

Transportation of Elephants in Hellenistic and Byzantine Egypt*

Transportation in antiquity and medieval times was twofold, by land or by sea. The choice between the two means of transportation, according to M. Mollat, was usually decided in favor of the first.¹ Muhsin Yusuf, writing about Middle Eastern transportation during the Muslim era (622–1517), correctly points out that a distinction should be made between transportation before and after the 11th century, “since transportation by land was easier and more natural than sailing [before the 11th century] which depended on the mastery of various technological fields, [such as] shipbuilding.”² It should be added that overland transportation was greatly facilitated by the excellent road system of the Romans and was preferable as long as the route led through friendly realms.

M. Yusuf’s view concerning the time of transportation is, in general, valid. The historical time frame concerning shipping should be taken into consideration; thus, certain generalizations about the Arab navy without noting the various stages of development through which it passed cannot be accepted *in toto*. The Arabs started navigating in the Mediterranean in the middle of the 7th century, albeit with a fleet hampered by great deficiencies; however, they eventually acquired thalassocracy by the 9th century. Thereafter, although they lost their supremacy in this sea, they continued successfully sailing in the Indian Ocean and beyond.³ At the turn of the 11th century, the Arab-Byzantine nautical trade relations reached their peak, the maritime struggle between the two super-powers of the time came to an end and the Western naval powers became predominant.⁴

Nevertheless, in addition to the chronology of transportation, other factors must be also considered, in particular the shipping routes and especially, the purpose of the voyages, i.e. transporting passengers, soldiers, goods or animals. One of the most conspicuous examples of transportation challenges can be seen in the navigation of the Red Sea. Here, because of the numerous reefs, underwater currents and sudden storms, ships traveled only during the day, and in both ancient and medieval times passengers and animals had to alternate between land and sea routes. The best account of such fascinating multiple modes of transportation appears in Ibn al-Jubayr’s *Travels* (12th c.), in which the author-traveler describes how on his first trip on the Red Sea, he followed the Nile towards upper Egypt, starting from Miṣr (present Cairo), passing Qibṭ (Koptos) and reaching Qūṣ (Apollonopolis) in nineteen days.⁵ From there Ibn Jubayr describes how he and his fellow passengers, along with their luggage, crossed the desert of ‘Aydhāb to reach the port of ‘Aydhāb on the Red Sea. A sea trip

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¹ See M. MOLLAT, *Problèmes navales de l’histoire des croisades*, in: M. MOLLAT DU JOURDIN, *Études d’Histoire maritime* (1938–1975). Torino 1977, 362 ff.

² MUHSIN YUSUF (BIRZEIT), *Sea versus Land: Middle Eastern Transportation during the Muslim Era*. *Der Islam* 73 (1996) 232–258, especially 233.

³ See Y. Y. AL-HIJJI – V. CHRISTIDES (eds.), *Aspects of Arab Seafaring. An Attempt to Fill in the Gaps of Maritime History*. Athens 2002. – Even at the Mamluks’ period we can discern two periods: first the period of negligence and second (after 1365) the rapid development and superiority over the Lusignans’ navy; see V. CHRISTIDES, *The Image of Cyprus in the Arabic Sources*. Nicosia 2006, 83–109, and IDEM, *Cyprus between East and West. The French Kingdom of Lusignans, an Appendage to the Latin Kingdom vs. the Mamluks*, in: J. VIGUERA MOLINS (ed.), *Ibn Khaldūn. The Mediterranean in the 14th century*. Seville 2006, 98–105.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*. Leiden 1907 (New York 31973), 57 ff.; trans. R. J. C. BROADHURST, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*. London 1952, 50 ff.

followed to the port of Jidda.⁶ The sea voyage from ‘Aydhāb to Jidda presented double obstacles both on land and at sea. While the sea sometimes was impassable because of bad weather, at the ports passengers, usually pilgrims, were harassed and exploited by the Beja-Blemmyes tribe who dominated the port and provided ships for the journey to Jidda.⁷

In the Red Sea from pre-Islamic times until late in the 12th century, there were neither permanent fleets nor patrolling warships, instead armed soldiers were stationed on board to fight against any pirates they encountered. In the conflict between the Ethiopians under their Christian ruler ‘Ella ‘Asbeha and the Yemenites under Dhu-Nuwās, at the turn of the 6th century, the former armed a number of merchant ships and launched a naval operation against Yemen in which a large number of the Ethiopians perished because of the treacherous waters of the Red Sea⁸. It is only as late as the year H.578/1183 that we note the construction of a Red Sea fleet by the Crusaders under the Christian Lord of al-Karak, whose ships were built in al-Karak and then transferred and assembled on the Red Sea⁹. The first permanent Arab fleet stationed in the port of ‘Aydhāb on the Red Sea was recorded in the 15th century by al-Qalqashandi (d. 1418). It was composed of a fleet of only five ships which was later reduced to three.¹⁰

While transportation of passengers in the Red Sea in ancient and medieval times was a formidable task, much more difficult was the shipment of animals and especially of elephants. Nonetheless, we know that even from pharaonic times wild animals were transported as recorded in the papyri and in their iconography. Unfortunately, pharaonic iconography depicts only sketchily the transport ships of the Egyptians carrying animals.¹¹

A few centuries later, in Ptolemaic Egypt, an intense interest developed in hunting wild animals and transporting them to Egypt. Numerous works have been written about the organization of Ptolemaic hunting expeditions, especially by Desanges, Gowers, Hofmann, H. H. Scullard and more recently by Burstein.¹² The Ptolemies organized their hunting expeditions in a systematic military order, starting from Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246 B.C.). They recruited the most skillful hunters and paid special attention to their logistic support – providing them with necessary supplies and rewarding them with regular payment through organized banks.¹³ The amount of money paid by the Ptolemies was immense. The Ptolemies’ area of hunting soon expanded from Nubia to the southeastern coastal belt of Africa, reaching Eritrea. The amazing rapid expansion was caused, as Casson suggests,¹⁴ by the exhaustion of herds due to excessive hunting which, according to Burstein, was not the result of the Ptolemies’ avidity of acquiring war elephants, but of their lust for ivory.¹⁵

⁶ MUHSIN YUSUF, *Sea versus Land* presents a number of various trips of Ibn Jubayr including those of the Red Sea without any emphasis on the perplexity of these voyages.

⁷ See Y. F. HASAN, *The Arabs and the Sudan*. Khartoum 1973, 73.

⁸ For details of this Ethiopian naval enterprise, see V. CHRISTIDES, *The Martyrdom of Arethas and the Aftermath: History vs. Hagiography*. *Graeco-Arabica* 7/8 (2000) 51–92. *Le martyre de Saint Aréthas et de ses compagnons* (BHG 1669), ed. critique, étude et annotation M. DETORAKI, traduction par J. BEAUCAMP (*College de France, Monographies* 27). Paris 2007.

⁹ St. RUNCIMAN, *A History of the Crusades, II: The Kingdom of Jerusalem*. Cambridge 1951, 436–437.

¹⁰ Qalqashandi, *Ṣubḥ al-A‘shā*, III. Cairo 1913, 524.

¹¹ See P. F. HOULIHAN, *The Animal World of the Pharaohs*. London 1966, pl. xxiii, where there is a depiction of a raft carrying a number of wild birds (Thebes, Eighteenth Dynasty).

¹² J. DESANGES, *Les chasseurs d’éléphants d’Abou-Simbel*, in: *Actes du 92^{ème} Congrès Nationale des Sociétés Savantes, section archéologique*. Strasbourg–Colmar 1970, 31–50; W. GOWERS, *African Elephants and Ancient Authors*. *African Affairs* 47 (1948) 173–180; I. HOFMANN, *Wege und Möglichkeit eines indischen Einflusses auf die meroitische Kultur*. Vienna 1975, 46–111; H. H. SCULLARD, *The Elephant in the Greek and the Roman World*. London 1974; S. M. BURSTEIN, *Ivory and Ptolemaic Exploitation of the Red Sea, the Missing Factor*. *Topoi Orient–Occident* 6² (1996) 799–807.

¹³ See a papyrus found in Elephantine in Egypt, first published by U. WILCKEN, republished with an English translation by T. HÄGG and commentary by L. TÖRÖK in *Fontes Historiae Nubicorum II*, ed. T. EIDE – T. HÄGG – R. H. PIERCE – L. TÖRÖK. Bergen 1996, 575–576. It is a letter reporting a substantial payment (4 silver ? drachmas) per day. As CLAIRE PREAUX characteristically writes in her book *L’Économie royale des Lagides*. Brussels 1939, 34: “[La chasse aux éléphants] l’une des nouveautés les plus coûteuses de l’armement hellénistique ...”.

¹⁴ L. CASSON, *Ptolemy II and the Hunting of African Elephants*. *TAPA* 123 (1993) 247–260, 256 ff.

¹⁵ BURSTEIN, *Ivory and Ptolemaic Exploration* 802 ff.

While this theory was partly true, we should not ignore another factor in the demand for hunting elephants, i.e. pure entertainment: hunting for hunting's sake. This was in addition to the need for war elephants. Actually, Diodor of Sicily, who provides us with important insight into the Ptolemaic hunting practices, correctly explains that the motivation of Ptolemy II for undertaking the hunting of elephants was simply "his hobby was collecting for elephants and animals in general and he had gathered a large number of wild animals in Memphis".¹⁶ Hunting from ancient to modern times has not been inspired solely by materialistic profit.

The question which naturally arises is how the huge elephants were transported from Ethiopia and beyond to Egypt. Most probably they were carried partly by ship via the Straits of Bāb al-Mandab to the Ptolemaic ports of the Red Sea and from there they were sent overland to Edfu and continued their journey to Memphis (see Map). The Ptolemies had organized an admirable series of ports along the coastline of the Red Sea. A route was established by the Pharaohs from Memphis, rebuilt by the Ptolemies and, via a man-made canal, it led to the Red Sea. The terminal ports were Ptolemais Theron and further north Berenice Dere at the entrance of the straits of Bāb al-Mandab (see Map). Diodor of Sicily (1st c. B.C.) described, in a dramatic way, the difficulties which the cargo ships faced carrying an extraordinary load of elephants in a treacherous sea full of reefs. They were frequently immobilized by sudden storms and inundated with huge waves:¹⁷ "the sea, which runs to shoals ... having a depth of no more than three fathoms ... is green ... because of the mass of seaweeds ...". One can imagine the wild agitation of the frightened elephants and the danger of capsizing in the turbulence.

Shipwrecks were frequent and the sea through which the elephant boats, known in the papyri as "elephante-ga" ships (ελεφαντηγά πλοια), was spread with their remnants which, covered with mud, were left in the shallow waters by the Ptolemies as a warning to the navigators in order to alert them to the immense danger they had to face sailing in this sea.¹⁸ At least half of these ships sank en route. Unfortunately, none of the sources describe the type of ships used. Diodor of Sicily simply reports that the elephant ships were bulky, equipped with sails (ιστία) and carried pads (κοντοί) to clear the water of seaweeds. There is no concrete indication of the size of the elephant vessels. Walter Krebs's assumption that every elephant ship carried ten elephants is mere speculation and was correctly rejected by Burstein.¹⁹ Since elephants were enormous animals, large solid ships were required. Egypt did not have the proper timber and the Egyptian wood could be used only in minor parts of the construction of ships. It is likely that better timber was imported by the Ptolemies from Cyprus which was part of their domain.²⁰ Most probably the elephants were below deck because their weight would have ballasted the ships and offered the handlers better control.

In Berenice of the North and/or in other ports of the Red Sea the work of shipping construction took place in accordance with the naval technology needed for sailing in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. From the Greek papyri of the Ptolemaic period, we learn that the big vessels carried masts (ιστία) and the crews included oarsmen (ερέται) and armed mercenaries (μισθοφόροι πληρωματικοί) for protection from the endemic piracy of the Red Sea.²¹ Their size must have been bigger than the common merchant ships. We can assume that special care had been taken for the gangways to facilitate the embarkation of the huge elephants.

Unfortunately, there is no substantial pictorial evidence to help us acquire a proper understanding of the place the massive beasts occupied on the elephant ships. While depictions of elephants in stone carvings, wall paintings, coins and other artifacts are common in Hellenistic art, little information appears concerning their transportation by ship. A most conspicuous depiction of elephants boarding ships appears in the famous mosaic known as the "Great Hunt" at Piazza Armerina in Sicily, which formed an intermediate station for the special Roman ships carrying elephants and other wild animals from Africa to Italy. The Piazza Armerina Roman mosaic covers completely a corridor of seventy yards in length and depicts the hunting, capture, embark-

¹⁶ Diodor of Sicily, *Bibliotheca Historica* III 36, 3–5. Ed. and trans. by C. H. OLDFATHER, vol. II. London 1935, 186–187.

¹⁷ Diodor of Sicily III 40, 1–5. OLDFATHER 203.

¹⁸ Diodor of Sicily III 40, 6ff. OLDFATHER, 203 ff.: "... the waves cast such a mass of sand against the body of the ship and heap it up in ... incredible fashion ...", and III 40, 8: "For it is the King's command to leave in place such evidence of disasters that they may give notice to sailors of the region which works their destruction ...".

¹⁹ W. KREBS, *Einige Transportprobleme der antiken Schifffahrt. Das Altertum* 11 (1965) 96–101; S. M. BURSTEIN (ed. and trans.), *Agatharchides of Cnidus on the Erythraean Sea*. London 1989, 141, n. 3.

²⁰ For Cyprus's excellent timber and its use for ships, see V. CHRISTIDES, *The Image of Cyprus* (note 3) 3–4.

²¹ MARIA MERZAGORA, *La navigazione in Egitto nell'eta greco-romana. Aegyptus* 10²⁻⁴ (1929) 120.

ing and disembarking of a wide variety of animals, among them the embarkation of an elephant ascending a gangway.²² There are no details of the gangway, which is of particular importance for leading the elephants since they would likely be reluctant to embark. Polybius describes how the Indians used to pave the gangways with grass in order to lead the elephants more easily on board.²³ Likewise in Burma until the present day, the Burmese camouflage the gangways with grass in order to facilitate loading the elephants.²⁴ It is noteworthy that in Islamic miniatures animals often appear embarked on ships in their depiction of Noah's ark, but most of the animals are painted unrealistically. However, in some Islamic Indian illustrations, the elephants' gangways appear quite realistic. In addition to the Piazza Armerina mosaic, another Roman mosaic from Carthage offers us a glimpse of the embarkation of elephants without including any important details.²⁵

Any further discussion concerning the transportation of elephants in late antiquity is beyond the scope of the present article. It is sufficient to mention here that exotic animals and in particular elephants were sent to Constantinople, the new capital of the Roman Empire, as gifts by foreign rulers in whose countries the animals lived. The earliest example of such a gift seems to be the sending of an elephant to the emperor Anastasius (491–518). A crude sketch in a fragmentary papyrus (P. Mich. Inv. 4290) depicts this elephant. While most scholars have accepted the date of the elephant sketch which shows the transportation of elephants from Ethiopia to Constantinople, the question of the possible means of the elephants' transportation has not yet even been asked.²⁶ It should be noted that even in later Byzantine times, it is reported that Constantine IX Monomachus (1042–1055) received an elephant as a gift from Egypt, but nothing is said about its transportation.²⁷

TRANSPORTATION OF WAR ELEPHANTS FROM NUBIA TO BAHNASA (OXYRYNCHOS) IN UPPER EGYPT (SAID) (CA. 642 A.D.)

The Arabs, in general, made extensive use of horses and camels especially in their early conquests.²⁸ Horses were usually brought to the battlefield without their riders who were mounted on the camels until they reached the front. The horsemen took special care of their horses and were paid a double salary. In contrast, the Berbers used camels almost like horses in their attacks or as a line of defense.²⁹

Elephants were rarely used in warfare by the Arabs in both pre-Islamic and Medieval Islamic periods, although there are two main references in the Arabic sources to defense against elephant warriors. The first is reported to have taken place at the time of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad in 570 A.D., "the year of the elephant" as the Arabic sources call it, when the Ethiopians tried unsuccessfully to occupy Mecca.³⁰ The second appears in a controversial Arabic source known as *Futūḥ al-Bahnasa*. It describes an expedition of Christian Sudanese in ca. 642, which moved from Nubia to the key town of Middle Egypt, Bahnasa (Oxyrynchos), to help the Byzantine defense of this city from the Arab forces which were moving against it after their conquest of Lower Egypt and the capital Miṣr.

Bahnasa is the Arabic name of the famous trade center in Middle Egypt which enjoyed great prosperity at Byzantine times. It was of extreme military importance being the gate to Southern Egypt (Ṣa'īd). Unfor-

²² See R. J. A. WILSON, *Piazza Armerina*. Austin, Texas 1983, 24 ff.; see also J. M. C. TOYNBEE, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*. New York 1973, 27 ff.

²³ For Polybius' account, see SCULLARD, *Elephant* 157.

²⁴ SCULLARD, *Elephant*, fig. III.

²⁵ M.A. MAHJoubi, Découverte d'une nouvelle mosaïque de chasse à Carthage. *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*. Paris 1967, 264–277.

²⁶ See S. M. BURSTEIN, An Elephant for Anastasius. A Note on P. Mich. Inv. 4290, in: *Graeco-Africana. Studies in the history of Greek relations with Egypt and Nubia*. New Rochelle, N.Y. 1995, 215.

²⁷ Miguel Atalíates, *Historia*. Ed. I. PÉREZ MARTÍN (*Nueva Roma* 15). Madrid 2002, 36–38. BURSTEIN, *Ivory and Ptolemaic Exploration*.

²⁸ D.R. HILL, The Role of the Camel and the Horse in the Early Arab Conquests, in: V.J. PARRY – N.E. YAPP (eds.), *War, Technology and Society in the Middle East*. London 1975, 32–43.

²⁹ See HILDE GAUTHIER-PILTERS – ANNE INNIS DAGG, The Camel. Chicago–London 1981, 119 ff.; see also V. CHRISTIDES, Byzantine Libya and the March of the Arabs towards the West of North Africa (*BAR International Series* 851). Oxford 2000, 60.

³⁰ See the French translation and commentary of Mas'ūdi's *Murūdj al-Dhahab* by CHARLES PELLAT, *Les prairies d'or*, II. Paris 1965, 386 and notes.

tunately, there is little information in the historical sources about this Arab expedition. According to the epic romance of *Bahnasa*, the Christian Sudanese army was composed of the tribes of Beja and Nuba³¹ and included a military corps of many elephants whose role was instrumental in the numerous battles between the Sudanese and the Arabs.³² The anonymous author seems to realistically describe the activities of the Sudanese elephants with several details about their contribution to the final victories of the Sudanese army as well as their drawbacks, which finally proved that the use of war elephants was more detrimental than beneficial.

It is of particular interest that numerous details of the activities of the Sudanese war elephants closely resemble those in the Greek and Latin sources which describe Alexander the Great's expeditions as well as those of his successors in the Near East. Since the Arab author had no access to such sources, it is obvious that he drew his information from the Arab oral tradition known as *maghāzi* and from some written and now lost Arabic sources. The topographical information found in this work and the details of the ensuing battles betray a tradition based on a historical event, in spite of the mythological elements which were incorporated into the historical core.

Unfortunately, the epic romance of *Futūḥ al-Bahnasa* has not yet been edited properly. E. Galtier was the first to publish a French translation of it based on a limited number of manuscripts, while the Arabic edition of the text was published later, based on some other manuscripts.³³ My former student, Mr. Gamal el-Taher, has written a successful dissertation on this narration and has promised to publish it based on all relevant manuscripts.³⁴

The elephants brought by the Sudanese to the battlefield of Bahnasa were of the African breed and were distinctively different from the Asiatic. The African elephants have large fan-like ears, larger tusks, concave backs and sloping foreheads while the Asiatic are bulkier with smaller ears and humped convex backs. The Asiatic elephants had been considered by the Ancient Greek and Latin authors stronger than and superior to the African. In their reports on the battle of Raphia (Coele-Syria) (221 B.C.), in which the Egyptian king Ptolemy IV Philopator fought against the Seleucid Antiochus III, they emphasize the superiority of the Indian elephants, a view which has been confirmed by modern specialists.³⁵ Nonetheless, the African elephants of the Sudanese proved to be a formidable weapon in the first skirmishes between their masters and the Arabs, but eventually, like their predecessors used against Alexander the Great, they were confronted skillfully by the Arabs and ended up being more harmful to their keepers than to their enemies.

According to the *Futūḥ al-Bahnasa*, each elephant carried a tower (*qubbah*) either with only a black mahout or containing soldiers, mainly archers, who launched an array of well-shot arrows against the Arabs.³⁶ The Greek and Latin literary sources and the numismatic evidence describe the war elephants as carrying either only a single mahout in the towers or castles, the animal itself comprising the weapon, or a tower containing usually one to three soldiers.³⁷ The Sudanese towers were made of leather fenced around with light metal.³⁸

While the frightening appearance of the elephants at first wrought havoc among the Arabs, the latter managed eventually to overcome the deadly impact by using various stratagems. Their best shooters aimed directly at the elephants' eyes killing them and, similarly to Alexander's soldiers, they cut the trunks of the animals with their swords thus paralyzing them. In addition, they applied a ruse; they loaded some camels with flammable

³¹ See *Futūḥ al-Bahnasa* in: *Futūḥ al-Shām*, ed. DĀR AL-JAYL, n.d., 243, "Al-Barbar, wa'l-Nūbah wa'l Bajāwah". Perhaps with the term "Barbar" the author referred to some primitive African tribes.

³² *Futūḥ*, *ibidem*.

³³ E. GALTIER, *Futūḥ al-Bahnasa*, in: E. CHASSINOT (ed.), *Mémoires de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale*. Cairo 1909.

³⁴ GAMAL EL-TAHIR, *Byzantino-Nubica: The Participation of the Sudanese in the Defence of Byzantine Egypt*. Ioannina 1994 (unpublished dissertation [in Greek]).

³⁵ Polybius, *Hist.* V 84, trans. W. R. PATON, *Polybius, The Histories*. London 1960, vol. III 205.

³⁶ *Futūḥ al-Bahnasa*, ed. DĀR AL-JAYL 243. It is noteworthy that a number of Beja-Blemmyes had allied with the Byzantines and acted like unofficial *foederati*; see L. TÖRÖK, *Late Antique Nubia*. Budapest 1988, 73. After the Arab conquest of Egypt a considerable number of Beja-Blemmyes acquired permission from the Arabs to reside in southern Egypt, enjoying special privileges; see V. CHRISTIDES, *Ethnic Movements in Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan: Blemmyes-Beja in Late Antique and Early Arab Egypt until 707 A.D.* *Listy Filologicke* 103.3 (1980) 129–143.

³⁷ SCULLARD, *Elephant* 240 ff.

³⁸ *Futūḥ al-Bahnasa*, ed. DĀR AL-JAYL 228.

material and let them run in among the elephants. Thus, in the ensuing panic, the elephants threw their riders and tramped on their own soldiers.³⁹

The *Futūḥ al-Bahnasa* describes in detail the entry of the Sudanese army to Egypt through Aswān, Qibṭ and Usmuniya, paying special attention to the warm welcome which it received from the local authorities. However, the *Futūḥ al-Bahnasa* does not report on the long route, which obviously went across the Nile through Abu-Simbel to Aswān. It is noteworthy that epigraphic evidence reveals elephants passing through Abu-Simbel in Ptolemaic times.⁴⁰ At the end of the Umayyad period (750 A.D.), a similar route was taken by the Nubian king Cyriacus who – moving from Dongola – reached Fustāṭ, the capital of Egypt, in order to liberate the Coptic patriarch who was imprisoned by the Emir of Egypt.⁴¹

Actually, already in pre-Islamic times, there were trade routes between Egypt and Nubia along which there were frequent movements of merchants and travelers. Thus, the elephant corps along with the rest of the Nubian army moved without trouble along well-trodden routes. As the Nubians were marching along the river Nile, their elephants had enough water and could easily endure the long distances.

References to elephants are frequent in the Arabic sources but it is worth mentioning here one peculiar function, i.e. their use as executioners. Elephants, which are normally mild and pleasant animals and can be easily domesticated, can also be trained not only to fight but even to act as executioners. A most conspicuous example appears in the work of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. This indefatigable Moroccan traveler, who had criss-crossed the Islamic world and had visited even Constantinople,⁴² spent considerable time in India where Muḥammad bn. Tughlaq, the king of India, appointed him judge in Delhi. He remained there for fifteen years (1333–1348) and had the opportunity to study and describe the daily life of the Indians. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa frequently reported on the appearance and activities of the elephants in India, including occasions when the king used them to distribute gold and silver coins to the people from small catapults mounted on their backs. He further reported that some Indian elephants were trained as executioners. The elephants which killed people had their backs covered with sharp pieces of metal like knives. When the order was given, they grasped the criminals with their trunks, threw them in the air and then killed them as they fell onto the sharp pieces of metal.⁴³ Similar practices of elephant executioners appear in the work of Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil*,⁴⁴ and in the epic romance of *Sīrat ‘Antar*.⁴⁵

³⁹ *Futūḥ al-Bahnasa*, ed. DĀR AL-JAYL 243 ff.

⁴⁰ DESANGES, *Les chasseurs d'éléphants* 31–50.

⁴¹ G. VANTINI, *Christianity in the Sudan*. Bologna 1981, 75–76.

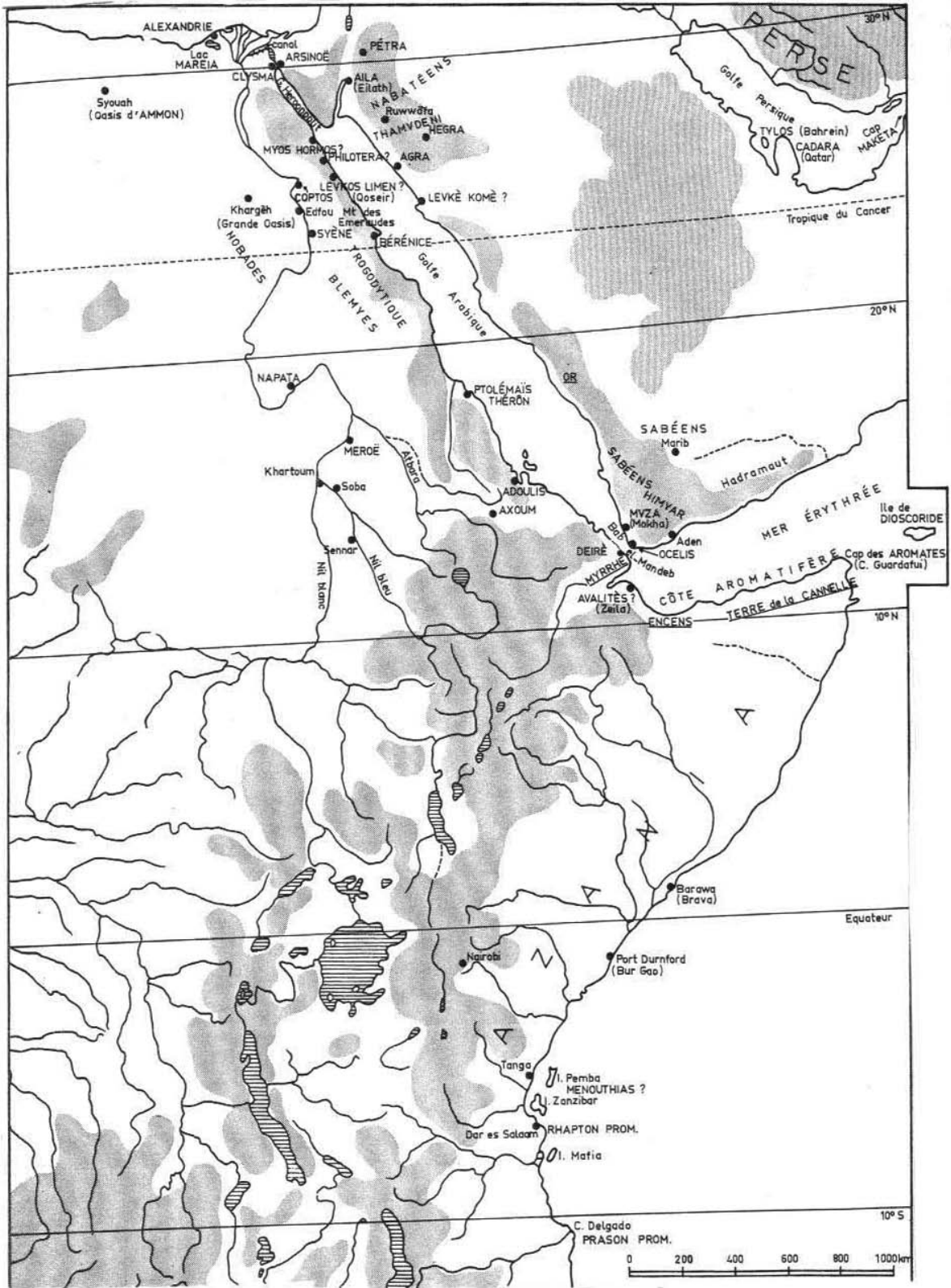
⁴² V. CHRISTIDES, *Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's Journey to Constantinople*, in: J.P. MONFERRER SALA – MARIA DOLORES RODRÍGUEZ GÓMEZ (eds.), *Entre Oriente y Occidente. Ciudades y Viajeros en la Edad Media*. Granada 2005, 307–319.

⁴³ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Travels*, ed. and French trans. C. DEFREMERY – B.R. SANGUINETTI, III. Paris 1979, 330–331.

⁴⁴ Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil*, *Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabiya*. Beirut 1967, VIII 179 (year 488 H.).

⁴⁵ For the epic-romance of *Sīrat ‘Antar*, see the unpublished dissertation of I. FADEL, *The Image of Byzantines in the Arabic Epic-Romance of Sīrat ‘Antar*. Ioannina 1997 (in Greek); *Sīrat ‘Antar*, ed. Maktaba al-‘Ilmiya, n.d., V 29.

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Map of Hellenistic and Roman Egypt and Eastern Africa (taken from J. DESANGES, Recherches sur l'Activité des Méditerranéens aux Confins de l'Afrique. Paris 1978, IX).

