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 (Maqrizi, Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam, Mas‘ūdī, Baladhuri). 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. Kā‘b (AD 758-759), still refers to the baqt when he reminds his addressee, the sāhib 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 Maqrizi (AD 1364-1442), it was the wāli of Aswan, who received the annual Nubian payment of 360 ‘heads’. In his Futūḥ Misr, Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam (9th cent. AD) gives a number of 360 to 400 ra’s min al-sabi, of which 40 were for the wāli 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.

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. Maqrizi reports that under al-Mu’tasim (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.

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

Byzantines (Elephantine/Syene)

Blacksmith (chalekontaios) (S), boatman (nautes) (E/S), coppersmith (chaktotypos) (S), fisher (holieus) (E), caulkers (kalarafatos) (S), shoemaker (skutetus) (S), trader/worker of leather (dermaji) (E/S), potter (kerameus) (E/S), brickmaker (pintheus) (S)

Early Islamic (all from Aswan)

Baker (al-habbaz), beekeeper or bleacher/washer (? (al-‘assal/al-gassal), camelier (al-‘ammal), carpenter (al-naggari), changer/banker (ar-sarrar), coal seller (ar-ranham), clothier (al-bazzaz), coppersmith (al-saffar), darner (al-raffa), dyer (al-sabbag), feltmaker (al-labbad), fisher/hunter (al-sayyad), glassmaker (al-zaggag), goldsmith or weaver (?) (al-sa‘ig/sann), importer (al-gallab), jeweler (al-gawhari), lentilseller/-cooker (al-‘addas), perfumer/pharmacist (al-‘attar), sievemaker (al-‘arabilili), silkcleaner (al-musaffi al-hariti), stonemason (al-nahhat), maker or seller of wool (al-sawwaf), miller (al-tahhabi), oilseller (al-zayyati), platemaker (al-sahhab), ropemaker (al-hhabal), saddler (al-sarrag), slave merchant (al-nabbs), stonecutter (al-haggari), storeroom keeper (al-‘ambari), tailor (al-hayyat), timber merchant (al-baabab).

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