

TWO DOCUMENTS FROM THE DAYS OF
NĀṢIR B. MUḤAMMAD ABŪ LIKAYLIK,
HAMAJ REGENT OF SINNĀR

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Elsewhere in these pages Neil McHugh has published two documents of the Hamaj period in Sinnār, and he has most graciously invited my comments upon the historical setting in which they were issued. The discussion to follow is based upon my study *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, Chapter 15, ‘The Regency, 1785-1803’, pp. 348-80.

In 1199/1785, Sultan ʿAdlān of Sinnār revolted against the Hamaj Regency. The *wazīr* Rajab b. Muḥammad Abū Likaylik marched back from Kordofan to suppress the rising, but died in battle before the capital at al-Turus in Dhū ’l-Qaʿda 1200/26 August - 24 September 1786. The defeated partisans of the Hamaj fell back upon ʿAbbūd, north of the capital, and lingered there for two years in encampment, dispirited and divided in counsel. In 1202/1787-8, however, they rallied; they elected Nāṣir b. Muḥammad Abū Likaylik as their pretender to the vacant if not actually defunct Regency, and then revived the prospects for the office of *wazīr* by crushing the royalist forces at the decisive battle of Inṭaraḥnā. Sultan ʿAdlān died, his forces dispersed, while the victorious Nāṣir entered the Funj capital, sacked it, and burned it to the ground.

I

Document A was issued shortly thereafter on 6 Jumāda II 1203/4 March 1789. It confirmed the existing rights and

privileges of a prominent holy family of the °Abbūd area—a modest reward to folk who had spent the previous two years serving as hosts to Rajab’s battered army. Two unusual features of the document may be interpreted as reflections of the unsettled conditions prevailing between Nāṣir’s victory at Inṭarahnā and his consolidation of power by the end of 1203—by which time he felt secure enough in the heartlands of Sinnār to embark upon an extended northern campaign against the °Abdallāb.

The Anonymous Sultan.

Document A is a confirming charter in which ‘the sultan’ is said to confirm and ratify the acts of ‘the previous sultans’, beginning with the seventeenth-century ruler Bādī III. The previous confirmation of the grant by Muḥammad Abū Likaylik, the founder of the Hamaj Regency, is likewise recorded. The name of the sultan reigning at the time the charter was issued, however, is not given. While the omission of the incumbent king’s name might perhaps be a mere copyist’s error, a more probable alternative explanation is at hand; namely, that even to contemporaries during the early months of 1789 the identity of the legitimate successor to the late Sultan °Adlān was literally unknown. Eight doomed men and one unfortunate child called themselves Sultan of Sinnār during the brief years 1202-1207: °Adlān, Idrīs, Awkāl, Ṭabl, Rubāṭ, Bādī V, Ḥasab Rabbihi, Nuwwār and Bādī VI. The man who caused the charter to be issued may not have yet decided which royal cipher would occupy the throne, which the prudent beneficiaries of the grant, for their part, may have preferred the authorization of an imperial John Doe.

The Anonymous Benefactor.

Document A expresses the act of confirmation through an anonymous verb of execution, ‘I have confirmed it.’ In the apparent absence of a king, the most probable benefactor would certainly have been Shaykh Nāṣir; a possible motive for the new strongman’s reticence may be inferred from care-

ful examination of the appended roster of courtiers who served as witnesses.

Several of the courtiers who appear as witnesses to Document A were identified by their titles, as was customary in charter rosters of Sinnār. Other individuals named but not entitled in Document A may nevertheless be identified by function in Nāṣir's new administration through the titles they held in the next extant Sinnār charter of 1791 (or in the case of Muḥammad Kamtūr, its successors). Among Nāṣir's provincial governors, for example, in the year 1203/1789, only °Umar walad Qāsim was known by his title of Shaykh al-Qarbīn (falsely rendered as *shaykh al-gharb* by the copyist), while °Umar Jūr walad Ḥammad, °Ajīb walad Hākīt, Muḥammad walad Badr and Muḥammad Kamtūr were not yet known by their subsequent titles of Shaykh al-Tāka. Shaykh of Atbara, Shaykh of Alays and Shaykh al-Baḥr.

If all these men (with the possible exception of Kamtūr who, if appointed, was soon deposed) became provincial governors with the rise of Nāṣir, why were they not known in 1789 by their titles of 1791? The answer probably lies in the technicality of court protocol that only a sultan could invest new court officers. The most conspicuous difference between °Umar walad Qāsim and Nāṣir's other provincial governors was that Shaykh °Umar alone had already been formally entitled and invested with his office under the previous administration of Sultan °Adlān, while all the others were new men. Perhaps at the time Document A was issued they had not yet had the leisure to carry out the lengthy and immobilizing rites of investiture, undoubtedly rendered difficult by the destruction of the capital city where such ceremonies customarily took place if not actually impossible by the absence of a reigning sultan.

It would follow that it was not by accident that in the same roster of witnesses Nāṣir himself, like the other newcomers to the court, had no title; though he unquestionably ruled, he had not yet been formally invested as *wazīr*. An effective ruler not yet formally entitled and invested might

well have issued a charter using the anonymous formula, 'I have confirmed it.' Nāṣir's motivation was certainly not an excess of modesty; by 1791 he had not only allowed one of his puppet sultans to reign long enough to bestow upon him the title of *wazīr*, but had also demanded that his name and office be elevated from third to first position in the court roster, a preeminence of protocol which even Muḥammad Abū Likaylik had been forced to relinquish shortly after his rise to power in the coup of 1762.

II

The years of peace following the conclusion of Nāṣir's northern campaign of 1203-1206 exposed some peculiarities of the Regent's personality—a piquant theme relevant to the matter at hand only in that Nāṣir succeeded in alienating the affections of almost everyone including, in the end, his brothers. The most conspicuously ill-used sibling was Ḥusayn (one of the younger sons of Muḥammad Abū Likaylik and destined to serve in future years as the last Hamaj Regent), but the most important defections were those of Idrīs and °Adlān. Idrīs had made his home at al-Manāqil in the north-central Gezira at some distance from Sinnār; his conduct while visiting Nāṣir's ruined capital in the Regent's absence was such as to provoke rumors that he was conspiring against the Regent with Nāṣir's personal *wazīr* Daf° Allāh.

Document B places Idrīs's younger brother °Adlān in the vicinity of °Abbūd on 26 Muḥarram 1210/12 August 1795, and reveals him in the act of issuing a document whose grandiose formularies lack only an explicit claim by °Adlān to the title of *wazīr* to render them treasonous. Probably by 1210 the folk of the °Abbūd area sensed the impending fall of Nāṣir and sought the patronage of °Adlān as the most prominent lord of their region and a possible successor to Nāṣir as well. Most significantly, however, no court officials appear in the

roster of witnesses to Document B; °Adlān was supported only by his own military officers and his clients the holy men.

Over the course of the next year °Adlān played a double game. As late as 3 Shawwāl 1211/1 April 1797 he was still active in the service of Nāṣir; on that date the two brothers crossed the Blue Nile together in force and crushed the embarrassing enclave of unrepentent royalists opposite the capital at al-Ṭarfāya under Muḥammad ‘Abū Rayda’ b. Khamīs of the Sinnār Musabba°āt. Yet within the two months following, Idrīs launched his revolt; he brought his troops southward toward the capital and °Adlān returned west from the fief of the Musabba°āt to join him. The rebels encamped among °Adlān’s clients at °Abbūd.

With the victory of the insurgent faction, Idrīs became the new Regent; °Adlān hunted down Nāṣir and had him put to death. As long as Idrīs lived °Adlān served him well—too well, perhaps, for the enemies °Adlān made as the powerful new Regent’s professional killer doomed his own chances for successful rule when his turn came to assume the Regency upon the death of Idrīs in 1218/1803. Let °Adlān’s pretensions to the grandeur of authority as they appear in Document B be forgiven, for his real but brief subsequent tenure as Regent seems to have left no documentary legacy at all.