

## Notes



# The First Step to Apostasy? (An Ethiopian Ruler's Missive to the Sultan Baybars Re-interpreted)

*Serge A. Frantsouzoff*

Professor, Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, National Research University  
Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg State University, St. Petersburg,  
Russia

*serge.frantsouzoff@yahoo.fr*

## Abstract

A majority of the sources on medieval Ethiopia are written in the Gə'əz language in the “genre” of history. However, some texts written in Arabic remain equally important. Among such texts the missive addressed by a ruler of Ethiopia to the Mamluk Sultan Baybars (known as al-Malik al-Zāhir) in AH 673 / AD 1274-75 is of considerable interest. The Ethiopian ruler can be identified as the founder of the Ethiopian Solomonic dynasty Yəkunno Amlak. The text of this missive survived in three Arabic versions: in the Islamic “encyclopaedias” by al-Nuwayrī and al-Qalqashadī (resp. AH 730 / AD 1330 and AH 814 / AD 1412) and in the *dhayl* (continuation) to the Universal history by al-Makīn, compiled by the Coptic author al-Mufaḍḍal b. Abī'l-Faḍā'il in AH 759 / AD 1358. All three versions are almost identical, however, the version by al-Nuwayrī is the longest one and the closest to the original. The detailed analysis of this version supplied by the full translation into English made for the first time by the present author clearly shows that the person who wrote it was the *amār* (commander) of the Amhara and not yet the king of Ethiopia. However, he had an intention to become himself with his people a subject of Baybars to obtain help from him against the Zagwe dynasty. As a consequence, the Ethiopian Christians would have been under the Muslim power. However, the Mamluk Sultan was less interested in that affair.

## Keywords

Ethiopia – Arabic sources; Ethiopia – dynasties – Zagwe, Solomonids; Yəkunno Amlak – the first King of the Solomonids; Baybars – the Mamluk Sultan; diplomatic correspondence between the Ethiopian kings and the Mamluks

To reconstruct and interpret the events of the Medieval Ethiopian history one has to rely almost exclusively on the local sources written in the Classical Ethiopic (Gə'əz) language. These sources are mostly represented by the two “genres”, i.e. historical works and hagiography. Some rare exceptions are found among the works written in Arabic and Coptic, which belong to the Christian and Islamic traditions. This fact is even more remarkable since the Ethiopian Church for the period of one and a half thousand years did constitute an integral part of the Coptic Church and the Head of Ethiopian Church was appointed by the Coptic Patriarch.

One of the crucial episode of the Middle Ages in Ethiopia, viz. the *coup d'État* commonly dated from AD 1270, which brought to power the so-called Solomonic dynasty, is poorly reflected in sources, since it took place before the first Ethiopian chronicles and lives of Ethiopian Saints were written. However, three Arabic historical works preserved a text of the missive sent to the Mamluk Sultan Baybars I in AH 673 / AD 1274-75 by a certain ruler of Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> This ruler can be identified as Yəkunno Amlak,<sup>2</sup> who founded (or according to local legendary tradition restored) that dynasty. These Arabic sources are as follows.

1. The *Nihāyat al-arab fi funūn al-adab* by Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī (AH 677 / AD 1279–AH 733 / AD 1333),<sup>3</sup> a book on *adab*,

1 The references to two more sources (Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, Muḥyī'd-Dīn, *al-Rawḍ al-zāhir fi sirat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, taḥqīq wa-nashr 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Khuwayṭir, al-Riyāḍ, s. a., pp. 430-431; Baybars al-Manṣūrī, Rukn al-Dīn, *Zubdat al-fikra fi ta'rīkh al-hidjra*, taḥqīq D.S. Richards, Beirut, 1998, p. 144) given on that occasion by J. Loiseau (“The *Ḥaḥī* and the Sultan: Letters and Embassies from Abyssinia to the Mamluk Court”, in: *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads for Embassies. Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics*, ed. Fr. Bauden, M. Dekkiche, Leiden, 2019, p. 643 (pp. 638-657: chapter 20)) are not relevant for the present study, since they comprise only short reports about that missive rather than versions of its text.

2 This identification is generally recognized by the scholars specialists in Ethiopian studies (Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia. 1270-1527*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 70, 126; D. Nosnitsin, M.-L. Derat, “Yəkunno Amlak”, in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 5, ed. A. Bausi in cooperation with S. Uhlig, Wiesbaden, 2014, p. 45 (pp. 43-46)) as well as by Arabists (J. Loiseau, Op. cit., pp. 638-639, 643).

3 al-Nuwayrī, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb, *Nihāyat al-arab fi funūn al-adab*, taḥqīq Najīb Muṣṭafā Fawwāz wa-Ḥikmat Kashlī Fawwāz, 30-31, Beirut, s. a., pp. 135-136. It should be pointed to the fact that the editors were less accurate by referring to one of the works by al-Maqrīzī (al-Maqrīzī, Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Alī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-ma'rīfat duwal al-mulūk*,

which comprises a lot of information necessary for educating an efficient official. The historical events are mentioned there until the year AH 730 / AD 1330. 2. *Al-Nahdj al-sadīd wa'l-durr al-farīd fī-mā ba'da Ta'rīkh Ibn al-'Amūd* by al-Mufaḍḍal b. Abī'l-Faḍā'il.<sup>4</sup> The title unambiguously shows that the chronicle is in fact a continuation of the universal history by the Coptic historian George al-Makīn.<sup>5</sup> The last historical events mentioned there are dated from AH 759 / AD 1358. 3. *Ṣubḥ al-a'shâ fī ṣinā'at al-inshâ'* and completed in AH 814 / AD 1412 by Shihāb al-Dīn Abū'l-'Abbās Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Qalqashandī (AH 756 / AD 1355-AH 821 / AD 1418) a legal scholar and secretary in the Mamluk chancery.<sup>6</sup>

At least two authors of the works mentioned above belonged to the civil administration of the Mamluk Sultanate: al-Nuwayrī and al-Qalqashandī. These people most certainly should have had access to state archives. This fact invites a suggestion that they may well have consulted the original of the missive sent to the Mamluk Sultan Baybars I. The version preserved by al-Nuwayrī also seems to be the closest to the original. This is the earliest of the three, most complete and preserves some significant details missing elsewhere. For example, it preserved the title of the sender (in Old Amharic): [A]mḥarā māl'āk, which betrays the Amharic rather than the Arabic word order and means "Emir of the Amhara".<sup>7</sup>

All three versions of the missive are cited *in extenso* in the table as below. Their comparison makes clear that there is an overlapping between that by al-Nuwayrī and two others. The version by al-Nuwayrī as the most complete

---

dj. 1, qism 2, nashr Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyāda, Cairo, 1936, pp. 615-616) many times (al-Nuwayrī, op. cit., p. 135: notes 2-6, 8-10, p. 136: notes 1-7), since in the actual text of *Kitāb al-Sulūk* the information about the missive takes only two lines; as to numerous details mentioned in the commentaries, they are taken mostly from two other sources (see note 4 and note 5 to the present article).

4 About him almost nothing is known (J. den Heijer, "al-Mufaḍḍal b. Abī'l-Faḍā'il", in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, vol. vii, Leiden, 1993, p. 305).

5 Mufazzal ibn Abil-Fazail, "Histoire des sultans mamlouks", texte arabe publié et traduit en français par E. Blochet, fasc. ii, *Patrologia Orientalis*, 14 (1920), pp. 383-385 (373-672).

6 al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A'shâ*, dj. 8, Cairo, 1915, p. 120.

7 The written sources allow the Ge'ez term *māl'āk* to be interpreted as "chief, commander" along with the usual "messenger, angel" (Е.В. Гусарова, "Церковная иерархия в позднесредневековой Эфиопии" [Church Hierarchy in Late Medieval Ethiopia], *Vestnik Pravoslavnogo Sviato-Tikhonovskogo gumanitarnogo universiteta*, series iii : Philology, 5/40 (2014), p. 25, n. 20 (pp. 22-32)). In this case the Ge'ez *māl'āk* can be an equivalent to the Arabic *amīr*. On the Amhara, who were not merely an ethnic group, but, first of all, a social stratum, see: S. Chernetsov, "On the Problem of Ethnogenesis of the Amhara", in: *Der Sudan in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart (Sudan Past and Present)*, hrsg. R. Gundlach, M. Kropp, A. Leibundgut, Frankfurt am Main – Berlin – Bern, 1995, pp. 17-35.

TABLE

al-Qalqashandī, op. cit., p. 120	Moufazzal ibn Abil-Fazail, op. cit., pp. 383-385	al-Nuwayrī, op. cit., pp. 135-136
أقل المالِك يقتل الأرض، وينهى بين يدي السلطان الملك الظاهر، خلد الله ملكه / أن رسولاً وصل إلى من وإلى قوص، بسبب الراهب الذي جاءنا، فنحن ما جاءنا مطران مولانا السلطان ونحن عبيده، فيرسم مولانا السلطان للنظر ك [أن] بجهاز لنا مطراناً يكون رجلاً جيداً عالماً، لا يجني ذهباً ولا فضة، ويرسله إلى مدينة عوان وأقل المالِك يسير إلى نواب الملك المظفر صاحب اليمن ما يلزمه، وهو يسير إلى نواب السلطان، وما كان سبب تأخير الرسل عن الحضور إلى [ما] بين يدي مولانا السلطان إلا أنني كنت في سكار (?) والملك داود قد توفي، وقد ملك كوضع ولده،	يقول أقل المالِك محر املك يقبل الارض وينهى بين يدي السلطان الملك الظاهر / / خلد الله ملكه / أن رسولاً وصل من جهة والى قوص بسبب الراهب الذي جاءنا فنحن ما جاءنا مطران * مولانا السلطان ونحن عبيده فيرسم مولانا للبطرك يعمل لنا مطراناً يكون رجلاً جيداً عالماً يجب ذهباً ولا فضة ويسيره الى مدينة عوان فأقل المالِك يسير إلى ابواب الملك المظفر صاحب اليمن ما يلزمه، وهو يسيره الى ابواب السلطان وما آتت الرسل الى الابواب الآتى كنت في بيكار * فان الملك داود توفي وقد ملك ولده	ذكر ورود كتاب متهك الحبيشة... وكان مضمون كتاب متهك الحبيشة إلى السلطان: أقل المالِك [محر] ملاك يقبل الارض وينهى بين يدي السلطان الملك الظاهر، خلد الله ملكه / أن رسولاً وصل من [جهة] والى قوص بسبب الراهب الذي جاءنا، فنحن ما جاءنا مطران وبلا دنا بلاد مولانا السلطان ونحن عبيده، فيرسم مولانا يأمر الأب البطرك يعمل لنا مطراناً رجلاً جيداً عالماً يجب ذهباً ولا فضة، ويسيره إلى مدينة اسوان وأقل المالِك يسير إلى ابواب (نواب) الملك المظفر صاحب اليمن ما يلزمه، وهو يسيره إلى ابواب السلطان، وما كان سبب تأخر الرسل عن الحضور إلى السلطان إلا أنني كنت في بيكار، والملك داود

توفي، وقد ملك ولده، يامولانا،  
وعندي في // عسكري مائة ألف فارس  
مسلمين، وإنما النصراني كثير لا تعد، وكلهم  
غلمانك وتحت أوامرك، والمطران الكبير هو  
يدعوك، وهذه الخلق كلهم يقولون: آمين  
يطول بقاء عمر سلطاننا مالك مصر، وبهلك  
الله عدوه، ويقول الخلق آمين، وكل من يصل  
من المسلمين إلى بلادنا أقل الممالك يحفظهم  
ويسفرهم كما يجوبون، وإنما الرسول الذي سيره  
وإلى قوص نجد وهو مريض، وبلادنا بلاد  
وخمة أي من مرض ما يقدر أحد يدخل إليه،  
وأي من شتم راحته يموت ويموت، والراهب  
قال ما يروح [بغير] رقيق،  
ونحن فنحفظ كل من يأتي من المسلمين، وارسما  
فسير واطرانا يحفظهم، أنهى ذلك

في عسكري مائة ألف فارس من المسلمين، وإنما  
النصراني فكثير لا يعدّ وأكلهم غلمانك وتحت  
أوامرك والمطران الكبير يدعو لك وهذا الخلق  
كلهم يقولون آمين وكل من يصل من المسلمين  
إلى بلادنا نحفظهم ونسفرهم كما يجوبوا، والرسول  
الذي حضر إلينا من جهة وإلى قوص مريض  
وبلادنا وخمة أي من مرض بها ما يقدر أحدًا  
يدخل إليه ومن يشتم راحته يموت \*  
فمريض، وبلادنا وخمة. أي من مرض لا  
يقدر أحد يدخل إليه، وأي من شتم راحته  
فيمرض يموت .

ونحن فنحفظ كل من يأتي من بلاد المسلمين  
، فسير واطرانا يحفظهم .

makes the translation of the versions by al-Mufaḍḍal b. Abī'l-Faḍā'il and al-Qalqashandī redundant. By supplying a translation of the version by al-Nuwayrī one has to mention that this text has already been translated. The full translation from Arabic into Russian has been already offered by M. Tolmacheva in 2002. However, due to some inaccuracy and obvious mistakes<sup>8</sup> this translation can hardly be considered as reliable. The fragmentary English paraphrase of the missive given by Tadesse Tamrat is founded on its version preserved by al-Mufaḍḍal b. Abī'l-Faḍā'il.<sup>9</sup>

### Translation of al-Nuwayrī's Version of the Missive

"The humblest Mamluk, Emir of the Amhara kisses the ground and prostrates before the Sultan al-Malik al-Zāhir, let God make his reign perpetual!

[I am writing that] that an envoy arrived from the governor of (the town) of Qūṣ<sup>10</sup> and this is because of the monk who came to us, but a metropolitan didn't come to us. Our country is that of our Lord, the Sultan and we are his slaves. Let our Lord [the Sultan] issue the order to the Father Patriarch to ordain for us a metropolitan, a good and learned man, who is not greedy for gold and silver and to send him to the town of Aswan. Then the humblest Mamluk will deliver whichever is needed to the gates (functionaries ?) of al-Malik al-Muẓaffar, ruler of Yemen, and he, in his turn, will convey it to the gates of the Sultan.

8 As illustration are listed only some typical mistakes made by Mrs Tolmacheva. Cf. the translation of the title [A]mḥarā māl'āk (محرملاك) as a courtesy formula – "the most respectable of the rulers" (محرملاك) as addressed to Baybars I. The expression من جهة [والى قوص] was translated as "from some locality in Qūṣ" because the والى was understood as the conjunction *wa-* followed by the preposition *ilā*. In fact, here the title *wālī* ("governor") should be read. The monk's remark that "they are not moving without companion" (ما يروح [بغير رفيق]) was completely misunderstood: "Breath only with a friend". See: *Арабские источники XIII–XIV вв. по этнографии и истории Африки южнее Сахары* [Arabic Sources of the 13th–14th centuries on the ethnography and history of Africa South of the Sahara], t. 4, transl. V.V. Matveyev, L.E. Kubbel, M.A. Tolmacheva in cooperation with N.A. Dobronravina (Памятники письменности Востока, cxvi [Written Sources of the Orient, vol. cxvi]), Moscow, 2002, pp. 390–391, 402–403.

9 Tadesse Tamrat, op. cit., pp. 126 (nn. 2, 3), 127 (nn. 1, 2).

10 The town in the central part of Egypt which from the Hellenistic epoch onwards became the starting point for roads linking the Nile valley and the ports on the Red sea (J.-Cl. Garcin, "Qūṣ", in: *The Coptic Encyclopaedia*, Ed. in chief Aziz S. Atiya, vol. 7, New York – Toronto – Oxford, 1991, p. 2043 (pp. 2043–2046)).

As to the reason, why the envoys did arrive to the Sultan at such a late time: this was exclusively because of my stay in Bīkār (?).<sup>11</sup> The King David passed away and his son ascended the throne.

Oh, my Lord, in my army I have a hundred thousand Muslim horsemen; as for the Christians, they are very numerous, almost countless. Moreover, all of them are your *ghulams* and obey your order. And the Great Metropolitan is crying and appealing to you and all these people say: “Verily, may God prolong the life of our Sultan, the Ruler of Egypt and destroy his enemies”. And the people respond: “Let it be so!” And the humblest Mamluk protects all Muslims, who arrive in our country, and lets them go where they wish.

This is true that the envoy sent by the governor of Qūṣ contracted smallpox and is ill. As to our country, it is unhealthy, so that if anyone falls ill, nobody may enter to him, and everyone, who breathes his scent, will get sick and die. And the monk said: “They are not moving without companion...”

And as to us, we protect every Muslim who came. And give the order and send a metropolitan who will take his care of them.

It is completed”.

Those who commented on this text paid most attention upon the request to send a new metropolitan and the fact that the hierarch could not be sent.<sup>12</sup> Another observation was regarding the friendly relations between Yəkunno Amlak and “not only the local Muslims, but also the rulers of Yemen and Egypt”.<sup>13</sup> However, some interesting details regarding the author’s attitude towards the Muslims escaped the scholars’ attention. They are: his self-deprecation, his calling himself “the humblest Mamluk”, proclaiming the Sultan Baybars I “his Lord” and calling the Ethiopian Christians “slaves and *ghulams*” of this ruler. Those statements expressed in writing are far beyond the limits of the usual formulas<sup>14</sup> as required by the Oriental etiquette. Anyway, the subsequent Kings of Ethiopia avoided the use of such expressions in their correspondence with the rulers of Egypt and had never called the latter their sovereign.

The question, which should be asked here, is as follows: why the real founder of the “Solomonic” dynasty was ready to surrender to the Muslims and to transfer his subjects under their political control? An answer is given by all three survived versions of the missive. According to them already in AH 673 / AD 1274-75, i.e. four years after the commonly recognized date of the

11 Unidentified toponym.

12 Tadesse Tamrat, op. cit., p. 70.

13 Ibid., p. 126.

14 Tadesse Tamrat called them, probably as a result of an accidental slip of his pen, “the usual humble *protestations*” (Tadesse Tamrat, op. cit., p. 126) instead of *prostrations*.

dynastic *coup d'État*, Yəkunno Amlak did not succeed in his attempts to subdue the whole Ethiopia, since he had to mention the enthronization of a son of a certain "King David": both the father and the son belonged to the Zagwe dynasty. In that situation he was in search of allies and protectors. Even the status of a Muslim governor over Christian Ethiopia in this situation might have seemed attractive to him. If Baybars I would have shown interest to such a proposal, it would be the first step towards the submission of Ethiopia to the Mamluk Sultanate and, who knows, the gradual eradication of Christianity in the Horn of Africa, which would have every chance to share the fate of Nubia, where any trace of Christian faith disappeared because of the apostasy of the local *élite*.

However, the Sultan al-Malik al-Zāhir didn't give a favourable answer to the petition from one of the rulers of such a remote country as Ethiopia to him. Possibly his advisers from among the Copts dissuaded him from any serious contact with a rebel, who was trying to overthrow the Zagwe dynasty, which was considered at that period as legitimate. In his official answer, Baybars addressed his Ethiopian correspondent as an equal to himself using the titles *ḥaṣe* "emperor",<sup>15</sup> *malik Amḥara* "King of the Amhara", *akbar mulūk al-Ḥubshān* "the greatest King of the Ethiopians", etc.<sup>16</sup> Thus the Sultan completely rejected, albeit in a very polite manner, the attempt of Yəkunno Amlak to surrender to his supreme power and to become in perspective his governor over Ethiopia.

15 In its Old Amharic form transcribed as *ḥṣṣi*.

16 al-Nuwayrī, op. cit., p. 136; Moufazzal ibn Abil-Fazail, op. cit., p. 385.