Islām wa-wafayāt al-mašāhir wa-l-a‘lām*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmurī, vol. 23, 477. One should note that, according to al-Ḍahabī, Sa‘īd al-Nübī’s brother was called Yūsuf not Faḍl.

10 Trapped in the palatial enclosure, Abū al-Ḥayǧa, a supporter of al-Qāhir, presented himself under disguise to one Ğa‘far, gate keeper of Bāb al-Nübī, asking him to open the door for them. The gate keeper did not grant this request arguing that the loyalist troops were gathering in the vicinity of the gate to see the head of Nāzūk, Abū al-Ḥayǧa’s accomplice, who had just been executed. MISKAWAYH, *Taǧārib al-umam wa-ta‘āqub al-himam*, ed. Sayyid Kasrawī Ḥasan, vol. 5, p. 112.

11 VAN RENTERGHEM, *Les élites bagdadiennes au temps des Seldjoukides*, p. 222. [My translation]

variants by several later authors.¹² All we know is that the duties of the *ḥaḡib al-bāb* fell to the brother of Saʿīd after the latter's death which means that this prestigious office remained for some time in the hands of a relative of the deceased chamberlain. Nevertheless, we do not know under which circumstances his brother inherited the post. Did Saʿīd enjoy such Caliphal favour to the point of being able to designate or recommend his own successor?

In any case, the eminent place of this family of slaves of Nubian origin in reaching the closest favour of Abbasid power should not surprise us either, particularly when taking into consideration the importance of black slaves, and more particularly eunuchs, in the entourage of al-Muqtadir.¹³ When al-Ḥātib al-Baḡdādī (d. 1071) relates in his *Taʿrīḥ Baḡdād* the reception of Byzantine ambassadors, he insists on the large number of black pages and eunuchs present at the court. According to his narrative, among the 7000 eunuchs who populated the palace, 3,000 were black.¹⁴ Hilāl al-Ṣābiʿ (d. 1056) even suggests in his *Rusūm Dār al-Ḥilāfa* that the palatial enclosure could host in the days of al-Muqtadir up to 11,000 eunuchs (*ḥādim*) consisting of 4,000 white slaves (*bayḍan*) and 7,000 blacks (*sawdan*).¹⁵ Whatever the exact numbers, there should be no doubt that the Nubian eunuchs were part of the myriad of African slaves frequenting the *ḥarīm*, irrespective of whether they made their way to Baghdad as part of the famous *baḡṭ* or independently. According to the Christian scholar Bar ʿEbrōyō (or Bar Hebraeus, 1226–1286), the name Bāb al-Nūbī originated from the Nubian eunuchs guarding the gate.¹⁶ This explanation is actually not incompatible with the one we have just mentioned. It is in fact highly probable, even though it is not explicitly indicated, that Saʿīd al-Nūbī and his brother were eunuchs themselves. As David Ayalon has pointed out, it was impossible for black slaves to reach such high levels of responsibility without belonging to the corps of court eunuchs.¹⁷ The case of Saʿīd al-Nūbī and his brother, even if we ignore everything about their origins and their careers, is an indication, tenuous but precious, of the high functions that certain slaves of African origin could access

12 As well as Ibn al-Ḡawzī and al-Ḍahabī (see notes 8 and 9), see IBN KAṬĪR, *Al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya fī taʿrīḥ*, vol. 12, p. 72.

13 EL-CHEIKH, "Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of Al-Muqtadir", pp. 234–52. More generally on al-Muqtadir's reign, see VAN BERKEL, EL-CHEIKH, KENNEDY & OSTI (eds.), *Crisis and Continuity at the Abbasid Court: Formal and Informal Politics in the Caliphate of al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–32)*.

14 AL-ḤĀTĪB AL-BAḠDĀDĪ, *Taʿrīḥ madīnat al-salām*, ed. Baššār ʿAwwād Maʿrūf, vol. 1, pp. 419, 422; SALMON, *L'introduction topographique à l'histoire de Baḡdādh d'Abou Bakr Aḥmad ibn Thābit al-Khatīb al-Baḡdādī*, pp. 135, 139.

15 HILĀL AL-ṢĀBĪʿ, *Rusūm Dār al-Ḥilāfa*, ed. Miḥāʿil ʿAwwād, p. 8.

16 BAR ʿEBRŌYŌ [Bar Hebraeus], *The Chronography of Gregory Abū ʿl-Faraj (1225–1286)*, vol. 1, p. 252.

17 AYALON, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, p. 35.

in Baghdad,¹⁸ as well as a testimony to the deep impression that the most eminent among them have left, through toponymy, upon the urban memory of the Abbasid capital.

¹⁸ The case of Sa'īd al-Nūbī is not isolated either, as evidenced by another black eunuch called Mufliḥ who has been studied by El-Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of Al-Muqtadir," pp. 244-49.

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