

Nubian Letters

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Smidswater 8, 2514 BW The Hague
The Netherlands

February 1990

Tours 1985

NUBIAN LETTERS is an independant biannual bulletin for Nubian history and archaeology, published under the auspices of the International Society for Nubian Studies and the department of Early Christian Art at the University of Leiden, the Netherlands.

Editors: Elisabeth de Ranitz and Karel Innemée.

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SOME ASPECTS OF THE HISTORY OF THE DODEKASCHOINOS DURING THE X-GROUP PERIOD (298-550 A.D.) **

S.B.DAFA'ALLA, KHARTOUM, SUDAN

The aim of selecting any subject to be one of the themes of a conference, according to the understanding of the writer, is to shed more and more light on the subject and to collect as much material as possible pertaining to it. This can be done either through presenting fresh data or new ideas. This paper is, therefore, written on some aspects of the history of the Dodekaschoinos in the belief that any attempt to cover all aspects will produce, at best, a kind of general history which can easily be found elsewhere.

At the beginning, the writer hesitated whether there is justification to speak of a Dodekaschoinos during the X-Group period. It is known that during this time the region did not maintain its former status as a distinctive cultural and administrative zone. The name Dodekaschoinos does not occur in any of the written sources of the period. Nevertheless, some considerations have convinced the writer that speaking of an X-Group Dodekaschoinos is not altogether irrelevant.

One consideration is the fact that the events which formed the beginning of the X-Group period, and whose consequences shaped the rest of the period's history had, in fact, taken place in the Dodekaschoinos. By these events is meant the withdrawal of the Roman garrisons from the region by the order of Emperor Diocletian and the policies that followed. All this is recorded, with vivid details, by the Byzantine historian Procopius in his History of the Wars, I.19.30.

Another consideration is the existence of some points of similarity between Roman and X-Group Dodekaschoinos. For example, one observes that, as far as administration and government is concerned the Dodekaschoinos during the X-Group period, continued to be very closely linked to Egypt; by one way or another, the Byzantine government seems to have established a loose suzerainty over the petty kingdoms of the Blemmyes and the Noubades. Although this latter point has been realized by some scholars, one believes that it has not been sufficiently explained and emphasized.

The writer, therefore, shall speak with some detail about two subjects. The first is about the circumstances which led to the ejection of the Noubades from the Dodekaschoinos and the establishment of the Blemmyes in their place. The second is the subject of Byzantine suzerainty over the Dodekaschoinos.

THE EJECTION OF THE NOUBADES FROM THE DODEKASCHOINOS

First are the circumstances which brought the Noubades to the Dodekaschoinos. The chief source is Procopius (op.cit.). He maintains that when Diocletian came to Egypt (in 297 A.D.), he withdrew the Roman garrisons that had been stationed in the old Roman towns south of Elephantine which became the new frontier. Diocletian, Procopius says, also invited a people called Nobatae from the city of Oases to occupy the evacuated territory¹⁾. Eventually, the Nobatae made the migration and established themselves in the old Roman stations. Procopius proceeds to say that one of the objectives of Diocletian behind ceding the region to the Nobatae was the hope that they would probably beat off the Blemmyes and other barbarians who might attack the new frontier.

It is not known for how long the Nobatae controlled the Dodekaschoinos. The period of the hundred years or so after Deocletian is

characterized by a scarcity of written evidence, especially native sources. When conclusive evidence re-appears in the fifth century (for example, the account of Olympiodorus and the inscription of King Silko), one finds a new political situation; the Dodekaschoinos and the country to the south as far as Qasr Ibrim was in the hands of the Blemmyes. The Noubades of Silko, certainly the descendents of the Nobatae of Procopius, were established in the country south of Ibrim. The circumstances which led to this change are lost in the obscurity of the fourth century A.D.

Scarcity of written evidence is commonplace in the field of ancient history in general. One believes that this obstacle should not stop historians from probing deeper in the available scanty evidence. Pending the discovery of new sources, historians should endeavour to fill the gap by plausible working hypotheses that take into consideration all the available evidence, whether native or foreign, and at the same time make use of logical deduction and of historical imagination. In the following pages, therefore, the writer presents a working hypothesis for the conditions which might have prevailed during the fourth century A.D. and which resulted in the ejection of the Noubades from the Dodekaschoinos.

The writer has a strong contention that the Blemmyes who controlled Lower Nubia during a part of the fourth and fifth century A.D. were not nomads who invaded the Nile valley at that particular time as believed by some scholars (Kirwan, 1963,77). It would appear that the Blemmyes of Olympiodorus constituted only a branch of the great Blemmyan tribes and that they came to Lower Nubia in the train of the resettlers who re-inhabited the area after long centuries of depopulation. Those Blemmyes, therefore, were Meroites and in this sense they had a share in the Meroitic culture which flourished in Lower Nubia during the first three centuries of our era. Until evidence to the contrary turns up, the writer

would give the Meroitic officials of the third century A.D. (i.e. the generals, governors of Tacompsa and rulers of the Triacontaschoinos) a Blemmyan identity and would make them ancestors of the Blemmyes of Olympiodorus²⁾.

Adams (1976,23) believes that the Nobatae did not come from the west but they were in fact the erstwhile Meroitic masses in Lower Nubia from the beginning. This view of Adams could have made a very good working hypothesis had it not implied the falsification of Procopius whose statement about the original homeland of the Nobatae appears to be very authentic³⁾.

If one believes in the authenticity of Procopius' statement and in the Blemmyan identity of the Meroitic officials, one can begin then to imagine the events of the fourth century A.D.

It would appear that the Meroitic officials (or the sedentary Blemmyes) having been ignored by Diocletian who ceded the Roman towns to the Nobatae, refused to accept the Emperor's decision. In the meanwhile, they made several attempts to regain what they thought to be their right in the Dodekaschoinos. At the end, their attempts were successful and the whole of the region between Elephantine and Qasr Ibrim came once more under their control.

There is some indication to suggest that the ejection of the Nobatae from the Dodekaschoinos did not become effective through the use of force, but more probably through the intervention and arbitration of the Byzantine government. This indication is found in the archive of a Roman soldier called Abinnaeus who flourished during the reign of Constantius II (337-361 A.D.). Abinnaeus includes in his archive an account about some Blemmyan refugees (Blemniorum gentis refuga) whom he met in Upper Egypt and later escorted to Constantinople. A summary of the account is given here:

During the time of the events related, Abinnaeus was attached to an army unit quartered at Diospolis in Upper Egypt. From there, he was selected by the former count of the frontier called Senecio, to escort to the imperial court in Constantinople some Blemmyan people referred to as refugees. Senecio too accompanied them. Having arrived at Constantinople,⁴⁾ the Blemmyes were presented to the Emperor. Thereafter, Abinnaeus was instructed to conduct the Blemmyes to their country. He stayed with them three years in their country during which time he sent reports to the imperial court at Constantinople (Bell et al., 1962, 35-6).

Perhaps it is quite evident that the Blemmyes who met the count of the frontier were not ordinary people, but more probably they were people of important status. The fact that they were described as refugees suggests that these men had been forced to leave their homes and to seek refuge in Upper Egypt. According to the theory of the sedentary Blemmyes mentioned above the writer would see in these refugees the descendants of the Blemmyan chiefs whom Diocletian deprived of the opportunity to rule the Dodekaschoinos. The refugees now approached count Senecio to enable them to travel to Constantinople to present their grievance to the Emperor. The Emperor seems to have responded favourable judging by the fact that he made Abinnaeus return with the refugees to their country.

Is it not possible that the Blemmyan refugees went to Constantinople to ask for the Emperor's personal intervention and arbitration in the problem of the Dodekaschoinos⁵⁾? In the opinion of the writer this is quite possible and accordingly, the writer would suggest that the ejection of the Noubades from the Dodekaschoinos took place during the reign of Emperor Constantius II, that is to say between 340-361 A.D.

Moreover, there seems to be a certain relationship between the account of the Abinnaeus archive and the long Meroitic text known as

Meroitic inscription 94; both seem to allude to events which led to rearrangement of land between Lower Nubian tribes. According to Griffith who studied the inscription (1912, 27), the style of the letters belongs to a very late cursive style⁶.

It is well known that a complete understanding of any Meroitic text is impossible at present due to the difficulties impeding the full decipherment of the Meroitic language, and helped by his own genius, Griffith has been able to glean some information from the text. For example, he recognizes that it contains two royal names (Kharamadoye and Yesmeniye) and some place names such as Pilqoy (Philae), Phrs (Faras) and Salele (Shellal?). Further, Griffith notices the repetition of phrases containing place names which made him think that the inscription probably commemorates a conquest or a re-arrangement of territory. Recently, Millet (1969, 203-212, 269-304 and 1973, 31-49) has re-examined the same inscription and has accepted the general conclusions made by Griffith.

Could Meroitic inscription 94 refer to the ejection of the Noubades and the establishment of the Blemmyes in their place⁷ ?

BYZANTINE SUZERAINTY OVER THE DODEKASCHOINOS

The withdrawal of the Roman garrisons from the Dodekaschoinos by Diocletian did not mean that Rome had given up all claims and interest in that part of Nubia. As long as Egypt remained the chief source of corn to the Empire, peace and order within and on the border of Egypt had to be maintained in order to enable farmers to produce. It was apparent from the beginning that Diocletian merely introduced an alternative policy to the old policy of colonization which would also ensure sufficient Roman control over the Southern tribes. That new policy was the so called federate system.

Generally speaking, the federate system may be described as a sort of political contract between the Roman government and the chiefs of the tribes living on the border of the Roman Empire. The Romans give land and money. In return the tribes refrain from attacking the Roman frontier. The tribes are also expected to defend the frontier against the raids of other tribes. Sometimes, they are asked to supply contingents under their own leaders to assist the Roman army (Jones, 1964, 612).

The first implementation of this policy in the Dodekaschoinos may be seen in Diocletian's decision of selecting a particular tribe (the Nobatae) and inviting them to occupy the evacuated Roman towns. That is to say, Diocletian did not leave the towns to be occupied by whatever people happened to be in the vicinity but selected the Nobatae in particular. Thereafter, he decreed that they should be given an annual sum of gold with the stipulation that they stop plundering the Roman frontier and that they also defend it against the attacks of the Blemmyes.

It is interesting to note that the same annual tribute was extended to the Blemmyes (Procopius, op.cit.). Surely this is a reference to the Blemmyan king who resided in the Blemmyan main centres in the wadis of the east desert. As to those sedentary Blemmyes, some of them sought refuge in Upper Egypt (cf. the Abinnaeus archive), some probably joined with the main group in the east desert and some may have remained in the Dodekaschoinos as subjects of the Noubades.

Judging by their experience with the federate tribes in Armenia and North Africa, the Romans might have invested the chiefs of the Blemmyes and the Noubades with their regalia in order to acquire some control over their choice (cf. Jones, op.cit. 611). In fact, there is some evidence to support this view. The figure of the king which is drawn in the temple of

Kalabsha appears clad in a short tunic of mail like those tunics worn by the late Roman Emperors (cf. Gauthier, 1914, pl. LXXII)⁸⁾. Beside the native crown which he wears, the figure is also crowned by a winged victory which according to Kirwan (1982, 199) symbolizes Rome.

The policy of federation proved to be very effective and has fulfilled its main objectives, for there is no record of any attack on the Egyptian border from the time of Diocletian until the beginning of Marcian (450-457 A.D.) during whose reign occurred the Blemmyan-Noubadean raid against the Roman possessions in Uper Egypt (Priscus, Frag. 21). This raid recorded by Priscus could have been the same one mentioned in the letter of petition sent by Appion, the bishop of Syene, contra Syene and Elephantine to the Emperors Theodosius II (408 - 450) and Valentinian III (423 - 455)⁹⁾. The bishop appeals to the two Emperors to send him military protection for himself and his churches against the raids of the Blemmyes and the Noubades (Wilcken, 1901, 398-402).

There must be good reasons behind this hostile behaviour of the two tribes against the Romans. One simple reason may be that the Romans had stopped the annual tribute to the Blemmyes and the Noubades. In fact, what one knows of the history of the Byzantine Empire at that time strengthens this belief. It is well known that the Empire had been paying enormous amounts of gold to the Huns and other tribes during the reign of Theodosius II. The burden became so heavy on Theodosius' government that it was found necessary to impose upon the Roman citizens a war-tax to be paid annually (Gordon, 1960, 65-66). But, when Marcian became Emperor in 450 A.D. he immediately discontinued the tribute to the Huns, an action for which he was greatly praised (Gordon, op.cit., 131).

The writer, therefore, is inclined to believe that discontinuation of tributes to the friendly tribes was a general policy of Marcian.

Therefore, it is possible that Marcian had stopped the tributes of the Blemmyes and the Noubades and by doing this he condemned the federate policy. Instead of giving them any money, the government of Marcian in Egypt made them sign a very humiliating treaty involving the taking of their children to Egypt as hostages. This may explain why the Blemmyes and the Noubades attacked the border again after the death of Maximinus, the Roman Prefect in Egypt who led the negotiation with the two tribes, which led to that humiliating treaty.

However, there are some indications which suggest that repayment of the annual subsidy was resumed some time after the death of Marcian and before the end of the reign of Justin (518-527). First, there is no evidence that the frontier was raided at any subsequent time. Secondly, there is a passage in the Acta Sanctorum (cf. Kirwan, 1937, 87), in which the Blemmyes and the Noubades appear as Roman clients supplying them with fighting men. Actually, the passage is a letter from Emperor Justin to his contemporary Auxmite king, in which he tells him that he shall send him through Coptos and Berenice troops from the Blemmyes and the Noubades to assist him in his war against the Hymerites.

NOTES

** A paper presented at the Sixth International Conference for Meroitic Studies, Khartoum, January, 1989.

- 1) This part of Procopius' statement has been rejected by a number of scholars who found it hard to believe that the Noubades had been living in the western oases. However, in another article (Dafa'alla, 1989), the writer argues strongly for the authenticity of the statement.

- 2) For more details about the theory of the sedentary Blemmyes of the late Meroitic times, cf. Dafa'alla, 1987, 34-40.
 - 3) See foot-note 1.
 - 4) This emperor must be Constantius II because the account was in fact part of a petition addressed by Abinnaeus to Constantius II and Constans who, together with their elder brother Constantine II, were named Augusti in September 337 A.D. Since Constantine II was not addressed in the petition, the petition must have been written after 340 A.D., the year of his death.
 - 5) This reminds one of the embassy of the Meroitic queen to Samos in c.22 B.C. which met Augustus. The ambassadors got everything they requested (Strabo, Geography, 17,54).
 - 6) Placed between 5-4th century A.D. (cf. Griffith, 1911,21).
 - 7) It is worth mentioning that neither the name Noubades nor Blemmyes (or Bega) is discernible in the Meroitic text. However this is not important since the people could have been known by other names.
 - 8) However, no find of such tunics has been encountered in Nubia. The only possible armour found at Ballana was fragments of leather garments. A complete piece of frontal body armour made of ox hide was discovered at Ibrim, (Plumley, 1975, pl.XIV.3)
 - 9) Although the letter of bishop Appion was addressed to Theodosius, it is not impossible that it was written during the first or second year of Marcian. Stationed in the remote cataract region, the bishop might not have heard of the death of Theodosius when he wrote his letter.
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A comparison of Nubian costume with the Old Testament priestly costume in a similar way that one can compare Nubian dress with costumes from regions in the eastern Mediterranean would not be very useful. Until the beginning of this century there were two 'schools' in the history of liturgical costume: the 'antiquarian', according to which the origin of liturgical dress was the profane costume of the late antiquity and the 'ritualistic' which considered the Old Testament priestly dress as the origin of Christian liturgical costume ¹. It is generally accepted nowadays that the origin of Christian liturgical vestments lies in the profane costume of the late antiquity. Nevertheless certain elements from the Old Testament priestly costume seem to appear in the (Nubian) Christian liturgical costume and Christian authors since Eusebius have made comparisons between Jewish and Christian liturgical dress. The question of whether certain aspects of the Old Testament are reflected in Christian liturgical costume appears in the first place not to be an (art-)historical problem but rather a historiographical matter. In other words, although we know now that Christian liturgical dress did not develop from Jewish priestly vestments, it is worth noting that for certain reasons Christian authors in different periods have tried to link the liturgical vestments from both religions by assuming a historical continuity or common symbolical meaning. The primary object of this study is not, however, to investigate the reasons why such comparisons have been made. We will limit ourselves here to those elements in Nubian liturgical vestments that were possibly inspired by the priestly costume in Old Testament and we will compare this with the way that other regions adopted such elements.

The inducement for such an investigation were the bells that adorn the vestments of bishops in Nubian wall-paintings. They occur in both bishops' portraits and in saints' representations. The oldest wall-paintings show small tulip-bells hanging from the border of the phelonion, epitachelion, omophorion and enchirion (for instance in two unpreserved fragments, Faras inv. nrs. 119 and a68), in later paintings little pellet-shaped bells are also depicted. This decoration of vestments with little bells seems typical for Nubia, but we have evidence from Byzantine wall-painting that it also occurred there. At least one example is known, a pair of wall-paintings of the saints Basilios and Nicholas from the church of the Aghii Anarghiri at Kastoria where the enchiria and the epitachelia have bells on their borders ².

One could suppose that also in this case there is a possible influence from Byzantium on Nubia, but as the Byzantine examples are so scarce, one is inclined to believe that the Old Testament description of the priestly costume in Exodus 28, 33-36 and 39, 24-27 was the main source of inspiration for Nubia. That bishops in Nubia were wearing bells on their garments and that this detail is not just an iconographic 'invention' is highly likely. Under the staircase of the church at Buhen 41 little bells were discovered during the excavations in 1909 ³. Although no finding of textile fragments was documented, the context is an indication that it possibly concerned bells from an ecclesiastic garment.

¹ R.A.S. Macalister, *Ecclesiastical Vestments, their Development and History*, London 1896, pp. 2,3.

² S. Pelekanidis, M. Chatzidakis, *Kastoria*, Athens 1984, p. 27, ill. 4, 5. The datation given is 11th/12th century.

³ M. Shinnie. 'Bells' in *Kush* II (1954), pp. 92-94.

A second element that might be of Old Testament origin occurs only once in Nubian wall-painting. The bishop from the Rivergate-church in Faras had on his forehead an object that looked like a flower with three petals. Such a headdress seems to appear nowhere else as part of the episcopal costume. The Old Testament description of the priestly costume mentions a headdress called *sis* (literally 'flower'), which was made from gold and bound with a blue-purple string on the forehead (Exodus 28, 36-37 and 39, 30-31, Leviticus 8, 9).

In Byzantine art the Old Testament high priests, of which Aaron and Zacharias are the ones most frequently depicted, often have a diadem with a rectangular or round object on the forehead⁴. The Greek term for this diadem is *petalon chrysoun*. The word *petalon* has a number of meanings: 'leaf' (of a tree or flower), 'horseshoe' and 'metal plate'. If we use the translation of 'horseshoe', it could refer to the diadem-shape of the headdress, while 'metal plate' could simply refer to the material of which it was made⁵. Only if we use the translation of 'leaf' it would mean that the headdress had a floral shape. This translation is also closest to the Hebrew term *sis*. A. de Buck considered the priestly diadem indeed as flower-shaped and tried to find the roots of its symbolism in Egypt⁶. But regardless of what the Old Testament priestly headdress really looked like, it is very possible that the same interpretation, on the basis of the Hebrew text or of a Greek translation of the Old Testament, was made in Nubia around the time that the wall-painting in the Rivergate-church was made.

The bells on liturgical vestments occur frequently, the flower on the forehead only once. But assuming that this one example is a derivation from the Old Testament priestly dress, the question remains why Nubian liturgical vestments should bear such reminiscences to the Jewish priestly costume. A number of Jewish and patristic sources refer to the Jewish priestly costume, the latter sometimes in connection with the Christian ritual. Especially the bells and the diadem on the forehead are mentioned several times.

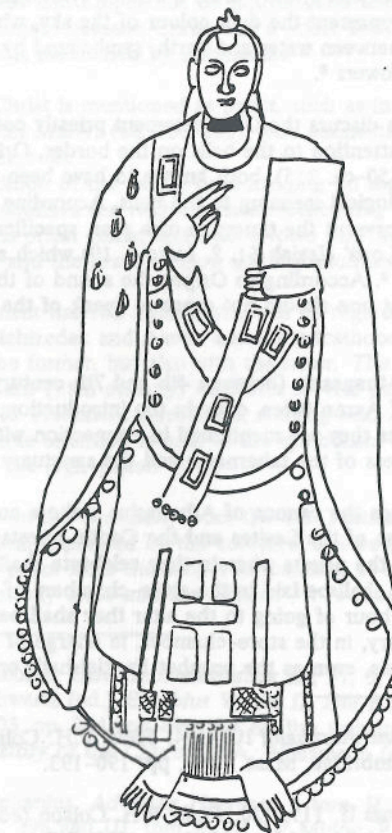
The Jewish author Philo of Alexandria (ca. 25 b.Chr.-45 A.D.) saw in the high priest the manifestation of the Logos, which might have contributed to the Christian concept that Christ was the perfect priest in the Old Testament tradition. He illustrates his statement with the *petalon* and the decoration on the border of the priestly garment:

"If again you examine the Logos as revealed in the High Priest, you will find him to be in agreement with this and his holy vesture to have a variegated beauty derived from powers belonging some to the realm of pure intellect, some to that of sense-perception.... On

⁴ Examples are the illustrations of the *Topographia Christiana* by Cosmas Indicopleustes in the Mss. Vat. Graec. 699, fol. 50 r° (Aaron), 76 r° (Zacharias) and Sin. Graec. 1186, fol. 82 r° (Zacharias and Abia), 84 r° (Aaron); reproduced in Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographie Chrétienne*, W. Wolska-Conus (ed.) Paris 1968-1973, resp. I, p 192, II, pp 267, 65 and 79; an ivory bookcover in the Victoria and Albert Museum, resembling fol. 76 from Ms. Vat. Graec. 699; W.F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters*, Mainz 1976, p. 133, nr. 224, Taf. 104.

⁵ The latter translation, *feuille d'or*, is used in A. le Boulluec, P. Sandevor (ed.), *La Bible d'Alexandrie II, L'Exode*, Paris 1989, p. 291.

⁶ A. de Buck, 'La fleur au front du grand-prêtre' in *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 9 (1951), pp. 18-29.



Unidentified bishop protected by Christ (detail), Faras Rivergate Church

the head, then there is a plate of pure gold bearing as an engraving 'a holy thing to the Lord' and at the feet on the end of the skirt, bells and flower patterns. The signet spoken of is the original principle behind all principles after which God shaped or formed the universe, incorporeal, we know, and discerned by the intellect alone; whereas the flower patterns and the bells are symbols of qualities recognized by the senses and tested by sight and hearing. And he has well weighed his words when he adds: 'His sound shall be audible when he is about to enter into the Holy Place.'⁷

In two other writings, *De Vita Mosis* and *De Specialibus Legibus*, Philo attaches to the Old Testament priestly dress a cosmic symbolism. The mantle of the priest is dark to represent the dark colour of the sky, while the bells represent the harmony between water and earth, symbolized by the pomegranates and the flowers⁸.

Several Christian authors discuss the Old Testament priestly costume, sometimes with special attention to the bells on the border. Origen (ca. 185–254) and Clemens (ca. 150–ca. 215), both known to have been influenced by Philo, attach an eschatological meaning to the bells. According to Clemens the bells, 360 in number, represent the timespan of a year, specifically the 'acceptable year of the Lord' (Isaiah 61, 2, Luke 4, 19) which announces the epiphany of the Saviour⁹. According to Origen the sound of the bells is a continuous reminder that one should not cease to speak of the last things and the end of the world¹⁰.

The Coptic Canons of Athanasius (between 4th and 7th century) mention the bells on the garments of Aaron twice, once in the introduction, a second time in canon 7. In both cases they are mentioned in connection with the comparison of the holiness of the tabernacle and the sanctuary in the church¹¹.

Apart from these passages the canons of Athanasius make a comparison in general between the dress of the Levites and the Coptic priests:

"The garments of the priests wherein they celebrate shall be white and washed. They shall be laid in the store-chambers of the sanctuary. At the hour of going to the altar they shall be found laid in the sanctuary, in the store-chamber, in charge of him that guardeth the vessels, even as the prophet Ezekiel hath ordained."¹²

⁷ *De migratione Abrahami* 102–104; Philo, F.H. Colson (ed.), tome IV, London/Cambridge, Mass. 1968, pp. 190–193.

⁸ *De Vita Mosis* II, 119, 120; Philo, F.H. Colson (ed.) tome VI London/Cambridge, Mass. 1966, pp. 506, 507. *De Specialibus Legibus* I, 93; Philo, F.H. Colson (ed.) tome VII, London/Cambridge, Mass. 1968, pp. 152, 153.

⁹ *Stromata* V, 6, 37, 1–4; Clément d'Alexandrie, *Stromate* V, A. Le Boulluec (ed.), Paris 1981, pp. 84–85.

¹⁰ *Homilia in Exodum* IX, 4; Origène, *Homélie sur l'Exode*, M. Borret s.j. (ed.), Paris 1985, pp. 302–303.

¹¹ W. Riedel and W.E. Crum, *The Canons of Athanasius*, London/Oxford 1904, pp. 4 and 15.

¹² Canon 28; Riedel and Crum, *The Canons of Athanasius*, p. 31.

Not only the bells, but also the *petalon* is discussed by Christian authors as an attribute of priesthood.

Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 265–339) quotes the priest Polycrates saying:

"Again there is John, who leant back on the Lord's breast and who became a sacrificing priest wearing the *petalon*, a martyr and a teacher; he too sleeps in Ephesos."¹³

According to Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 315–403) the apostle James, the brother of Christ, was a priest and allowed to enter the Holiest of Holy and was invested with the *petalon* as the sign of his priestly dignity¹⁴.

Both authors seem to attach value to the priesthood of the apostles as forerunners of the bishops. Their consecration, most probably by Christ, although Eusebius and Epiphanius do not mention this explicitly, was rooted in the Old Testament because Christ was a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, as is mentioned by Epiphanius¹⁵.

In some texts Christ is mentioned as priest, such as in the *Dialogue with Tryphon* of Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165), who connects the priesthood with the symbolism of the bells:

"The tradition of the twelve bells hanging on the cloak of the high priest symbolized the twelve apostles depending on the power of the eternal priest Christ and whose voice fills the whole earth with the glory and the grace of God and his anointed one."¹⁶

The Old Testament has two figures who can be regarded as prototypes of priesthood, Melchizedek and Aaron and the priesthood of Christ is connected not only with the former, but also with the latter. *The Book of the Guide* by Yahya ibn-Jarir (11th century) dedicates several paragraphs to the continuity of Old Testament priesthood, starting with Aaron, to the Christian tradition¹⁷. Ample attention is paid to the symbolism of the several parts of the costume of the high-priest.

A similar stress on the continuity from the Old Testament priesthood to the apostolic tradition, expressed by the costume, can be found in the *Triadon*, a Coptic didactic poem from the early 14th century. It calls Melchizedek 'the bearer of the priestly dress and the *tallasar*'¹⁸. A connection seems to be

¹³ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, 31, 3; see also V, 24, 2–4; E. Schwartz (ed.) *Eusebius Werke II, Die Kirchengeschichte*, Leipzig 1903, pp. 264 and 490, the English translation is from Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, G.A. Williamson (ed.), London 1983, p. 141.

¹⁴ Epiphanius, *Adversus Haereses*, I, tom. II, 29, 4; Migne, P.G. 41, col. 396 and III, tom II, 78, 14; Migne, P.G. 42, col. 721.

¹⁵ *Adversus Haereses* I, tom. II, 29, 4; Migne, P.G. 41, col. 396; Cf. Letter to the Hebrews 6, 20.

¹⁶ *Dialogus cum Tryphone* XLII, 1; Justin, *Dialogue avec Tryphon*, G. Archambault (ed.), Paris 1909, tome I, pp. 186–187.

¹⁷ *The Book of the Guide* XXXI, 50–62; G. Khouri-Sarkis, 'Le Livre du Guide de Yahya ibn Jarir'in *L'Orient Syrien* 12 (1967) pp. 444–447.

¹⁸ In Coptic ATECTO H MN EΦOUT; in Arabic sahib al-hulla wa't-taylasan; verse 286; P. Nagel, *Das Triadon, ein sahidisches Lehrgedicht des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Halle (Saale) 1983, p. 39.

suggested here between the *tailasan* of Melchizedek and the liturgical headcover of the Coptic bishops (later also priests).

Summarizing one can say that a number of Christian authors had an interest for the Old Testament priestly costume and its symbolism. The bells at the border of the dress and the *petalon* are parts that received a specific attention in dealing with this costume. An important part of the interest in the Old Testament liturgical dress can be explained by the wish to see a continuity from the Old Testament to the Christian priesthood. Christ as priest 'according to the order of Melchizedek' and his apostles are the ones connecting the Old and the New Covenant in this view.

The Jewish origin of Christian liturgical dress is therefore not so much a matter of historical as of symbolical meaning. If modern historians look for the origin of certain vestments they are mostly interested in a morphological development. To the patristic authors discussing the subject of liturgical vestments the primary intention was to find or explain the symbolical meaning behind them regardless of the exact historical truth in our sense of the word. For this reason it seems not very fruitful to contrast the 'antiquarian' and the 'ritualistic' approach. One could call the first one 'historical' while the second one has more historiographical aspects. By investigating 'Jewish origins' of the Christian liturgical dress we do not find a historical continuity, but the view of a number of patristic authors on a symbolical and, maybe to the opinion of some of them, historical continuity.

The fact that Nubian bishops' vestments, in a number of wall-paintings and probably often in real life as well, were decorated with bells could be explained as a symbol of the continuity in the tradition of priesthood from the Old Testament to Christianity. The enigmatic object on the forehead of the bishop from the Rivergate-church, although a unique example so far, could be explained in a similar way.

The painting in Faras cathedral representing Aaron, the brother of Moses, is too much damaged to see the shape of the *petalon* on his head. Remains of the bells on his dress are still visible. But in general one can say that his costume hardly bears any resemblance to the Nubian bishop's dress. In Nubia the Old Testament priest might have been considered as a forerunner of the bishop, but in the material sense only the bells (and maybe the *petalon*) express this symbolism.

* The present article is part of the author's doctor's thesis *Ecclesiastical vestments in Nubia and the Christian Near East* which was presented on April 5th 1990.

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