

Merchants and Tradespeople in Late Antiquity and Early Islamic Aswan

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egypt | change & continuities

Border trade

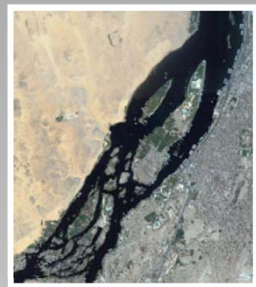
In AD 652 the conflict between Muslim ruled Egypt and Nubia was settled by a treaty (*baqt*), which stipulated an annual exchange of goods between both countries. The Nubians delivered a certain amount of heads (*ru'ūs*), whereas Muslim Egypt provided commodities such as grain and wine (Maqrīzī, Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, Mas'ūdī, Balāḡurī). Commuting merchants enjoyed special protection under this treaty, revealing that border trade was fostered by the Muslim government.

In an Arabic letter of the year AD 758, the governor of Egypt, Mūsā b. Ka'b (AD 758-759), still refers to the *baqt* when he reminds his addressee, the *ṣāhib* of the Muqurra and Nubians, of this mutual agreement (P.HindsNubia (24. 11.758, Qasr Ibrim)). A merchant from Aswan had been mistreated by Nubians, which is why Mūsā urges the Nubian to guarantee the freedom of trade across the border, which they were bound to uphold by contract. The *baqt* was thus not only a diplomatic framework for maintaining peaceful relations between the countries, but also the basis of an economic exchange between Nubia and Egypt.

According to Maqrīzī (AD 1364-1442), it was the *wālī* of Aswan, who received the annual Nubian payment of 360 'heads'. In his *Futūh Miṣr*, Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam (9th cent. AD) gives a number of 360 to 400 *ra's min al-sabī*, of which 40 were for the *wālī* in Aswan. Thus, Aswan and its economy certainly benefitted from this border exchange, which makes the region an interesting case study for analysing economic changes and continuities in the early Muslim period.



Southern Egypt and Lower Nubia (Sidebotham et al. (2008), 346)



The Island of Elephantine and Aswan (eastbank)

Trade in and production of pottery

During the Roman and Late Roman period, Aswan (Roman Syene) was a major production center of pottery for the Nubian market. Findings in Nubia show that imports continued between the late Byzantine and early Islamic period (Adam 2013; 1986). Changes occurred only in the middle of the 9th century, during which W.Y. Adam observed a decline in Aswan wine *amphorae*. This coincides with a change in the composition of the *baqt*. Maqrīzī reports that under al-Mu'taṣim (AD 833-842) wine had ceased to be part of the *baqt*. Based on this complementary archaeological and literary evidence, Aswan had a distinctive economic role in the politically motivated exchange of goods with Nubia. It is still not clear from where the products for the exchange with Nubia originated, but resorting to goods produced close to the border would have reduced transportation costs.

Trade in and production of glass

The glass finds as well do not indicate major changes after the conquest since colours and fabrics remained the same until the Abbasid period. Elephantine and Aswan differ, however, with regard to the colours of glass: in proportion, more stemmed goblets of the Byzantine/Umayyad blue/green colour were found in Aswan than in Elephantine (93:49), whereas in Elephantine the Roman yellow/green exceeds the glass finds in Aswan (28:3) (Keller 2014).

Archaeological evidence suggests that glass came to Elephantine by trade, as the amount of glass finds on the island is too small for a local production at any time. (Keller 2014). The consumer market could thus have differed from that of Aswan. In Aswan, however, the remains of workshops show evidence for glass-production (area 49). Although the workshops date only to the *Mamluk period*, an *Arabic stela* from the cemetery of Aswan could be taken as evidence that the profession of the glassmaker (al-zaḡḡāḡ (الزجاج)) had already existed in the 9th century (al-Tawab, no. 148, 2nd May 870).



Blue/green Byzantine goblet from Aswan (Keller 2014)

Change and Continuities

Written sources from the early Islamic period show that, from the very beginning of Muslim rule over Egypt, decision-makers established suitable conditions to guarantee free border trade. Continuities in trade are also attested by the archaeological evidence here exemplified by production and trade patterns of pottery and glass from the Aswan region of the 7th to 9th century AD.

Craftsmen and merchants in Aswan/Elephantine (6th to 9th cent.) in papyri, ostraca and inscriptions

Byzantine (Elephantine/Syene)
Blacksmith (*chalkeus*) (S), boatman (*nautēs*) (E/S), coppersmith (*chalkotupos*) (S), fisher (*halieus*) (E), caulker (*kalafatēs*) (S), shoemaker (*skuteus*) (S), trader/worker of leather (*derma*) (E/S), potter (*kerameus*) (E/S), brickmaker (*plinthētēs*) (S)

Early Islamic (all from Aswan)
Baker (al-ḥabbāz), beekeeper or bleacher/washer (?) (al-ʿassāl/al-ḡassāl), camelier (al-ḡammāl), carpenter (al-naḡḡār), changer/banker (al-ṣarrāf), coal seller (al-fahḥām), clothier (al-bazzāz), coppersmith (al-ṣaffār), darner (al-raffāʿ), dyer (al-ṣabbāḡ), feltmaker (al-labbād), fisher/hunter (al-ṣayyād), glassmaker (al-zaḡḡāḡ), goldsmith or weaver (?) (al-ṣāʿiḡ/ṣānīf), importer (al-ḡallāb), jeweler (al-ḡawharī), lentilseller/-cooker (al-ʿaddās), perfumer/pharmacist (al-ʿatṭār), sievemaker (al-ḡarābīlī), silkcleaner (al-muṣaffī al-ḡarīrī), stonemason (al-naḡḡāt), maker or seller of wool (al-sawwāf), miller (al-ṭahḡḡān), oilseller (al-zayyāt), platemaker (al-ṣahḡḡān), ropemaker (al-ḡabbāl), saddler (al-sarrāḡ), slave merchant (al-naḡḡās), stonecutter (al-ḡaḡḡār), storeroom keeper (al-ʿanbārī), tailor (al-ḡayyāt), timber merchant (al-ḡaṣṣāb).

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