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A MORE PRECISE DATING OF THE AS-SAQALIBA REBELLION IN THE MEDIEVAL MAGHRIB

Medieval Arabic sources give us occasional information about the presence of as-Saqaliba, or Slavs, in North Africa¹. The aim of this note is to determine more precisely the chronology of the as-Saqaliba rebellion in the emirate of Nekor, a country which lay in what is now Morocco. Let me first make clear that this brief text was written from an archaeologist's point of view and that the question at issue is the dating of the events in which Slavs may have had a central part². Let me also add that the extract I have translated from the Arabic document points to many other interesting problems which may be worth investigating in their own right.

Here is a passage from a study written by Tadeusz Lewicki: "...at the court of the ruler of a small but rather important Berber-Arab state called Nekor [...] there was a Slavic guard. We know from an account of a particular event given by al-Bakri that the guard was the mainstay of the local dynasty's power and was regarded with favour by the emirs. This state of affairs continued until the beginning of the 11th century, at which point the Saqaliba, taking advantage of the emirate's difficult political situation, demanded that the ruler of the time, sultan Sa'id ibn Salih, should end their nominal status as slaves and grant them also formal freedom. When the sultan refused, the Saqaliba, supported by other members of the Nekor dynasty, withdrew to the mountains in the vicinity of the city of Nekor and set up a fortified camp in a place which was named Qarjat as-Saqaliba ('Village of the Slavs') after them."³

The above passage comes from the year 1952. Lewicki repeated the same information in his entry on "Słowianie w Afryce" ('The Slavs in Africa') in volume I of the *Słownik starożytności słowiańskich*⁴. I have been unable to find any further references to the matter in Lewicki's writings.

¹ Cf. J. Hrbek, *Die Slaven im Dienste der Fatimiden*, "Archiv Orientalni", 1953, vol. 21, pp. 543-81.

² The Arabic word as-Saqaliba may be a noun meaning slaves as well as a proper name denoting Slavs.

³ T. Lewicki, *Osadnictwo słowiańskie i niewolnicy słowiańscy w krajach muzułmańskich*, "Przegląd Historyczny" 1952, vol. 43, No. 3/4, p. 490.

⁴ Idem, entry "Słowianie w Afryce" ['The Slavs in Africa'] in: *Słownik starożytności słowiańskich*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1961, vol. 1, p. 7.

This brief information led me to look up the original Arabic source. The source is the monumental work of McGuckin de Slane done in the middle of the 19th century, an edition of an 11th century Arabic text written by al-Bakri⁵.

The history of the rebellion is reported in a passage of the Arabic text devoted, as al-Bakri puts it, to a description of the route from the place called Oujda to Fez⁶. We need to note at this point that large portions of al-Bakri's work have the nature of a guidebook, with route descriptions for merchants and travellers, short information about the particular places and histories of the local ruling families. The geographical and historical data are enriched with verses and sententiae that made some impression on the chronicler. To understand the atmosphere of the work we have to know how important it was for the author to produce a lively depiction of a scene and a dramatic account of an event. By contrast, it is only very rarely that he gives the date of an event he describes. Still, the few dates that do appear in the text indicate that the narrative was arranged chronologically.

In the passage concerning the route from Oujda to Fez al-Bakri presents some episodes from the lives of several members of the ruling dynasty of Nekor. We are chiefly interested in events that took place under four successive generations of the dynasty. The rulers of the emirate of Nekor were descended from Salih ibn Mansur (a Himyarite)⁷. Members of the dynasty ruled the emirate of Nekor for about three hundred years. Throughout its existence, their tiny kingdom had to keep up a balancing act between the contemporary Maghrib powers. The first of these, founded by the descendants of Idris ibn Abdallah, occupied large parts of the Maghrib, but soon declined as a result of being divided into provinces⁸. In the period of interest to us, that is at the time of the events involving as-Saqaliba, the glory of the Idrisides is already a thing of the past⁹.

⁵ De Slane, *Description de l'Afrique Septentrionale par Abou-Obeid-el-Bekri, texte arabe*, Paris 1965. An earlier edition appeared in Algiers in 1911, but the work must have been done much earlier because the introduction written by de Slane is dated 20 July 1857. Let us add that al-Bakri's chronicle is the first, and therefore the unique, original source for the history of the emirate of Nekor.

⁶ al-Bakri, in: de Slane, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-99.

⁷ C. S. Coon, *Tribes of the Rif*, Harvard African Studies - Peabody Museum of Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. 1931, vol. IX, pp. 27-33. The author uses the name "The Kingdom of Nekor" and locates the country in the Rif mountains.

⁸ A. Dziubiński, *Historia Maroka*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1983, pp. 36-39. We have to add here that the real founder of this short-lived but large state was Idris ibn Abdallah's son Idris II. Cf. also the entry "Idryszydzi" in: *Mały słownik kultury świata arabskiego*, Warszawa 1971, p. 226.

⁹ Most encyclopaedic sources on the Arab dynasties list the rulers of the main line of succession. For that reason, it is difficult to find more information there on the local emirs related to the main dynastic line, who I think may have married into the ruling family of Nekor. Cf. for instance the entry "Idrisides" by D. Eustache in: *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, nouvelle édition, Leyde-Paris 1971, vol. 3, p. 1062. I have not found any essential facts in E. de Zambaur, *Manuel de Généalogie et de Chronologie pour l'histoire de l'Islam*, Hanovre 1927.

Most important to our topic is the fact that we find a few dates in our source which enable us to determine more closely the time of the as-Saqaliba rebellion.

We read in al-Bakri's text that the ruler famous for converting the Berber tribes to Islam was the emir named Salih. His grandson Sa'id ibn Idris ibn Salih ibn Mansur al-Hamiri founded the city of Nekor. At this point the text gives us the first date: in AH 244 (AD 858) the city of Nekor was attacked by the "accursed" Magi¹⁰.

وغرى المجوس لعنهم الله مدينة نكور سنة اربع واربعين و ما يتين

Unfortunately, we do not know for sure who these "Magi" were. The word al-Magus as used by medieval Arab writers can denote: 1. the Zoroastrians, 2. pagans in general, 3. Normans, regardless of their faith¹¹. The sources (al-Ya'qubi) tell us about a Norman (al-Magus) raid on the coast of Muslim Spain as early as AD 843¹².

The builder and defender of Nekor, emir Sa'id ibn Idris ibn Salih ibn Mansur al-Hamiri, died after a reign of thirty-seven years¹³. As the "al-Magus" attack is followed in the text by further episodes from his life (chiefly battles), the probability is that the "al-Magus" episode did not occur at the end of his rule. The construction of the city must also have taken some time. This rules out dating the invasion to the first few years after his accession.

Emir Sa'id ibn Idris ibn Salih ibn Mansur al-Hamiri had several sons. They were Mansur, Hamud, Salih, Ziyada Allh, ar-Rasid, 'Abd ar-Rahman, 'Utman, Muawiya, 'Abd Allah and Idris. The third on the list, Salih ibn Sa'id, succeeded his father. According to al-Bakri's narrative, Salih's reign was filled with disputes or even wars with his brothers. He had Idris imprisoned and then executed. Unfortunately, we have no dates from this period. We are told that Salih ruled for twenty-eight years¹⁴.

Next his youngest son, Sa'id ibn Salih, was elected as emir. It was during the reign of Sa'id that the events involving as-Saqaliba took place.

¹⁰ al-Bakri, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

¹¹ Cf. T. Lewicki, *Źródła arabskie do dziejów słowiańszczyzny*, Wrocław 1969, vol. 2, pp. 70, 270. In my view, another plausible identification of the "Magi" might be with some Berber tribe which adopted Manicheism. The religion was very widespread in North Africa in the later Antiquity. Even St. Augustine was its follower in his youth. Simplifying matters, we can say that the dualistic assumptions of Manicheism about a conflict between the forces of good and evil may have put al-Bakri in the mind of the Persian religion. In fact, Manicheism had its roots in Zoroastrianism.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 270.

¹³ al-Bakri, p. 92.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Al-Bakri continues in his usual fashion with an account of Sa'id's successive achievements: information about the marriage of the emir's sister, a few stanzas of poetry, and then another story of more battles he had to fight with his enemies. But the most important point for us is that this time we have the date of the events: they happened in AH 304, i.e. AD 916¹⁵.

This establishes the temporal limits of the events involving the Slavs. The as-Saqaliba rebellion cannot have taken place later than AD 916, i.e. the beginning of the 10th century. We must also bear in mind that al-Bakri compresses his hero's entire lifetime into a text of several dozen lines. The particular events he lists may have been separated by intervals of a few or even more than ten years. If we assumed theoretically that the attack of the Magi on Nekor (AH 244) occurred in the early years of the reign of Sa'id ibn Salih's grandfather, Sa'id ibn Idris, then, adding the thirty-seven years of Sa'id ibn Idris's reign to the twenty-eight years of the reign of Salih ibn Sa'id we obtain the date of AH 309. That would be a date later than the events which involved the vanquisher of as-Saqaliba, Sa'id ibn Salih.

If we assume that the attack on Nekor took place in the latter half of Sa'id ibn Idris's long reign (of 37 years), all the events connected with his grandson's battles with the Slavs can be shifted to the end of the 9th century.

Of course, the preceding paragraph presents purely theoretical possibilities. What is certain is that the events of the as-Saqaliba rebellion must have occurred not later than the beginning of the 10th century (certainly before AD 916).

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MAREK SKOCZEK

HAYARUM QATALUM

Pendant environ trois cent ans dans la période du huitième au onzième siècle de notre ère a existé au Maghreb un petit émirat situé dans la zone du Rif. Nous devons tout notre savoir sur cet Etat arabo-berbère au chroniqueur arabe du onzième siècle El-Bekri¹.

Aux dires du chroniqueur le fondateur de cet émirat, l'homme, qui unifia les tribus du Rif fut Salih ibn Mansour, issu de la très ancienne famille des Himiarites, dont les racines remontent aux temps de l'Etat de Saba².

La signification du radical du mot arabe dont est issue la dénomination de la famille des Himiarites est liée au radical sémite hmr désignant notamment l'âne (hébreux Chamor ou arabe himar pluriel hamir).

L'analyse du fragment de la chronique d'El-Bekri dans le passage consacré à la tentative de conclusion d'une alliance entre Salih arrière-petit-fils de Salih ibn Mansour et les tribus révoltées de Meknàs³ attire l'attention sur un large fragment consacré à la signification attribuée à l'âne par les parties concluant le pacte:

”...وامتنعت مكناسة عن صالح و... فكتب اليهم يوعدهم
وختم الكتاب وادخله في مخلاة وشدها على حماره
وبعته مع ثقة من ثقاته وقال اذا توسطت بلاد مكناسة
فاترك الحمار بما عليه وانصرف ففعل فاصابت مكناسة
حمار صالح وكان معروفا بينهم واخذوا المخلاة فلما
قرءوا الكتاب ايتمروا على عقرا الحمار والثمادى على
امتناعهم ثم انصرف رايهم الى جمع ما كان عليهم
لصالح فجمغوه وجللوا الحمار بملحفة مروية واتوا صالحا
بالحمار مجللا و... واستعتبوه فاعتبهم...”

¹ de Slane: *Description de l'Afrique Septentrionale par Abou-Obeid El-Bekri*, texte arabe, Alger 1911, p. 88-102.

² J. Jasińska, entrée “Himiarites” [dans:] *Mały Słownik Kultury Świata Arabskiego*, Warszawa 1971, p. 193.

³ El-Bekri, *ibid.*, p. 91-93.