

Bashier Negood Hassan

The Nile as the Main Traffic Artery in the Ancient Sudan

The Nile has always played a very important role in the economic life of Sudan. Especially in the ancient time, it was very important for all the people, who lived near it. The Nile was the main traffic artery as well as a source of water for agriculture (especially, on the floods' periods) and a source of various types of fish (Bonnet 2000: 170; Adams 2010: 158).

The Nile flows from south to north at an average speed of about four knots during inundation season.

According to Pliny's Natural History "a canal was dug from the river Nilus (Nile) to the spot where the obelisk lay; and two broad vessels, laden with blocks of similar stone a foot square, the cargo of each amounting to double the size, and consequently double the weight, of the obelisk, were brought beneath it; the extremities of the obelisk remaining supported by the opposite sides of the canal. The blocks of stone were then removed, and the vessels, being thus gradually lightened, received their burden. It was erected upon a basis of six square blocks, quarried from the same mountain, and the artist was rewarded with the sum of fifty talents" (Pliny, *Historia naturalis*, XXXVI. 14). Herodotus wrote of the Nile: "the river rises of itself, waters the field, and then sinks back again; thereupon each man sows his field and waits for the harvest" (Herodotus, II. 93,6).

For traffic on the Nile, the Meroites made vessels (ships and boats) out of the stems of plants, reed and papyrus, so they were quick, but they could not carry more than three people.

The wooden boats with steering oars, a mast and sail, which appeared in the later period, could run therefore against the wind. For ritual purposes, those boats and ships were decorated with the gods' images on both sides. (Liverani 2004: 138-139; Bonnet 2004: 73). They carried portable Altar of God aboard. The graphics, indicating of that ceremony, are found on ceramics and pottery.

In the Graeco-Roman period in Egypt, the Romans used high side boats designed for two people (Engelmayer 1965) and large-sized boats, made out of several layers of papyrus. The large boats could place some passengers and even one big animal aboard. The boats made out of tightly roped papyrus' stems and woven reed mat were used by fishermen and hunters at shallow water.

The bow of the boat was on the water level and the stern rose high above the river, so the boat could smoothly sail forward and it could be easily pushed away from the sandbank (Trigger 1976: 39; David 2008: 362).

Due to the geographical location of the Kingdom of Meroe, the Nile river played an important role in the development of the trade between the Kingdom of Meroe and Ancient Egypt (Trigger 1976: 18-19), which had a great demand for raw materials, gold, silver, iron, manpower, African and exotic products (incense, animal skins, precious wood, etc.) (Gradel 2010: 99-101).

For this reason, the Egyptian administration system was imposed by the Egyptian government on the Nile. To protect trade on the Nile, the Egyptian government based the garrison on the island of Philae. Later two main trade points were found on the Nile route (used, probably, as traffic terminal as well): in Hiera Sykaminos and in Syene. (Carl 1998, Plate XVI). The customs receipts were found in Syene, testifying to the Roman-Egyptian Customs in the region in the 1st and 2nd century AD. And the large market, where the Egyptian and Meroe commodities were supplied, took place in Hiera Sykaminos. (Berzin 1992: 66).

Meroe also controlled trade on the Nile Road, and put some military checkpoints along the Nile to regulate trade and protect caravans. The luxury life and well-being had become a habit for the Greek and Roman emperors and their nobles. The demand for ivory increased the number of elephant tusks' traders. (Tallet 2012: 84).

The Meroites used the Nile for goods' transportation all the year around. However, the Red Sea way was far from the trade centers' suppliers and the caravan routes connecting the Nile Valley and the coast run through the waterless and hot Eastern Desert. Moreover, the sea trade route on the African coast was seasonal and depended on monsoon. The route was more dangerous from equipping level point of view, especially the first period when the Red Sea coast was developed and studied.

The commodities' supply from Nubia to Greek Egypt, with their further reexport to the Mediterranean countries, increased after the expedition of Ptolemy II.

The Meroe nobles maintained from their side the demand for luxury goods, jewelry, statues, lamps, ships and weapons, bottles of wine and honey, clothing, aromatic oils and cosmetics supplied from Egypt. (Hintze 1978: 93; Adams 1988: 24; Gradel 2010: 101).

In the Ptolemaic period, the interest for elephants increased not only for commerce but also for war purposes. The Greeks started to look for facilitation of the export of elephants and work on development of trade routes between Meroe and Egypt. Some Greek trade points were established on the Red Sea coast from there African elephants and other exotic products were deported to Egypt.

The shift of the trade route from the Nile to the Red Sea was one of the most crucial reasons that led to the end of the Kingdom of Meroe.

REFERENCES

- ADAMS, W. Y. 1988. The Nile Trade in Post-Pharaonic Times. *Sahara* 1:24.
- ADAMS, W. Y. 2010. *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*. London.: Lexington.
- BERZINA, S. 1992. *Meroe and the world I – VIII century AD*. (Берзина С. Я. Мероэ и окружающий мир I-VIII вв. н.э.. М.: Наука. С. 66): 66
- BONNET, CH. 2000. *Edifices et rites funéraires à Kerma. Mission archéologique de l'Université de Genève à Kerma (Sudan)*:170. Paris.
- BONNET, CH. 2004. "The Kerma Culture." *Sudan Ancient Treasures: An Exhibition Of Recent Discoveries From The Sudan National Museum*. Ed. D. A. Welsby and J. R. Anderson. British Museum: 73, 87. London.
- CARL, F. 1998. *The Cambridge History of Egypt. Vol. I. Islamic Egypt, 640 – 1517*. Plate XVI. Cambridge.
- DAVID, R. 2003 (2008). *Hand Book to life in Ancient Egypt*. University of Manchester (Russian edition 2008).
- ENGELMAYER, R. 1965. *Die Felsgravierungen im Distrikt Sayala-Nubian*. Wien.
- GRADEL, C. 2010. Meroe. Royaume de Relais Commerciaux ?. In: M. Baud (ed.) *Méroé, Un empire sur le Nil, Catalogue d'exposition, éditions du Musée du Louvre*: 99-101. Paris.
- HINTZE, F. 2010. The Kingdom of Kush: The Meroitic Period. In: S. Hoschfield (ed.) *Africa II in Antiquity*: 93.

- LIVERANI, I. 2004. Hillat El-Arab. *Sudan Ancient Treasures: An Exhibition Of Recent Discoveries From The Sudan National Museum*. Ed. D. A. Welsby and J. R. Anderson. British Museum: 138–139. London.
- TALLET, G., GRADEL, C. and S. GUÉDON. 2012. Le site d'el-Deir, à la croisée des routes du désert Occidental: nouvelles perspectives sur l'implantation de l'armée romaine dans le désert égyptien. In: P.Ballet (ed.) *Greco et Romains en Égypte. Territoires, espaces de la vie et de la mort, objets de prestige et du quotidien*: 84. Le Caire.
- TRIGGER B. G. 1976. *Nubia. Under the pharaohs*:18-19, 39. London.