



Map 13. The Muslim states of the Bilad al-Sūdān in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

6 Islam in Nubia and Funj

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Historical Themes and Patterns

The focus on Egypt as the paramount power on the Nile since pharaonic times has preempted a similar strong focus on the history of the lands beyond the first cataract, south of Aswan. The lands between the first cataract in the north and the sixth cataract in the south and beyond, to the confines of Ethiopia, nevertheless saw the rise and fall of great empires, from Kush in pharaonic times to Meroe in Roman times, to Nubia in Byzantine, 'Abbasid, and Fātimid times and Sinnār-Funj in Ottoman times. These empires were informed in religious, political, and cultural terms by their closeness to Egypt and their entanglement with historical developments in the north. At the same time, the empires on the Upper Nile developed their own distinct identity and even met with Egypt on their own terms, as, for instance, in the context of military interventions in both pharaonic and Islamic times. The history of the populations on the Nile south of the first cataract can thus be described as being rooted in multiple cultural, social, political, and religious legacies, fusing pharaonic and post-pharaonic Egyptian, Roman, Greek, Arab, Ethiopian, and Iranian influences, as well as Islam and Christianity with ancient Nilotic and Sudanese traditions from the south. Sub-Saharan Nilotic and Sudanic traditions contributed to shaping the empires and populations on the Nile to such an extent that the lands on the upper Niles, the Blue Nile and the White Nile, cannot be seen as a simple extension of a pharaonic, Christian, or Muslim north. The strength of Sudanic influences became particularly clear in the sixteenth century, when the Funj federation stopped the southward advance of the Arab-Nubian 'Abdallāb tribal populations and delayed the process of Islamization on the Niles for more than 200 years. Even Funj was unable and unwilling, however, to isolate itself from her Muslim neighbors, in particular Egypt and Arabia, and eventually abandoned her foundations in pre-Islamic traditions. The shift to Islamic sources of political legitimacy in the early eighteenth century led to the demise of Funj as a major power on the Nile.

From Christian to Muslim Nubia

While Egypt may be seen as a gift of the Nile, depending on its annual floods, Nubia, the land of gold (nūb in Coptic) beyond the first cataract, may be seen, like the Sahara, as a transmission belt which linked the bilād al-sūdān on the Nile with Egypt in the north and vice versa. Like the Sahara, Nubia not only acted as a transmission belt but also as a filter, channeling and sieving influences in both directions. By contrast to

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