MAIN ASPECTS OF THE ARAB MIGRATION
TO THE SUDAN

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The appearance of Islam is an important landmark in Arab history: it provided the Arabs with a religious and intellectual bond that helped them in creating a vast empire. Under the banner of Islam Arab forces marched towards the north, east and west reaching places which were probably never visited by Arab immigrants before. The early conquests coincided with an overpopulation, which time and again compelled the Arabs to cross their borders in search of food and pasture. There is indeed some evidence to suggest that some Arabs reached the Sudan in pre-Islamic times either directly across the Red Sea or via Egypt. These were the two major routes that the Arabs followed in later times.

Before discussing the factors that led to the Arab migration into the Sudan we should consider briefly the condition of the country lying south of Aswan, which may be called for convenience the «Sudan».

At the time the prophet Muḥammad was born, that country consisted firstly of the Beja living in more or less their present habitat, secondly of three kingdoms whose sphere of influence was mainly confined to the Nile Valley between Aswan and Sennar on the Blue Nile. The first Kingdom was Nobatia or al-Maris which was eventually united to the second one, al-Muqurra, thus forming the Kingdom of Nubia which extended as far as Kaboshîyya. Dongola was the capital. The third Kingdom was known as ‘Alwa, and Soba was its capital.

The people of the Sudan, and especially the northerners and the

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easterners were originally more akin to the predynastic Egyptian of Negada and were influenced in varying degrees by the semi-negroid tribes that came from the south. These peoples remained pagan until the sixth century when the Christian faith was extensively adopted by the inhabitants of 'Alwa and Nubia where only a portion of the Beja were converted. When the Muslims raided Nubia, Christianity was undoubtedly the predominant religion among the Nubians. This point may explain Nubian resentment to Muslim domination over the Copts and their increasing attacks on Upper Egypt. The Nubians were accustomed to harassing the Egyptian border whenever it was opportune or when they felt that the rulers of Egypt were not strong enough to defend it. But it seems that the present attacks were so alarming that the Caliph 'Umar b. al-Ḥaṭṭāb ordered his viceroy in Egypt, 'Amr b. al-‘Āṣ to put an end to them.

The nature and the number of the early Muslim attacks is not clear from Arabic accounts. There were probably at least two major campaigns one in 641 and the other in 651. The first campaign was met with stout resistance from the famous Nubian bowmen. A Himyarite elder who claims to have participated in two expeditions against the Nubians in the time of 'Amr b. al-‘Āṣ relates: «There were no warriors as brave as they are. I saw one of them asking a Muslim in which part of your body do you want me to put my arrow, and, when the Muslim shows him a certain spot, he would not miss it».

Indeed the resistance was so strong and the booty was so meagre that the Muslims asked 'Amr b. al-‘Āṣ to make peace. 'Amr rejected the idea and the Arabs continued their campaigns until 651 when 'Abd Allāh b. Sa'd b. Abī Sarḥ, the governor of Egypt marched with a force of 5000 as far as Dongola. In the ensuing battle between the Arabs and the Nubians, the latter exhibited the same gallant fighting powers and were only scared by the catapults which bombarded their cathedral. The presence of this strange siege weapon prompted the Nubian King Qalaydarūt to ask for peace. Having failed to defeat their enemies

5. Al-Balāḏūrī, Futūḥ al-Buldān, Cairo 1938, 238, 239.