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The Nubian Frontier as a Refuge Area Warrior Society between c. 1200 and c. 1800 CE: A Comparison between Nubia and the Ottoman Balkans

Henriette Hafsaas¹

Introduction

The period from the Ayyubid invasion of Lower Nubia by Salah ad-Din's brother in 1172–1173 to Mohammed Ali's conquest of northern Sudan in 1820–1821 has been termed the *Feudal Age* by William Adams, the nestor of Nubian archaeology.² The characterizing feature of the Feudal Age was the disappearance of centralized government, and in its place “a growing spirit of military feudalism [...] manifested itself in the appearance of castles and military architecture, in the rise of increasingly independent local feudatories, and in dynastic quarrels within the ruling houses.”³ The rocky and isolated region of Batn el-Hajar has been considered as an area of refuge during these tumultuous times.⁴ For the people living in Nubia, this period was marked by the emergence of tribal societies. Some inaccessible tracts, like Batn el-Hajar, were also characterized by religious resilience where Christianity prevailed, although there was a religious shift from Christianity to Islam among their neighbors.

During the centuries of religious transition from Christianity to Islam in Nubia, the region spanning the stretch of the Nile between the First Cataract in Lower Nubia in the north and the Third Cataract in Upper Nubia in the south was a zone between opposing polities (Map 1). In accordance with David Edwards, Ali Osman,

1 Volda University College.

2 ADAMS, *Nubia*, pp. 510, 635.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 544.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 513.

Map 1. Nubia with sites mentioned in the text. Graphics by the author.



Table 1 Chronological phases in Nubia

Phase	Time-span
Transitional phase	c. 550-600
Early medieval phase	c. 600-850
Classic medieval phase	c. 850-1150
Late medieval phase	c. 1150-1400
Terminal medieval phase	c. 1400-1550
Ottoman occupation of northern Nubia	c. 1550-1800

and Intisar El-Zein, I see this region as a *Nubian frontier*.⁵ However, I will expand the timeframe of the Nubian frontier of the 2nd millennium CE by proposing that it began around 1200, when the stateless zone in northern Nubia was situated between the Muslim Ayyubid and thereafter Mamluk rulers of Egypt and the Christian kingdom of Makuria with its heartlands in the Dongola Reach between the Third and the Fourth Cataracts. I will also include the period from c. 1500 to c. 1800,⁶ when the Nubian frontier was placed between two Islamic empires – the Ottomans in the north and the Funj in the south. I understand this Nubian frontier as a zone between large and expanding states, although the frontier zone was never fully integrated into any of these states. Such a zone outside state administration has also been called a *tribal zone*.⁷ Anthropologists R. Brian Ferguson and Neil L. Whitehead consider tribalization, i.e., the genesis of new tribes, as the result of sociopolitical transformations caused by proximity to a state without being part of it.⁸ The terms *tribe* and *tribal* have been widely criticized for their pejorative connotations and for being colonial constructs.⁹ However, *tribe* is still a useful term for a form of decentralized political organization that often derives from contact with a socio-politically centralized society – usually a state.¹⁰ I will argue that tribalization occurred on the Nubian frontier during the 2nd millennium CE. Since the location on the frontier of a state is the constant variable in this form of tribalization, I will use the term *frontier* rather than *tribal zone*.¹¹ In fact, the land to the south of Egypt has been a frontier during many periods in the history of the complex relationship between Egypt and Sudan.¹²

In the study of the Nubian past, the period between c. 1200 and c. 1800 has received little attention from archaeologists and historians alike – due both to a lack of sources and to a greater interest in more monumental periods. In this article, I will attempt to amend this by applying the cross-cultural adaptation of a *refuge area warrior society*, which was first termed and employed by the anthropologist Christopher Boehm.¹³ I will discuss if the Nubian frontier is compatible with a refuge area warrior adaptation between c. 1200

5 EDWARDS & OSMAN, *Survey in the Mahas Region*, p. 19, and EDWARDS & EL-ZEIN, *Post-Medieval Settlement*, p. 173.

6 EDWARDS & EL-ZEIN, *Post-Medieval Settlement*, p. 173.

7 FERGUSON & WHITEHEAD, *The Violent Edge of Empire*, p. 3.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

9 Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity*, p. 52.

10 HAFSAAS-TSAKOS, *War on the Southern Frontier of the Emerging State of Ancient Egypt*, p. 166.

11 See also *ibid.*, p. 167.

12 E.g., EDWARDS & OSMAN, *Survey in the Mahas Region*, p. 5. See also HAFSAAS-TSAKOS, *War on the Southern Frontier of the Emerging State of Ancient Egypt*, p. 396, and Van der Vliet, *Contested Frontiers: Southern Egypt and Northern Nubia, AD 300–1500*.

13 BOEHM, *Mountain Refuge Area Adaptations*, pp. 24, 31, 35.

and c. 1800, and how the frontier situation affected processes of tribalization and the religious transition from Christianity to Islam. I focus on the developments on Sai Island, where the Medieval Sai Project¹⁴ has undertaken a survey that included post-medieval remains, but I also include the wider frontier zone by using available data to support the arguments in this comparative case study.

The emergence of the Nubian frontier of the 2nd millennium CE

Nubia was evangelized in the second half of the 6th century by missions from the Byzantine court in Constantinople, while the Coptic Church centered on the Patriarchate of Alexandria played an important role after the initial Christianization.¹⁵ The conversion to Christianity marks the beginning of the Medieval period in Nubia (Table 1). During the early medieval phase, Nubia was divided into three kingdoms: Nobadia (or Maris) in the north, Makuria (or Dotawo) in the middle, and Alodia (or Alwa) in the south (see Map 1). Makuria annexed the northern kingdom of Nobadia around the turn to the eighth century,¹⁶ and Makuria thus became a large state stretching from the First Cataract in the north to al-Abwāb about halfway between the Fifth and the Sixth Cataract in the south. In contrast to Christian Nubia, Egypt came under Muslim rulers in the early 7th century.¹⁷ Despite some confrontations, there appears to have been rather peaceful relations between the Christian kingdoms in Nubia in the south and the Muslim rulers of Egypt in the north under the Abbasid and Fatimid dynasties.¹⁸ The early and classical phases of the medieval period in Nubia have been meticulously studied, but the collapse of the Nubian kingdoms and the religious shift from Christianity to Islam have not been as thoroughly explored.

The last vizier of the Fatimid Dynasty in Egypt, Salah ad-Din, became the first sultan in the Ayyubid Dynasty when he seized power in Egypt in 1171.¹⁹ The largest group in the Fatimid army was formed by African footsoldiers known as the *Sūdān* (meaning “blacks” in Arabic).²⁰ The demolition and dispersal of the *Sūdān* was necessary in order for the Fatimid state to collapse.²¹ Already when Salah ad-Din was a vizier, he replaced the old multi-ethnic Fatimid army with an army of Turkmen and Kurdish horsemen.²² This was achieved by executing the commander of the *Sūdān*, which caused the black sol-

14 HAFSAAS-TSAKOS & TSAKOS, *First Glimpses into the Medieval Period on Sai Island*, pp. 78–79.

15 EDWARDS, *The Nubian Past*, pp. 216–217.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 236–237.

17 HOLT & DALY, *A History of the Sudan*, p. 13.

18 EDWARDS, *The Nubian Past*, pp. 248–249, 214–215.

19 BAADJ, *Saladin, the Almohads and the Banū Ghāniya*, p. 102.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

21 LEV, *Saladin in Egypt*, p. 82.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 141, 150.

diers to revolt. Saladin crushed the rebellion, and he justified the violence toward them by alleging that the commander plotted against him.²³ Thousands of the Sūdān rebels sought refuge in Upper Egypt, where they probably found allies in Nubia. In 1172–1173, Nubians together with the remnants of the Sūdān regiments of the Fatimid army attacked Aswan in an attempt to invade Upper Egypt.²⁴

At this time, the southern borderlands of Egypt, including the southernmost town Aswan, the gold-bearing Wadi Allaqi, and the Red Sea port Aydhab, were controlled by the *Beni Kanz* – a semi-nomadic Muslim tribe of partly Arab descent.²⁵ This tribe was formed by a coalition between Arabs of Aswan and the Beja tribe of the Eastern Desert. The alliance started in the early 10th century and was cemented by large-scale intermarriage.²⁶ The leader of the Beni Kanz had been considered the *de facto* governor of Aswan since the 10th century under the title *Kanz ad-Dawla*,²⁷ and his subjects were often referred to as the *Kunuz* (singular *Kanzi*).²⁸ When the Nubians and the Sūdān foot-soldiers of the Fatimids attacked Aswan, the *Kanz ad-Dawla* asked Salah ad-Din for help. Salah ad-Din dispatched a contingent who assisted the Beni Kanz in expelling the intruders.²⁹ Thereafter, Salah ad-Din sent a major punitive campaign into Nubia in 1172–1173 under the leadership of his brother Tūrānshāh. The Ayyubids captured and occupied Qasr Ibrim – a fortified Nubian settlement on a defensible hill-top in the central part of Lower Nubia.³⁰ During the occupation, Qasr Ibrim was given as an *iqṭaʿ* (Arabic for land grant) to Ibrahim al-Kurdi and his contingent of Kurds. Al-Kurdi and his men used Qasr Ibrim as a base from where they launched attacks on the local population and raided the region.³¹ There are indications that they attacked Faras, the seat of the eparch of the northern province of Makuria and the former capital of the independent kingdom of Nobadia, and killed the bishop there.³² In 1175, al-Kurdi and some of his men drowned in an attempt to reach the island of Adindan. The remaining Kurds retreated to Egypt with their plunder, and Nubians resettled at Qasr Ibrim.³³

Around the time of the Ayyubid occupation of Qasr Ibrim, the large settlement of Meinarti, with a strategic position on an island straddling the northern end of the Second Cataract, was temporarily

23 Ibid., p. 84.

24 BAAJ, *Saladin, the Almohads and the Banū Ghāniya*, pp. 103–105.

25 Ibid., p. 92.

26 BAAJ, *The Political Context of the Egyptian Gold Crisis during the Reign of Saladin*, p. 126.

27 ADAMS, *Nubia*, pp. 524–525 and HOLT & DALY, *A History of the Sudan*, p. 17.

28 BAAJ, *The Political Context of the Egyptian Gold Crisis during the Reign of Saladin*, p. 126.

29 BAAJ, *Saladin, the Almohads and the Banū Ghāniya*, p. 105.

30 EDWARDS, *The Nubian Past*, p. 215.

31 BAAJ, *The Political Context of the Egyptian Gold Crisis during the Reign of Saladin*, pp. 131–132.

32 BAAJ, *Saladin, the Almohads and the Banū Ghāniya*, p. 105.

33 BAAJ, *The Political Context of the Egyptian Gold Crisis during the Reign of Saladin*, p. 132.

ly abandoned. The inhabitants had blocked the doors of many of the houses before they left. This brief hiatus has been linked to the time of the Ayyubid occupation of Qasr Ibrim.³⁴ Also other important settlements in southern Lower Nubia were abandoned in the latter half of the 12th century, and the cathedrals at both Qasr Ibrim and Faras were damaged.³⁵ The list of bishops of Faras, as compiled on one of the walls in the cathedral, came to an end in the late 12th century. Thereafter, the bishopric of Faras appears to have been combined with that of Qasr Ibrim.³⁶ All this testifies to the instability caused by the Ayyubid attacks in southern Lower Nubia.

In 1174, only two years after the Beni Kanz received military support from the Ayyubids in connection with the campaign against the Nubians and the Sūdān rebels in Aswan,³⁷ the Arab tribes of Upper Egypt saw their traditional privileges being threatened by the new sultan. Salah ad-Din gave the *iqta'* of the Beni Kanz to an Ayyubid emir, imposed heavy taxes on the Arab tribes, and reduced the number of Arab troops in the army. The Kanz ed-Dawla therefore instigated a revolt against the regime in 1174.³⁸ Salah ad-Din responded by sending a large expeditionary force to the south. The Ayyubids engaged the Beni Kanz in a fierce battle, where the latter were decisively defeated.³⁹ The Beni Kanz sought refuge in northern Lower Nubia, and they greatly influenced the developments there.⁴⁰

The Ayyubid campaigns of the 1170s caused severe political and demographic changes in Lower Nubia. The Beni Kanz principality in Aswan was crushed, and the Kunuz migrated to Lower Nubia in great numbers.⁴¹ The Fatimid order in Upper Egypt, Lower Nubia, and the Eastern Desert was thus destroyed.⁴² A consequence of the Ayyubid withdrawal from Lower Nubia was that the region remained outside the Ayyubid Sultanate spanning Egypt, Syria, northern Iraq, the Hijaz, Yemen, and parts of the North African littoral. Simultaneously, Lower Nubia north of Qasr Ibrim appears to have slipped out of Makurian control. The northern part of Lower Nubia was thus a region outside state administration, but this stateless zone still bordered on states with centralized governments both in the north and in the south. I consider the Ayyubid intrusion as the event that triggered the emergence of the Nubian frontier of the 2nd millennium CE. Later invasions by the Mamluks and the collapse of

34 EDWARDS, *The Nubian Past*, p. 231.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 232.

36 Jakobielski, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras on the Basis of Coptic Inscriptions*, pp. 190–195.

37 See above.

38 BAADJ, *Saladin, the Almohads and the Banū Ghāniya*, p. 106.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

40 ADAMS, *Nubia*, pp. 524–525.

41 BAADJ, *The Political Context of the Egyptian Gold Crisis during the Reign of Saladin*, p. 135. See also ADAMS, *Nubia*, pp. 524–525.

42 BAADJ, *The Political Context of the Egyptian Gold Crisis during the Reign of Saladin*, p. 135.

Site	Number of epitaphs	Date	Source
Kertassi	1	10th century	DBMNT
Tafa	43	9th–14th century (mainly 10th century)	DBMNT, Seignobos p.c.
Kalabsha	1	10th century	DBMNT
Derr	3	11th–12th century	DBMNT
Arminna	5	11th century	DBMNT
Jebel Adda	18	11th–12th century (?)	DBMNT, Seignobos p.c. com.
Debeira (Komangana)	2	10th century	DBMNT
Meinarti	5	11th century	DBMNT
Mirgissa	1	11th century (?)	Seignobos, p.c.
Total	79	Mainly 9th–12th century	

Table 2. Sites in Lower Nubia with epitaphs in Arabic. Sources: Database of Medieval Nubian Texts and Seignobos, p.c.

Makuria expanded the Nubian frontier until it stretched from the First to the Third Cataract.

The Islamization and tribalization of Nubia

Both archaeological remains and historical documents can give us some indications of the process of Islamization in Lower Nubia. Grzegorz Ochała's *Database of Medieval Nubian Texts*⁴³ records 28 epitaphs in Arabic from Lower Nubia, and Robin Seignobos has identified another 51 epitaphs in Arabic from Tafa, Jebel Adda, and Mirgissa (Table 2).⁴⁴ Most of these epitaphs preserve Arab names for the deceased, and the earliest epitaph comes from Tafa in northern Lower Nubia and records 832 CE as the year of death for Ibrahim, son of Ishakh.⁴⁵ In the late 9th century, Muslims were buried near Debeira, which is south of Faras.⁴⁶ Ibn Sulaym al-Aswani was sent as an envoy to Old Dongola by the Fatimids in the late 10th century, and he recorded that the northern part of Lower Nubia was open to Muslims. Al-Aswani furthermore commented that some of the Muslim inhabitants spoke poor Arabic, and this has been taken as an indication for conversions to Islam by the local Nubian-speak-

43 *Database of Medieval Nubian Texts*, <http://www.dbmnt.uw.edu.pl/>.

44 SEIGNOBOS, *L'Égypte et la Nubie à l'époque médiévale*, vol. 2, pp. 56–67, and SEIGNOBOS, p.c.

45 DBMNT 703.

46 DBMNT 513 and 514.

ing population.⁴⁷ There is also a conspicuous lack of late medieval churches in Lower Nubia.⁴⁸

An important factor in the Islamization of Lower Nubia was the migration of Arab tribes into the region.⁴⁹ The aforementioned Beni Kanz was the most influential Arab tribe in Lower Nubia. The Beni Kanz and the local Nubians intermarried, and in time they were recognized as the ethnic group of the Kunuz.⁵⁰ In the early 19th century, the territory of the Kunuz extended from the First Cataract to Wadi Seboua.⁵¹ The Islamization was partly caused by intermarriage between the Nubians and the immigrating Muslims.⁵² The process of Islamization in Lower Nubia thus seems to have started in the 9th century and then accelerated from the 10th century onwards, when the population in Lower Nubia appears to have adopted Islam in increasing numbers.

It is more probable that the Beni Kanz introduced a tribal organization to the communities in Lower Nubia, which had become stateless in the late 12th century, than that there was a gradual emergence of the tribal system in Lower Nubia. Based on travelers' descriptions, it is known that a tribal system existed in Lower Nubia in the early 19th century. John Lewis Burckhardt observed that the Kunuz were "subdivided into many smaller tribes, which have given their names to the districts they inhabit [...]. Great jealousies often exist amongst these different tribes, which sometimes break out in wars."⁵³ Nevertheless, there must have been local adaptations to the peculiar conditions on the Nubian frontier. In any case, the consequence of the absence of a state authority was that Lower Nubia became tribal territory.

During the remaining period of Ayyubid rule in Egypt, the relations between Egypt and Nubia appear to have been peaceful.⁵⁴ This changed when the Mamluks seized power in Egypt in 1250. The Mamluk rulers were warrior-kings and converts to Islam, and they thus adopted an aggressive policy towards Nubia in order to bring under control both insubordinate Arab tribes taking refuge there and the Christian kingdom of Makuria.⁵⁵ The remaining Christians in Lower Nubia probably retreated southwards, and the rocky and isolated region of Batn el-Hajar appears to have been the area chosen as refuge for these Christians.⁵⁶ There are few records of events

47 HOLT & DALY, *A History of the Sudan*, p. 15.

48 ADAMS, *Nubia*, p. 511.

49 EDWARDS, *The Nubian Past*, p. 254.

50 ADAMS, *Nubia*, p. 525.

51 BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia*, p. 25.

52 ADAMS, *Nubia*, p. 525.

53 BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia*, p. 26.

54 HOLT & DALY, *A History of the Sudan*, p. 18.

55 *Ibid.*

56 ADAMS, *Nubia*, p. 513.

in Lower Nubia during the 13th century,⁵⁷ and no Arabic funerary stelae have been found dating to this time.⁵⁸ This indicates that also part of the Muslim population fled from the region due to the unstable conditions there. Further research is needed in order to establish their destination.

The Mamluks also intervened in the politics of Makuria.⁵⁹ Shakanda, a Nubian prince with a claim to the throne, appealed to the Mamluks for help to overthrow the king. The Mamluks responded to the invitation by sending their army to Nubia.⁶⁰ The king in Old Dongola ordered the governor of Lower Nubia to evacuate the land before the arrival of the Mamluk intruders,⁶¹ and this may have contributed to the depopulation of Lower Nubia. The Mamluks defeated the army of Makuria at Old Dongola in 1276.⁶² Makuria became a vassal state of Egypt when the Mamluks installed Shakanda on the throne. The people of Makuria were forced to pay the *jizyah* – a per capita yearly tax imposed on non-Muslims.⁶³ From this time onwards, the kings of Makuria were mainly puppet kings, and the real contenders for the kingdom were the Mamluks and the Beni Kanz.⁶⁴ In 1317, the Mamluks for the first time installed a Muslim on the throne in Old Dongola. King Abdallah Barshambu was a member of the Makurian royal family, and he had converted to Islam while he was a Mamluk hostage in Cairo.⁶⁵ A stele with an Arabic inscription found in the so-called throne hall at Old Dongola indicates that the building was converted into a mosque in 1317. A recent reinvestigation of both the context and the text of the stele throws doubt on the current understanding of this find.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, several churches in Nubia were in time converted into mosques,⁶⁷ like the cathedral of Qasr Ibrim. The centralized government of Makuria seems to have collapsed in the latter half of the 14th century.⁶⁸ Both the Third and the Fourth Cataract may have been refuge areas for Christians in the Dongola Reach, as both regions have numerous settlements of late medieval date.⁶⁹

The Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt was defeated by the Ottoman ruler Selim I in 1517, and Egypt became a province of the Ottoman Em-

57 Ibid., p. 525.

58 SEIGNOBOS, *L'Égypte et la Nubie à l'époque médiévale*, vol. 2, pp. 56–67.

59 EDWARDS, *The Nubian Past*, p. 215.

60 ADAMS, *Nubia*, p. 526.

61 EDWARDS, *The Nubian Past*, p. 215.

62 ADAMS, *Nubia*, p. 526.

63 INSOLL, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 107.

64 ADAMS, *Nubia*, p. 529.

65 INSOLL, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 114.

66 SEIGNOBOS, *L'Égypte et la Nubie à l'époque médiévale*, vol. 1, pp. 353–356.

67 EL-ZEIN, *Islamic Archaeology in Sudan*, pp. 239–240.

68 EDWARDS, *The Nubian Past*, p. 216.

69 Ibid., pp. 233, 227.

pire.⁷⁰ The regions further south remained under tribal control until the 1560s,⁷¹ when the Ottomans advanced to the Second Cataract and created the province of Ibrim.⁷² Although the Funj Sultanate in Central Sudan never reached that far north, the Ottoman authorities apparently considered its rising power as a major threat to the Red Sea port of Suakin and the regions of Upper Egypt and Nubia.⁷³ In 1584, an Ottoman army passed the Batn el-Hajar and seized Sai Island and Sesibi. The army continued south beyond the Third Cataract, and the Ottomans allegedly defeated the Funj army at Hannek.⁷⁴ The following year, Sai Island and the wider region of Sikkoot/Sukkoot became a district in the southernmost Ottoman province on the Nile,⁷⁵ and the Ottomans established their southernmost fortress on Sai Island.⁷⁶ This event marked the end of the medieval era in Nubia and the beginning of the almost three centuries long period of Ottoman occupation of Nubia north of Sai Island.⁷⁷

We have now seen how the Nubian frontier slipped out of state control in stages: First, Lower Nubia with the Ayyubid occupation, and thereafter Upper Nubia with the Mamluk interventions. In the absence of centralized government, a tribal organization emerged – first in Lower Nubia and then spreading into Batn el-Hajar as the Christians retreated southwards into more marginal environments above the Second Cataract. A similar process took place in Upper Nubia after the collapse of Makuria in the late 1300s, and some Christians from the Dongola Reach appear to have sought refuge in the Third Cataract region.

This brings me to the core of this article, which is the following research question: Did the people inhabiting the area between the Second and the Third Cataract develop into a refuge area warrior society as an adaptation to the ecological and political environment on the frontier between states during the time span from c. 1200 to c. 1800?

Refuge area warrior society

When politically centralized states or empires expand into small-scale societies on their peripheries, the conquered people have three main options: incorporation and subjugation, resistance, or

70 ALEXANDER, *Ottoman Frontier Policies in North-East Africa*, p. 226.

71 ALEXANDER, *The Turks on the Middle Nile*, p. 15.

72 ALEXANDER, *Ottoman Frontier Policies in North-East Africa*, p. 227.

73 MÉNAGE, *The Ottomans and Nubia in the 16th century*, p. 144.

74 PEACOCK, *The Ottomans and the Funj Sultanate in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, p. 96.

75 ALEXANDER, *The Turks on the Middle Nile*, p. 18.

76 ALEXANDER, *Qalat Sai, the Most Southerly Ottoman Fortress in Africa*, p. 16.

77 HAFSAAS-TSAKOS & TSAKOS, *A Second Look into the Medieval Period on Sai Island*, p. 88.

flight.⁷⁸ In some regions, there are natural frontiers of unproductive and inaccessible land around the expanding states, e.g., mountains, deserts, or islands. Such regions can serve as suitable refuge areas, which the fleeing people can “use as natural fortresses to maintain their local autonomy.”⁷⁹

Reading Christopher Boehm’s ethnohistorical works on feuding among the tribal Montenegrins on the frontier of the Ottoman Empire before 1850,⁸⁰ I was struck by the parallels to the situation on the Nubian frontier of the 2nd millennium CE. According to Boehm, people taking refuge in inhospitable terrain may turn into a “refuge area warrior society,” and he considers this as a cross-cultural adaptation.⁸¹ In the Balkans, several such refuge area warrior societies appeared in rugged mountain regions that the Ottomans were unable to control, such as the Montenegrins in the Dinaric Mountains,⁸² the tribes in the Accursed Mountains of northern Albania,⁸³ and the Maniots in the Taygetus Mountains in the southern Peloponnese.⁸⁴ The people taking refuge on the frontiers of the Ottoman empire were often fleeing from forced conversion to Islam.⁸⁵

Michael Galaty, an archaeologist working in northern Albania, has identified four features of refuge area warrior societies that can be identified through archaeological and historical investigations:

1. Location on a frontier;
2. Relatively high population density in areas with low carrying capacity;
3. Permanent residence in defensible locations;
4. Evidence for inter- and intragroup violence, i.e., warfare and feuds.⁸⁶

I have already shown that the territory between the First and the Third Cataract was a frontier in the period under consideration, and I have suggested that the region between the Second and the Third Cataract was a refuge area for Christians from both Lower and Upper Nubia. In order to establish that Boehm’s theory is applicable for the Nubian case study, I will examine the three other features of refuge area warrior societies, as identified by Galaty, against the existing archaeological and historical data of Nubia. Let us first consider

78 BOEHM, *Mountain Refuge Area Adaptations*, p. 24, and FERGUSON & WHITEHEAD, *The Violent Edge of Empire*, p. 17.

79 BOEHM, *Mountain Refuge Area Adaptations*, pp. 24, 35.

80 Ibid. and BOEHM, *Blood Revenge*.

81 BOEHM, *Mountain Refuge Area Adaptations*, p. 35.

82 Ibid. and BOEHM, *Blood Revenge*.

83 GALATY, “An Offence to Honor Is Never Forgiven...”

84 HAFSAAS, *Mani as a Refuge Area Warrior Society during the Ottoman Period*.

85 E.g., GALATY, “An Offence to Honor Is Never Forgiven...,” p. 144.

86 Ibid., p. 153.

Fig. 1. Stretch of Batn el-Hajar showing mountains and the narrow river-bed. Photo by the author.



the second feature of the refuge area warrior adaptation: relatively high population density in areas with low carrying capacity.

High population density

Between the Second and the Third Cataract, the Nile crosses a region where the basement complex mainly consists of hard granite. In this region, the flow of the Nile is broken by numerous islands and cataracts, and the river-bed is narrow and steep-walled. In this landscape, the river bank has few tracts of alluvial soil. The Batn el-Hajar in the northern part of this stretch is indeed the most barren landscape along the Nile (Figure 1).⁸⁷ Still, it was in this rocky area that a substantial population sought a living in late medieval times – probably because of a gradual Islamization and violent state intrusions in Lower Nubia. The Second Cataract and the Batn el-Hajar seem to have been a barrier for the southward expansion of Islam for several centuries. During this time, the Batn el-Hajar had a relatively high population density in an area with low carrying capacity,⁸⁸ but this may not have been representative for the whole stretch up to the Third Cataract, as the section of the Nile between the Dal and the Third Cataract is more fertile.

A fundamental aspect for a population's adaptation to its natural environment is the population density in relation to the amount of food that can be produced in a standard year.⁸⁹ The high population density on the Nubian frontier in the late medieval and Ottoman pe-

⁸⁷ ADAMS, *Nubia*, pp. 22, 26.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 511.

⁸⁹ BOEHM, *Mountain Refuge Area Adaptations*, p. 175.

riods was likely a strain on the carrying capacity of the land. One solution for hungry people is raiding.⁹⁰ Contemporary written accounts from the Nubian frontier give the impression that the river route was very dangerous, and travelers had a high likelihood of being robbed and even killed by the local people.⁹¹ Another solution are land grabs: If a household desperately needed additional land for pasture or agriculture in order to survive, it is likely that this family would intrude on the land of its neighbors. This can lead to quarrels over productive land that can again turn into feuds.⁹² A feud starts with a homicide followed by revenge killing. Feuds are deliberately limited and consist of carefully counted killings, and they take place between two groups on the basis of specific rules for killing, pacification, and compensation.⁹³ Feuding is typically a feature of societies without or with limited centralized political control,⁹⁴ and this was the situation for the people on the Nubian frontier. Feuding was a result from having to cope with competition for resources in an environment with low carrying capacity and a relatively high population density. I will thus argue that the need for defensive housings on the Nubian frontier was not a consequence of external threats, but rather related to feuds within the refuge society that arose from interpersonal conflicts in a marginal area that had to be solved without a centralized government.⁹⁵ This brings us to the next characteristic: Permanent residences in defensible locations.

Defensive Settlements

Permanent residence in defensible locations is characteristic for the refuge area between the Second and the Third Cataract of the Nile. During the late medieval period, a distinctive type of tower-house, also called castle-house, was developed in this region.⁹⁶ This house-type can be linked to a wider tradition of tower-houses around much of the eastern and central Mediterranean, and the tower-houses of Nubia are probably the southernmost distribution of this type of defensive housing.⁹⁷

The tower-houses between the Second and the Third Cataract were almost always discrete structures with two stories. Most examples have substantial stone foundations up to two meters high, and this ground-floor was devoted to vaulted storage cellars. The

90 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

91 EDWARDS & EL-ZEIN, *Post-Medieval Settlement*, p. 177.

92 BOEHM, *Mountain Refuge Area Adaptations*, p. 178.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 194.

94 BOEHM, *Blood Revenge*, p. 39.

95 See *ibid.*, pp. 87–88.

96 ADAMS, *Nubia*, p. 514.

97 EDWARDS, *Medieval Settlement*, p. 158.

Fig. 2a-c.
Probable tower-
houses on Sai
Island recorded by
the Medieval Sai
Project in 2009.
a: Site 8-G-510;
b: Site 8-G-503;
c: Site 8-G-509.
Photos: Medieval
Sai Project,
Henriette Hafsaas
and Alexandros
Tsakos.



second story was built of mud-brick and provided the living quarters. The only access was through a doorway at the level of the second floor, and a retractable ladder must have been used to enter these houses.⁹⁸

In the Batn el-Hajar, notable tower-houses were located in places like Kulubnarti and Dal,⁹⁹ and the survey of the Third Cataract region has recorded this defensive house-type occurring singularly or in groups at eleven localities.¹⁰⁰ In 2009, the survey of the Medieval Sai Project, identified the ruins of three probable tower-houses on Sai Island (Figure 2a-c).¹⁰¹ It may be significant that all of them were located on the southeastern bank, which is the most barren part of Sai Island (Map 2).

At the end of the medieval period, the tower-houses were gradually replaced by another type of defensive housing – the castles or *diffis*, as they are called by the Nubians.¹⁰² Colonel George English, an American officer serving in Mohammed Ali's army in 1820–1821, remarked that many villages south of Sai Island had a fortified castle with towers at the corners,¹⁰³ which must have been *diffis*. Ruins of *diffis* are plentiful in the region between the Dal and the Third Cataract. At least 39 *diffis* have been recorded in the region between the Dal Cataract and Sai Island, and more than 90 *diffis* were registered in the Third Cataract region.¹⁰⁴ The survey of the Medieval Sai Project recorded eight sites with *diffis* on Sai Island (See Map 2 and Figure 3).¹⁰⁵ Since these fortified houses were described by George English, many of the *diffis* should predate the 19th century. I argue that this type of fortified house probably belongs to the period of Ottoman occupation of northern Nubia, i.e., from the late 16th century to the beginning of the 19th century. In contrast to the tower-houses of the late medieval period, the *diffis* were built near land that could be cultivated and *saqia* wells were commonly associated with the castles on Sai Island. This may suggest that there were no external threats in the region under Ottoman rule, but that the Ottomans did not interfere in local affairs. The locals could inhabit the most productive land, but they still needed defensive housing in case feuds erupted in order to solve interpersonal conflicts. Characteristic of both the tower-houses and the *diffis* is that they were too frail to withstand an army, but suitable as refuges during feuds.

98 ADAMS, *Nubia*, p. 515.

99 *Ibid.*

100 EDWARDS, *Medieval Settlement*, pp. 157–159.

101 HAFSAAS-TSAKOS & TSAKOS, "List of Surveyed Sites: Medieval Sai Project."

102 EDWARDS & EL-ZEIN, *Post-Medieval Settlement*, p. 194.

103 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

104 *Ibid.*, p. 194.

105 HAFSAAS-TSAKOS & TSAKOS, "List of Surveyed Sites: Medieval Sai Project."

Map 2. Sai Island with locations of tower-houses and diffis recorded by Medieval Sai Project in 2009. Graphics by the author.

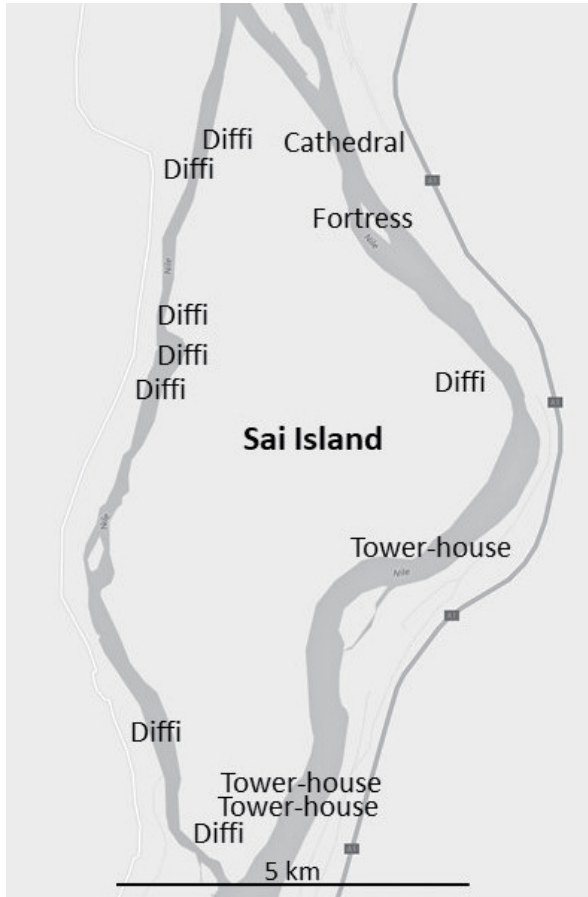


Fig. 3. Diffi of site 8-B-510 on Sai Island recorded by the Medieval Sai Project in 2009. Photo: Medieval Sai Project, Henriette Hafsaas and Alexandros Tsakos.



Evidence for warfare and feuds

The last feature of the refuge area warrior adaptation is evidence for warfare and feuds. Archaeological evidence for violence can be circumstantial like the presence of defensible housing. Skeletal material that could provide evidence for violence through traces on the bones is unfortunately largely lacking for the Nubian frontier in the late medieval and Ottoman periods due to restrictions on excavating Muslim graves.

The best source to throw light on inter- and intragroup violence is thus written accounts. Burkhardt traveled from Aswan to the Third Cataract in 1813, and he recorded several instances of intra-group violence in Nubia that appear to be instances of feuds.¹⁰⁶ I will quote one of these passages:

At the time of my visit, the Nubians belonging to Assouan were at war with their southern neighbours, occasioned by the latter having intercepted a vessel laden with dates, knowing it to belong to a merchant of Assouan. A battle had been fought [...] in which a pregnant woman was killed by a stone [...]. The southern party, to whom the deceased belonged, was now demanding from their enemies the debt of blood [...]. This the latter refused to pay, and being the weaker in numbers, [...] the men thought proper to retire from the field, [...] leaving only their women and female children, and retired with the males to Assouan. On my return [...], the Nubians were still at Assouan, where a caravan of women arrived daily, with provisions for their husbands.

A closer examination of archaeological and historical sources from Nubia has the potential for providing more information on the topics of both warfare and feuding, as well as the conditions in the refuge area warrior society more generally.

Conclusions: The refuge area warrior adaptation in Nubia

I have argued that a refuge area warrior society was established in the rocky and inaccessible tract of the Nile between the Second and the Third Cataract between c. 1200 and c. 1800. This was probably the refuge area of a population who adopted a segmentary tribal organization in order to cope in this marginal area outside state control. The supporting evidence that I have relied upon is the characteristic features of refuge area warrior societies: the location on a frontier between predatory states, a sudden population explosion

¹⁰⁶ BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia*, p. 6.

in a rather barren area, the construction of defensible housing, a prevalence of raiding, and the use of violence as a solution to interpersonal conflict.

The success of the refuge area warrior adaptations depends on several factors. The refuge territory has to be defensible and of marginal economic and strategic value to the predatory power so that the will to subjugate the tribesmen is limited.¹⁰⁷ Still, the refuge area has to be productive enough to support the tribesmen economically, and it seems characteristic that refuge area warriors also tend to go raiding.¹⁰⁸ The rugged mountains and islands in the Batn el-Hajar and the Third Cataract region were both marginal in economic terms and provided advantages for self-defense and flight. The more productive land between the Batn el-Hajar and the Third Cataract was situated behind the barriers of the cataracts and thus rather inaccessible. Politically, a segmentary tribal organization is crucial by “providing both a military format and a political structure for [...] fast decision-making at various collective levels,”¹⁰⁹ and great value needs to be put on local autonomy and warrior honors.¹¹⁰

The retreat to a refuge area between the Second and the Third Cataract appears to have delayed the adoption of Islam by the people of the Nubian frontier, while the peculiar conditions in the region were crucial for the emergence of a regional identity.¹¹¹ In this article, I have discussed the characteristics of a *refuge area warrior society* and compared this adaptation with the conditions on the Nubian frontier between c. 1200 and c. 1800. The aim has been to add a dimension to our understanding of the late medieval and Ottoman periods in Nubia, and it also demonstrates the comparative value of the theory of refuge area warrior societies as a cross-cultural adaptation by adding a case study where a tribal organization with feuding and raiding in an inhospitable region became a successful strategy for cultural survival in face of expanding states.

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107 BOEHM, *Mountain Refuge Area Adaptations*, p. 40.

108 Ibid., p. 33, and GALATY, “An Offence to Honor Is Never Forgiven...,” p. 150.

109 BOEHM, *Mountain Refuge Area Adaptations*, p. 33.

110 BOEHM, *Blood Revenge*, p. 41.

111 See EDWARDS & OSMAN, *Survey in the Mahas Region*, p. 19.

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