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The Nile River in Muslim Geographical Sources

The Arab Egyptians usually call this river Baḥr an-Nīl¹ (The Sea of Nile). Travelers from other Islamic regions also adopted this name apparently because of its great length and width.² Although the name An-Nīl does not explicitly appear in the Qur'ān, it appears as a metaphor and no doubt as a poetical allusion, in the word Yamm (Sea) in the story of Moses and the Egyptian Pharaoh³. According to the anonymous author of *Kitāb al-istibṣār*, the Qur'ān calls it Yamm like in Hebrew while the Arabs call it Baḥr (Sea)⁴.

Mustawfī arbitrarily connects the Nile River with what is generally stated in the Qur'ān in XXXII:27⁵. In this verse we read: *Have they not*

¹ The word *Baḥr* has acquired the meaning *river* in Arabic. The Nile is also called *Al-Baḥr* or *Baḥr Miṣr*, which is also the case with other separate parts of its river system, such as Baḥr Yūsuf. J. H. Kramers, Article: *Nil*, E.I. New Edition vol. IV. See also George Jacob, *Studien in arabischen Geographien*, Berlin, Mayer & Müller 1891, pp. 93-94.

² Anonymous, *Kitāb al-istibṣār fī 'aḡā'ib al-abṣār*, Alfred von Kremer, *Description de L'Afrique par un géographe arabe anonyme du sixième siècle de l'Hégire. Text arabe publié pour la première fois* Wien 1852. Islamic Geography, Vol143., reprint, edited by F. Sezgin, Institut für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften an der Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main 1993, pp. 47-48. Al-'Abdarī, *Riḥlat al-'Abdarī*, photo-copy of the manuscript, p. 81a., Šams ad-Dīn Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Luwātī Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Tuḥfat an-nuzzār fī ḡarā'ib al-amṣār wa-'aḡā'ib al-asfār*. Edited by 'Abd al-Hādī at-Tāzī, Akadīmiyyat al-Mamlaka al-Maḡribiyya, Ar-Ribāt 1997, pp. 207-208.

³ Muḥammad Ibn Makram Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, Dār Šādir, Bayrūt, n.d., vol. XII, p. 647; Ibn al-Aṭīr, Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī Ibn Abī al-Karam, *Al-Kāmil fī at-tārīḥ*, Būlāq, Al-Qāhira 1954, vol. I, p. 132.

⁴ Qur'ān, XX:39. In this connection see also Anonymous, *Kitāb al-istibṣār*, op. cit., p. 47.

⁵ *God says: See they not how we drive the rain to some parched land, and thereby bring corn of which their cattle and themselves do eat? Will they not then behold.* Qur'ān XXXII:27.

seen how We lead the water to the barren land therewith bringing forth crops whereof their cattle eat, and they themselves? Will they not then see? The author asserts that throughout all of Egypt, during the summer months when the river is flooding, it inundates all the lands; then during the three autumn months, when the river is low, they sow their fields and have no need for irrigation. And this is what is referred to in the Qur'ān⁶.

Muslim tradition holds that generally, the making of the rivers is mentioned in the Qur'ān. There are many verses which apparently explain how the rivers emerged and what the importance of the rivers for mankind and life on earth is. In *Sūra* 39, verse 21 we read: *Hast thou not seen how the God hath set down water from the sky and hath caused it to penetrate the earth as spring water*⁷. In the Qur'ān, the word river is repeated forty-three times. Most of these verses portray rivers as the main element in Paradise. Many verses repeated the concept of verse 25 in *Sūrat al-Baqara* in which we read: *Give thou the glad tidings unto those who believe and do good deeds, that for them are gardens beneath which flow rivers*. In the same *Sūra*, v: 74 we meet a literary similitude: *Thenceforth were your hearts hardened as stones or harder still; for verily of stones are some from which gush forth streams; others there are which split asunder and from them cometh out water*. Mustawfi, the Persian geographer, maintains that according to Al-Qazwīnī, mention is made in the tradition of the Prophet that three of the rivers of Paradise traverse through the country of Iran, and Prophet Muḥammad says the Sayḥūn (Oxus River), Ğayḥūn (Jaxartes River), Euphrates, and the Nile are all rivers of Paradise. The author, however, maintains that of these the Nile does not in its course reach the land of Iran⁸.

About rivers, the Islamic tradition cites four rivers as issuing from Paradise. The origin of the Nile is connected with the Jewish and Christian traditions which also depict the Nile springing from Paradise⁹. Muslim authors, particularly those who were living in Egypt or are sympathetic to Egypt, followed this notion. According to Al-Mas'ūdī, the four rivers originating in Paradise are the Nile, the Euphrates, the Tigris, and the

⁶ Ḥamad Allāh al-Qazwīnī Mustawfī, *Nuzhat al-qulūb*, edited and translated by G. Le Strange, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1919, p. 203.

⁷ *Qur'ān*, 39:21

⁸ Mustawfi, op. cit., p. 201.

⁹ J.H. Kramers, article: *Nile*, E.I., 1st edition.

Sayḥān (Sarus)¹⁰. There is no consensus among Muslim geographers in listing the rivers coming from Paradise. Al-Muqaddasī gives the four rivers as follows: the Nile, the Ġayḥūn (Jaxartes), the Euphrates, and Ar-Rass (Araxes)¹¹. According to Yāqūt, these rivers are the Tigris and the Euphrates, the Sayḥūn (Oxus), and the Ġayḥūn (Jaxartes)¹². Al-Maqrīzī only suggests two rivers, namely the Nile and the Euphrates¹³, but he comments that the Old Testament mentions four rivers namely Ġayḥūn, the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates. In Genesis we read:

And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison: that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havelah where there is gold. And the name of the second river is Gipon [read Gehūn]¹⁴, the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia. And the name of the third river is

¹⁰ Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī Ibn al-Ḥusayn Ibn ‘Alī al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūğ ad-ḍaḥab wa-ma‘ādīn al-ğawhar*, edited by Muḥammad Muḥyī ad-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, Dār ar-Rağā‘, Al-Qāhira 1938, vol. I, pp. 81-82.

¹¹ Šams ad-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn Maḥmūd Ibn Abī Bakr al-Bannā al-Baššārī al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan at-taqāsīm fī ma‘rifat al-aqālīm*, edited by M.J. de Goeje. Second edition, E. J. Brill, Leyden 1906, Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum, p. 23; Šams ad-Dīn Abī ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Abī Tālib ad-Dimašqī, *Nuḥbat ad-dahr fī ‘ağā‘ib al-barr wa-al-baḥr*, publié par M. A. F. Mehren, M. M. Egger et Copm, et H. Schmitzdorff, Saint-Petersbourg 1866, pp. 88-94; Le Strange, G. *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate*, Cambridge at the University Press 1930., p. 434. See also Abū al-Fidā al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Kaṭīr, *Al-Bidāya wa-an-nihāya*, vol. I-II, Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, Bayrūt 1985, vol. I, p. 26; Kamāl ad-Dīn ‘Umar Ibn Aḥmad Ibn Abī Ġarāda, *Buğyat at-ṭalab fī tāriḥ Ḥalab*, edited by Suhayl Zakkār, Dār al-Fikr, Bayrūt 1988, vol. I, p. 282; Ibn Battūta, op. cit., vol. I, p. 56.

¹² Yāqūt, Šihāb ad-Dīn ‘Abd Allāh Ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī ar-Rūmī, *Mu‘ğam al-buldān*, edited by Aḥmad Farīd ar-Rifā‘ī, Dār Šādir, Bayrūt 1977, vol. IV, p. 242. See also Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, vol. V, p. 237; Ibn Battūta, op. cit., vol. I, p. 207.

¹³ Taqī ad-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-mawā‘iẓ wa-al-i‘tibār fī dīkr al-ḥiṭat wa-al-āṭār*, ed. by M. M. Ziyāda, vol. I, Dār at-Taḥrīr li-ṭ-Ṭab‘ wa-an-Našr, Cairo n.d., vol. I, p. 91.

¹⁴ According to Kramers, the Christians named the River Ġayḥūn after one of the rivers of Paradise, as in the works of Ephraim, Syrus, and Jacob of Edessa, and the Syriac Christian author Agapius Al-Manbağī. J. H. Kramers. Article: *Nīl*, E.I., New Edition, vol. IV. It is noteworthy that the same word *Gīlūn* is used to refer to the River Nile in the Old Testament. *The Holy Scriptures*, Hebrew and English., A Jewish Bible According to the Masoretic Text, Sinai Pupliching, Tel Aviv, Israel 1979, Genesis, Chapter II, X-XIV.

*Hiddekel: that is it which goeth toward the east of Assyria and the forth river is Euphrates*¹⁵.

It seems here that Al-Maqrīzī replaced the Biblical river Gipon with the Nile as it goes around the land of Ethiopia. As to the etymology of the river names in Muslim geography, G. Le Strange maintains that it would seem that they were taken from a foreign language and that their meanings are unknown. The name Sayḥūn was changed into a jingling rhyme, Ğayḥūn; and this is the case with many other borrowed names, e.g. in the Qurʾān and the Tradition, Kābīl—Hābīl, for Cain and Abel; Ṭālūt—Ğālūt, for Saul and Goliath; Yāġūġ—Māġūġ, for Gog and Magog¹⁶.

The notion of the Fountain of Life (*ʿayn al-ḥayāt*) has an influence on the Arabic belles-lettres in which rivers are referred to. According to Kramers, Medieval cosmographical theory places Paradise in the extreme East on the other side of the sea, so the rivers of Paradise would have to cross the sea¹⁷. When connected to Paradise in these materials, the Fountain of Life is sometimes considered to be the origin of the four rivers of Paradise. These rivers have their origin apparently in various quarters of the earth.¹⁸ Ibn al-Wardī, the author of *Ḥarīdat al-ʿaġāʾib*, describes how Sayḥūn, Ğayḥūn, the Nile, and the Euphrates, i.e. the four rivers of Paradise, come fourth from the cupola of emerald and are poured out into the dark ocean and are sweeter than honey¹⁹. The same story can be found in the work of Al-Ibšīhī with one exception that this cupola is situated in the land of Gold²⁰. A brief word may be added by An-Nuwayrī, who apparently cites Islamic tradition. The author states that Muḥammad, in his miʿrāġ, reached the Sidrat al-Muntahā (the Lote-tree of the utmost

¹⁵ *The Holy Scriptures*, ibid.

¹⁶ Abū ʿUbayd al-Bakrī, *Muʿġam mā istaʿġam min asmāʾ al-bilād wa-al-mawāḍiʿ*, edited by Muṣṭafā as-Saqqā, ʿĀlam al-Kutub, Bayrūt 1403 H., vol. III, p. 771; Le Strange, op. cit., p. 434.

¹⁷ J.H. Kramers, ibid.

¹⁸ A.J. Wensinck, op. cit., p. 59.

¹⁹ Ibn al-Wardī, *Ḥarīdat al-ʿaġāʾib*. op. cit. p. 140. According to An-Nuwayrī, the four rivers arise in Paradise exactly at the location of the tree of the Sidrat (Šaġarat) al-Muntahā. Šihāb ad-Dīn Ibn Aḥmad Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, Wizārat at-Ṭaqāfa wa-al-Iršād al-Qawmī, vol. I, Cairo n.d., vol. I. p. 263. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ibn ʿAlī Ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Al-Muntaẓam fī tāriḥ al-mulūk wa-al-umam*, Dār Šādir, Bayrūt 1358 H., vol. I, pp. 157-158; Al-Baġdādī, Aḥmad Ibn ʿAlī, Abū Bakr, *Tāriḥ Baġdād*, Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, Bayrūt n.d., vol. I, pp. 45-55.

²⁰ Šihāb ad-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad Abū al-Faṭḥ al-Ibšīhī, *Al-Mustaṭraf fī kull fan mustaṭraf*, Maktabat al-Ġumhūriyya, Mišr 1385 H., vol. II, p. 137.

boundary) where he saw four rivers: two are Baṭīnī (internal) and the other two are Zāhirī (external); the two internal rivers flow into Paradise. The external rivers are the Nile and the Euphrates²¹. It seems here that the Sidrat al-Muntahā²² replaced the Fountain of Life as the origin of these rivers. The garden, Paradise, or the blissful region is located near the Sidrat al-Muntahā which is the abode of the pious ones²³. In Semitic literature, the Fountain of Life and the rivers of Paradise, which also found their place in Islamic tradition, are the origins of fresh water on the earth²⁴.

Gaufrey-Demombynes comments that the concept of the four rivers coming from Paradise could also be found in Christian tradition²⁵. The scholar based his theories on the theological-biblical commentaries and polemical works of Saint Ephraem the Syrian, deacon of Edessa who comments that the rivers which come out of Paradise are four, one for wine, the second for milk, the third for honey, and the fourth for butter.²⁶ Some Arabic sources mention here also cited these legends. Generally, it says that these rivers are conducted underground towards various spots where they break through the surface of the earth²⁷.

There are also a series of Muslim traditions connecting the rivers of Paradise with the Fountain of Life itself, which originally derived from Jewish and Christian traditions²⁸.

²¹ An-Nuwayrī, op. cit., p. 263.

²² The Qur'ān, 53:14. According to the interpretation of this verse, it is the point at which all knowledge ends or stops, and no one's knowledge crosses the limit beyond which neither any angel or any human being could pass. The garden, Paradise, or the blissful region near the Sidrat al-Muntahā is the abode of the pious ones.

²³ Mir Ahmad Ali Mir Ahmed Ali S. V., *The Holy Qur'an, with special notes from Ayatullah Agha Haji Mirza Mahdi Pooya Yazdi*, edited by S. V. Mir Ahmed Ali. First edition, The Islamic Republic of Iran, The Awqaf and Charities Organization, Tehran 1988, 53:14.

²⁴ A.J. Wensinck, op. cit., p. 60

²⁵ Gaufrey-Demombynes, Maurice, *Narodziny islamu*, translated by Hanna Ołędzka, PIW, Warszawa 1988, p. 340.

²⁶ Op. cit., p. 339.

²⁷ Ad-Dimašqī, op. cit., p. 88; Zakariyā Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Maḥmūd al-Qazwīnī, *'Aḡā'ib al-maḥlūqāt wa-ḡarā'ib al-mawḡūdāt*, ed. by F. Wüstenfeld, mit Unterstützung der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, Göttingen, im Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1849, p. 31.

²⁸ The story mentioned by Abū al-Fidā connected to Dū al-Qarnyn and his travels through the earth and nether world looking for the Fountain of Life *'Ayn al-Ḥayāt* is similar to, if not typical of, the oldest description in the Book of Henoch.

However, some geographers did their best to take a scientific and geological approach to rivers, their formation on the earth and their benefits for human beings. The work of Iḥwān aṣ-Ṣafā' gives detailed information about the formation of rivers and the water circulation over the earth (evaporation-condensation-precipitation). They additionally asserted that all rivers come from mountains and end in seas and lakes²⁹. One of the best such explanations was submitted by the anonymous author of *Hudūd al-‘ālam*. The author states that:

“Rivers are of two classes: the first natural and the others artificial. The latter are those of which the beds have been dug out and the water brought therein for the benefit of a town or for the agriculture of a district. Most of the artificial canals are small and ships cannot navigate them. There are towns with more or less ten canals, the water of which is used for drinking, for the fields, and for the meadows. The number of these canals cannot be fixed because at every moment it is subject to an increase or decrease. The natural rivers are those great waters which are formed by the melting of the snow, or by the springs coming from the mountains or from the surface of the earth; and they make their way, while their beds become now broad; and now narrow, and continually flow until they reach a sea or a marsh. Some of these natural rivers are not very large and are used for the benefit of a town or a district, such as the rivers of Balḥ and of Merv, and it may happen that from a natural river numerous canals are derived and utilised while the original stream goes down to a sea or marsh, as is the case of the Euphrates.”³⁰

In general, geographers mention that in the inhabited land there are many rivers. The largest among them are four in number: namely, the Nile, the Euphrates, the Tigris, and the River of Balḥ, sometimes called Ġayḥān (Oxus). All these rivers are located in the Muslim domain.

In the belles-lettres of Al-Ġāḥiz, we may encounter knowledge of full legendary tales. The author is the first who linked the Nile River to the River of Mihrān (Indus) considering the second a branch of the first. Some authorities compare the Indus with the Nile for size and importance. They noticed that the Indus also had crocodiles like those of Egypt, but they

Ibn Kaṭīr, Abū al-Fidā, *Al-Bidāya wa-an-nihāya*, op. cit., vol. II, pp. 98-100; A.J. Wensinck, op. cit., p. 58.

²⁹ Iḥwān aṣ-Ṣafā', *Kitāb Iḥwān aṣ-Ṣafā' wa-lullān al-wafā'*, edited by Ḥayr ad-Dīn az-Ziriklī, Al-Maṭba‘a al-‘Arabiyya, Miṣr 1928, p. 164.

³⁰ Anonymous, *Hudūd al-‘ālam*, The Regions of the World, translated and explained by V. Minorsky, Oxford University Press 1937, pp. 69-70.

never imagined any physical connection between the two rivers existed³¹. Although many other literary works cited Al-Ġāḥiẓ³², most geographers strongly rejected this accusation. Al-Bīrūnī, in his work on India, comments that the presence of crocodiles in the rivers of India led Al-Ġāḥiẓ to believe that the Mahrān River was a branch of the Nile. The author attributed Al-Ġāḥiẓ's theory to his simplicity of mind and his ignorance about the course of the rivers³³. Al-Mas'ūdī also criticised this statement saying that he did not know from where Al-Ġāḥiẓ had this false information³⁴.

In reference to the Nile and its rise, 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baġdādī mentions that the Nile has two remarkable peculiarities. Firstly, it is very long, and secondly, the river floods in the summertime in contrast to all other rivers in the world. The author adds that we do not know in the world a river of such great length from its source to its mouth³⁵. He maintains that the word Nīl is an Arabic word, and he arbitrarily presents an etymological interpretation that the word Nīl is the name of the thing given (*nāla-yanālu* —as the verb in present and past, and *Naylu* is the infinitive)³⁶. Yāqūt briefly reports that the name Nīl is an Arabicised word derived from a Rūm (Byzantine) word Nīlūs³⁷. The author adds that, about its location and distance, most Arab geographers located it between the latitude of 11° beyond the equator and at the latitude of 33 and one third degrees north of the equator where Damietta is located.³⁸ Accordingly, it could be said that

³¹ Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm Muḥammad al-Fārisī al-Iṣṭahṛī, *Al-Masālik wa-al-mamālik*, edited by Muḥammad Ġābir 'Abd al-'Āl al-Ḥinī, Wizārat at-Taqāfa wa-al-Irṣād, Dār al-Qalam, Al-Qāhira 1961, p. 107.

³² Aḥmad Ibn Abī Ya'qūb Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, edited by M. J. de Goeje. E. J. Brill, Leyden 1885, Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum. p. 336.

³³ Abū ar-Rayḥān Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī, *Taḥqīq mā li-l-Hind min maqūla maqbūla fī al-'aql aw marḍūla*, *Alberuni's India, An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India*, edited in the Arabic original by Edward Sachau, Trübner & Co, Ludgate Hill, London 1887. p. 101.

³⁴ Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī Ibn al-Ḥusayn Ibn 'Alī al-Mas'ūdī, *Kitāb at-tanbīh wa-al-iṣrāf*, edited by V. R. Baron Rosen, reprint: Maktabat Ḥayyāt, Bayrūt 1965, p. 55, *Murūğ*, op. cit., vol. I. p. 82. See also *Kaṣf aẓ-ẓunūn*, vol. 2, p. 1398.

³⁵ 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baġdādī, *Al-Ifāda wa-al-i'tibār*, Translated into English by Kamal Hafuth Zand and A. John and Ivy E. Videan, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London 1964, p. 19.

³⁶ 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baġdādī, op. cit., p. 205.

³⁷ Yāqūt, *Mu'ğam al-buldān*, vol. V, p. 334.

³⁸ Needless to say, there are different estimations among Muslim geographers concerning the southern latitude of the Mountain of the Moon where the author of

the total distance of the Nile measured in a straight line is equivalent to about 44°. Al-Bağdādī estimates its length to be nearly 900 *farsaḥs*³⁹. Yāqūt comments that, if we took note of zigzags and bends in the river it would be double that distance.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, in his geographical work *Nuḥbat ad-dahr* Ad-Dimašqī gives the length of the Nile with its zigzags and bends as about three thousand *farsaḥs* (parasangs) in total⁴¹.

Abū Šāliḥ al-Armīnī sums up the peculiarities of the Nile River as follows: “The learned are all agreed that there is not in the world a river of greater length than the Nile. For its course through the land of Muslims amounts to more than a month’s journey; and its course through Nubia to two month’s journey; and for a journey of four months it flows through uninhabited waste land, until the source is reached in the Mountain of the Moon, south of the equator. There is no other river again which runs from south to north except the Nile”⁴².

The fact that the Nile, unlike other great rivers known to the Arabs, flowed from the south⁴³ northward and was in flood in the summertime was an unsolved mystery for medieval Arabic geographers⁴⁴. In a scientific theory, Al-Bīrūnī attempts to explain this phenomenon. He mentions that the Nile has a high water level when both the Tigris and Euphrates have a low water level because the source lies in the Mountain of the Moon,

Kitāb al-istibṣār located it at 9½ degrees south of the equator. See also Ibn Sa‘īd al-Mağribī, op. cit., p. 80; ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Bağdādī, op. cit., pp. 19, 20.

³⁹ According to Al-Maqrīzī, the length of the Nile is about 748 *farsaḥs* - Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Ḥiṭāṭ*, vol. I, p. 98. It is noteworthy that the *farsaḥ* = *parasang* = league is equal to 3¼ miles, so nine hundred leagues is approximately equivalent to 2925 miles.

⁴⁰ ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Bağdādī, op. cit., p. 21. Al-Ibšīhī gives the length of 1748 *farsaḥs*, *Al-Mustatraf*, op. cit., p. 137.

⁴¹ Ad-Dimašqī, op. cit., p. 90.

⁴² Abū Šāliḥ al-Armīnī, *Tārīḥ aš-Šayḥ Abū Šāliḥ al-Armīnī fī adyirat Miṣr wa-kanā’isihā*, ed. and transl. by B.T.A. Evetts, Oxford at Clarendon Press 1859. Arabic text: p. 35, English translation: pp. 93-98.

⁴³ It is worth mentioning here that the Arabs give the name *Al-‘Aṣī* (the opposing) to the Orontes River because it flows from the highlands of Lebanon in the south and pours into the Mediterranean Sea in the north.

⁴⁴ An-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, op. cit., p. 263; Al-Maqrīzī, *Iğāṭat al-umma fī kašf al-ğumma*, edited by Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyāda and Ġamāl ad-Dīn aš-Šayyāl, Maṭba‘at Lağnat at-Ta’lif wa-at-Tarğama wa-an-Našr, Al-Qāhira 1940. pp. 24. Ġamāl ad-Dīn Abū al-Maḥāsīn Yūsuf Ibn Tağrībīrdī, *An-Nuğūm az-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhira*, Al-Mu’assasa al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li-t-Tarğama wa-aṭ-Ṭibā‘a wa-an-Našr, Al-Qāhira 1940. vol. I, p. 37; Al-Qazwīnī, *‘Ağā’ib al-maḥlūqāt*, op. cit., p. 185.

beyond the Abyssinian city Aswān in the southern region, coming either exactly from the equator or from countries south of the equator. It is evident that in those regions there is no freezing of moist substances at all. If, therefore, the high water of the Nile is caused by falling dew, it is evident that the dew does not stay where it has fallen, but that it directly flows off to the Nile. But if the high level of water is caused by the springs, these have the most abundant water in the spring. Therefore, the Nile has a high water level in the summer when the sun is near us and our zenith of those places whence the Nile originates, and which in consequence have winter⁴⁵. Al-Qazwīnī simply attributes the flood of the Nile to the extensive rainfall in the country of the Zang̃ in summertime⁴⁶.

In general, the Arabs have good information about the middle basin of the Nile River south of Aswān, i.e. the region of Nubia⁴⁷. They always kept diplomatic and commercial contact with this region. According to Al-Mas'ūdī, most of the Nubians were Christians. The author asserts that Nubia consisted of three major kingdoms: Al-Marīs, Al-Muqurra, and 'Alwa. Al-Marīs with its capital at Ibrīm lies on the Nile River south of Aswān and in the northernmost part of Nubia. In the center, the kingdom of Muqurra is situated with its capital at Dunqula. Further south lies 'Alwa with its capital Sūba. The kingdom of 'Alwa is situated between the Ethiopian highlands and the Nile River⁴⁸. This information is paralleled in many other Arabic sources⁴⁹. Nominally, these kingdoms and their kings were mutually yielding to the governors of Egypt, even during the reign of Mamlūks. A poll-tax of one dinar was collected in the kingdom of Dunqula from every adult in the country and sent to Egypt⁵⁰.

⁴⁵ Al-Bīrūnī, *Al-Āṭār al-bāqiya 'an al-qurūn al-hāliya*. (Arabic text) *Chronologie Orientalischer Völker von al-Albérūni*, edited by C. Edward Sachau. Leipzig, in Commission bei F.A. Brockhaus, 1878, p. 261, English translation, p. 252.

⁴⁶ Al-Qazwīnī, op. cit., p. 187.

⁴⁷ In the area from Aswan almost to Khartum lies the Cataract zone, which presents a real obstacle to upward and downward navigation of the river. The caravan route was the only way for transport south of Aswan. Fisher, W. B. *The Middle East. A Physical, Social, and Regional Geography*, Methuen and Co. Ltd., London 1950, p. 458.

⁴⁸ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūğ*, vol. I, op. cit., pp. 334-335.

⁴⁹ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Tanbīh*, op. cit., p. 57; Ibn Ḥawqal, Abū al-Qāsim, *Ṣūrat al-ard*, edited by J. H. Kramers, second edition, vol. I, II, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1938. pp. 58-59. Al-Iṣṭahrī, op. cit., pp. 34-35. Al-Qalqašandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'sā fi šinā'at al-inšā*, vol. II, III, Wizārat at-Taqāfa wa-al-Iršād al-Qawmī, n.d., vol. V, pp. 262-265.

⁵⁰ Al-Qalqašandī, op. cit., vol. XIII. pp. 290-291.

Another problem associated with the Nile River in Muslim geographical literature is the link between the Nile River and the Niger River. Many Muslim geographers, particularly those from the Western Caliphate, maintain that the two rivers arise from the same sources. Muslim geographers named the first river the Nile of Egypt and the second the Nile of Sudan or sometimes the Nile of Ghana⁵¹. Ibn Ḥaldūn summarises what was written by prior geographers of the Western Caliphate, mentioning that the Nile begins in a large mountain, sixteen degrees beyond the equator at the boundary of the fourth section of the first *iqlīm*. This mountain is called the Mountain of Al-Qamar. No higher mountain is known on earth. Many springs issue from the mountain, some of them flowing into one lake there, and some of them into another lake. From these two lakes, several rivers branch off, and all of them flow into a lake at the equator which is a distance of a ten-day journey from the mountain. Two rivers issue from that lake. One of them flows due north, passing through the country of the Nūba and then through Egypt. This river is called the Egyptian Nile. The other river turns westward, flowing due west until it flows into the Surrounding Sea (The Atlantic Ocean). This river is the Sudanese Nile. All the Black nations live along its borders⁵².

T. Lewicki maintains that this mistaken notion is attributed to Al-Ḥuwārizmī who stated that the Nile also crossed the country of Zaġāwa, i.e. an area extending to the east of Lake Chad⁵³. Most probably, this idea was within the framework of the Greek-Latin heritage known to the Arabs. According to Y. Kamāl, the map of Isidore de Séville, drawn in about 636,

⁵¹ Al-Idrīsī, *Kitāb nuzhat al-muštāq fi ihtrāq al-afāq, Opus Geographicum*, Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, Napoli-Roma 1979, p. 32. Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī Ibn Mūsā Ibn Sa‘īd al-Maġribī, *Kitāb al-ġuġrāfiyā*, edited by Ismā‘īl al-‘Arabī, *Manšūrāt al-Maktab at-Tiġārī li-t-Ṭibā‘a wa-an-Našr wa-at-Tawzī‘*, Bayrūt 1970, p. 90.

⁵² ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Ibn Ḥaldūn, *Tārīḥ al-‘allāma Ibn Ḥaldūn, Kitāb al-‘ibar wa-dīwān al-mubtada’ wa-al-ḥabar fi ayyām al-‘Arab wa-al-‘Aġam wa-al-Barbar wa man ‘āšarahum min as-sulṭān al-akbar*, vol. I, *Al-Muqaddima*, II, III. Maktabat al-Madrasa wa-Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, Bayrūt 1966, vol. I *Al-Muqaddima*, pp. 80-81.

⁵³ T. Lewicki suggests that Al-Ḥuwārizmī considered the Nile’s main river, Baḥr al-Ġazāl, to be the left tributary of the White Nile, as well as the Baḥr al-Ġazāl, which flows into Lake Chad. T. Lewicki, *Arabic External Sources for the History of Africa to the South of Sahara*. PAN, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1969, p. 16.

shows that both the Niger and Nile River has a common source and arise in the Mountain of Al-Qamar⁵⁴.

Al-Idrisī mixes Ptolemy's data and the Muslim notion of the Nile. The author argues that the Nile has its origin in the mountains of Al-Qamar from ten streams, five of which flow and unite in a big lake and the other five of which flow down the mountain into another lake. Three rivers start from each of these two lakes, all of which enter a very big lake. The author asserts that in this section the two Niles separated, the Nile of Egypt, which traverses its land and flows from south to north; and along this Nile the countries of Nūba and Egypt lie. The second section of the Nile flows from the east to the extreme west; and along this Nile all the countries of the Sudān or the majority of them lie⁵⁵. An-Nuwayrī presumably cites Al-Idrisī when referring to a similar notion. He mentions that the Nile of Ġānā (the Niger) also originates in the great lake named Kūrī⁵⁶. In view of the scarcity of information concerning Lake Kūrī, it is difficult to assert that this Muslim author is speaking about one of the main source lakes of Nile. The Lake Kūrī mentioned frequently by the western Muslim authors may refer to Lake Chad or to the equatorial lakes⁵⁷. According to Al-Maqrīzī, one of the river streams flows out from the western side of the swamp, and this is the Nile of the Sūdān which becomes a river and is called the Great River of the Damādim. It turns toward the west between Samğara and Ġānā, after which it forms a lake in that region. Then the remainder of the water continues flowing westward to the lands of Malī and Takrūr⁵⁸. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who visited many places in Africa south of the Sahara, refers to the Niger River as the Nile and named it the Great River which connects the Nile of Egypt in the country of Nūba⁵⁹.

It seems that although the Arabs themselves do not know exactly where the two rivers arise and although all their knowledge is based on mere assumption, they assume that both rivers, the Nile and the Niger, have a conjoint origin.

⁵⁴ Y. Kamāl. op. cit., vol. II, p. 417.

⁵⁵ Al-Idrisī, pp. 32-34.

⁵⁶ An-Nuwayrī, op. cit., p.262.

⁵⁷ According to A. aṭ-Ṭībī, Ibn Fāṭima maintains that the Lake of Kūrī should be referred to as the Lake of Chad south of the Sahara. A. aṭ-Ṭībī, *Kānum—Burnu fī as-Sudān al-awsaṭ, šilāt tāriḥiyya wa-tiğāriyya 'arīqa fī aš-šamāl al-ifriqī*, Mağallat al-Buḥūt at-Tāriḥiyya, (2) July 1987, Tripoli, Libya, pp. 32-32. Ibn Sa'īd al-Mağribī, *Kitāb al-ğurāfiyā*, op. cit., p.94.

⁵⁸ Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Ḥiṭaṭ*, op. cit., p. 160.

⁵⁹ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Tuḥfat an-nuẓẓār*, op. cit., vol. IV, pp. 250-251.

Equatorial Sources of the River Nile

More than one historian and geographer said that the opinions about the origin of the Nile differ considerably. Moreover, it is always claimed that nobody ever reached the sources of the Nile⁶⁰.

Most probably, the first among Muslim writers who mentions that the Nile springs from Ġibāl al-Qamar or al-Qumr (the Mountain of the Moon)⁶¹ is Al-Ḥuwārizmī⁶². In general, the reading of Ġibāl al-Qamar (the Moon Mountains) corresponds exactly to Ptolemy⁶³. Ibn Ḥurradaḍbih followed Al-Ḥuwārizmī in stating that the river flows from south to north, and when it reaches this side of the equator, its stream comes together to form two lakes. Leaving these lakes, it passes along the the Zangǧ, Abyssinian, and Nubian deserts until it reaches the country of Egypt⁶⁴.

Al-Baġdādī maintains that the rivers which come out of the Mountain of the Moon unite with others in the same huge lake⁶⁵, which is of vast extent. The Nile comes out of that lake⁶⁶. Al-Baġdādī also speaks about the

⁶⁰ Naṣīr Ḥusraw, *Safar nāma*, translated into Arabic by Yaḥyā al-Ḥaššāb, Dār al-Kitāb al-Ġadīd, Bayrūt 1970, p. 81.

⁶¹ According to Ibn Ḥaldūn, the Muslim scholars are not in consensus about the pronunciation of the *Q.am.ar*. Some geographers, such as Ibn Saʿīd and Yāqūt, pronounce it *Qumr*, maintaining that the name is attributed to a people from India. Others pronounce it *Qamar*, which in Arabic means *moon*, because these mountains are white and very bright. Ibn Ḥaldūn, vol. I. *Al-Muqadima*, op. cit., p. 94. Ibn Kaṭīr, *Al-Bidāya wa-an-nihāya*, op. cit., vol., pp. 24, 26; Ibn Saʿīd, op. cit., pp. 80, 81; Yāqūt, *Muʿġam al-buldān*, vol. IV. p. 378. Al-Masʿūdī maintains that the name is connected with the moon because the moon has a great influence on this area. Al-Masʿūdī, *Tanbīh*, p. 58.

⁶² Al-Ḥuwārizmī, Al-Ḥuwārizmī, Abū Ġaʿfar Muḥammad Ibn Mūsā, *Kitāb ṣūrat al-ard*, edited by Hans von Mžik, Otto Harrassowitz, Leipzig 1926, p. 38.

⁶³ V.Minorsky, *Hudūd*, op. cit., p. 205.

⁶⁴ Abū al-Qāsim ʿUbayd Allāh Ibn ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Ḥurradaḍbih, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-al-mamālik*, edited by M. J. de Goeje, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1889, Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum, p. 176.

⁶⁵ The Arabs used the plural form, *Baṭāʿih*, for the name *Baṭīḥa*, which applied to a water depression exposed to more or less regular inundation and in therefore swampy or extensively swampy area. The word also has a figurative meaning of *a vast lake*. Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, vol. II, pp. 213-214.

⁶⁶ See Al-Ḥuwārizmī's map in *Kitāb ṣūrat al-ard*, op. cit., Table No 3, and his description of the main sources of the Nile, op. cit., p. 106. See also Al-Masʿūdī, *Tanbīh*, op. cit., p. 57; ʿAbd al-Laṭīf al-Baġdādī, op. cit., pp. 214-

phenomenon of green stagnant water which appears in the Nile. We are not sure whether the author was basing his hypotheses on mere guesswork or whether he utilised eyewitness information which is unknown to us. He says that: "In the case of more abundant rains, they wash the deposits and stagnant water in the swamps and perhaps the water of the lake from where the Nile springs is without any doubt constantly stagnant, covered with moss and especially by the shores and in the shallows. When the periodical rains come to fall and their waters flow in torrents into this lake, they stir up the bottom of the lake and move the parts which previously were stagnant. Those which were on the shores are swept out to the middle, and are carried by the river current into the river bed".⁶⁷

Al-Maqrīzī cites these details and adds his own analysis concerning the changing colour of the water of the Nile.

Al-Baḡdādī explains that in the winter when there is a lack of abundant rain at the equator from where the Nile River springs, the lake water decreases. Large animals like elephants wander around this lake and damage the surrounding forest, an activity which results in the fading of the lake's water and this in turn causes the green colour and bad smell of the water flowing to Egypt during winter.⁶⁸

The Arabs give the name *Kūrī* to the main lake where the Nile originates, maintaining that this name is derived from the name of the black people who live there⁶⁹. Most Muslim geographers maintain that after the river leaves this lake, it flows into the country of *Kūrī*, and then into the country of *Ninna* (?) who are from the *Sūdān*. Then it continues to the country of the *Nūba* (the Nubians)⁷⁰.

Al-Bīrūnī explains the reason the Nile has high water when there is low water in both the Tigris and Euphrates. He maintains that this is a result of the fact that the source lies in the Mountain of Al-Qumr, beyond the Abyssinian city *Aswān* (?) in the southern regions, coming either exactly from the equator or from countries south of the equator. Al-Bīrūnī explains that: "This is, however, doubtful because the equatorial zone is not inhabited, as we have before mentioned. It is evident that in those regions there is no freezing of moist substances at all. If, therefore, the high water of the Nile is caused by falling dew, it is evident that the dew does not stay where it has fallen, but that it directly flows off to the Nile. But if the high

⁶⁷ 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baḡdādī, op. cit., p. 217.

⁶⁸ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-ḥiṭaṭ*, vol. I, p.102.

⁶⁹ An-Nuwayrī, op.cit., vol. I, p. 262.

⁷⁰ An-Nuwayrī, op. cit., p. 262.

water is caused by the springs, these have the most abundant water in the spring. Therefore, the Nile has high water in the summer, for when the sun is near us and our zenith, it is at a far distance from the zenith of those places whence the Nile originates, and which in consequence have winter.”⁷¹

The question of the source of the Nile in Muslim geographical material is controversial. In most cases, Muslim geographers indicate that the Nile River rises south of the equator and flows northward to drain into the Mediterranean Sea. It seems that their information concerning this question had stopped with Ptolemy's data. According to Ptolemy, who lived in Alexandria and wrote around AD 150, the Nile originated in the Mountain of the Moon near the equator. This information remained unchallenged in Muslim geographical material without any tangible changes from the time of Al-Ḥuwārizmī. Muslim geographers living after Ptolemy's materials were translated into Arabic explain that the Mountain of the Moon is located at the outer southernmost of the Nubian land, and no way existed to penetrate south of Dunqula because of the difficulties and natural obstacles of these countries.

The penetration of Islam across the Sahara was in part the work of Arab nomads but was chiefly a consequence of the development of trans-sahara trade. The expansion of Islam in Sudan, other than in Nilotic Sudan where the Arab conquest of Christian kingdom up to Dunqula took place, was largely carried out by Islamised peoples native to the Sudan⁷². In Eastern Africa the penetration of the Arabs was chiefly a consequence of sea trade by the Arabs of Yemen and Southern Arabia along the eastern coast of Africa. In both cases, the dense forests and the great swamps in the southern Nile River basin stopped the Arabs.

It goes without saying that Ibn Sa'īd, when speaking about the Nile River, had at his disposal not only the work of other authors who had dealt with the topic, but also the verbal information afforded him by people coming from Africa: merchants and travelers. Their information most probably derived from the unknown traveler Ibn Fāṭima. He refers undoubtedly to the fact that the great lakes of the Nile could be reached from the eastern coast of Africa. According to Abū al-Fidā, from the town of Duḡūṭa to the last town of Sufāla, the Nile could be traveled to the

⁷¹ Al-Bīrūnī, *Al-Āṭār al-bāqīya*, op. cit., p. 252.

⁷² J. D. Fage, *An Atlas of African History*, Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., London 1957, p. 8.

sources of the Nile where its lakes and tributaries are. According to our author, Ibn Fāṭima made his journeys in these territories⁷³. Most sources assert that the east African coast from Somalia up to Sufāla south of Mombasa was inhabited by Muslims⁷⁴. Ibn Taḡrībīrdī refers to the fact that all the Black kingdom south of Egypt is connected through the Nile up to the country of the Zang, and thence to Ġabal al-Qumr, where the sources of the Nile are to be found and the last inhabited regions of the terrestrial globe⁷⁵.

Through these considerations the fact was established that it is difficult and dangerous to go south either by river or inland until the Mountain of the Moon. However, of particular interest are those passages mentioned in other Arabic sources which directly refer to the fact that the Mountain of the Moon could be reached from the eastern coast of Africa. Al-Bīrūnī asserts that the land (of Africa) goes far south into the ocean in the western half of the earth, and the land of the Mountain of the Moon is situated there⁷⁶. Al-Ḥuwārizmī's book contains four maps, the most important and unique of which is a map of the Nile River. The importance of this map comes from the fact that it is realistic. Recent scholars maintain that this representation of the Nile undoubtedly has affinities with Ptolemy's map. Nevertheless, the only place names from Ptolemy are the Mountain of the Moon at the source and Alexandria at the mouth of the river. The remaining classification nomenclatures and names are contemporary with Al-Ḥuwārizmī⁷⁷.

The map was drawn in an advanced technical way similar to a coeval method, consisting of the main stream of the river with its meanders from its rise up to the mouth. Moreover, the drawing shows a long tributary rising from a lake situated east of the river and undoubtedly refers to the Blue Nile. South of the equator, there are two groups of streams composed

⁷³ 'Imād ad-Dīn Ismā'īl Abū al-Fidā', *Al-Muḥtaṣar fī tāriḫ al-baṣar*, vol. I-IV, Maktabat al-Mutanabbī, Al-Qāhira n.d., pp. 152, 153.

⁷⁴ According to Ibn Fāṭima, who was there, the town of Lirāna in the Kingdom of Sufāla belongs to the Muslims, and there is a great port in which Muslim ships anchored, Ibn Sa'īd, op. cit., p. 84.

⁷⁵ Ibn Taḡrībīrdī, *An-Nuḡūm az-zāhira*, vol. II, p. 296.

⁷⁶ Al-Bīrūnī, *Taḥqīq*, op. cit., p. 96.

⁷⁷ Gerald R. Tibbetts, *The Beginning of Cartographic Tradition*, in *The History of Cartography*, vol. II, book one, *Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies*, edited by J. B. Harley and David Woodward, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1992, p. 106.

of the main source of the river springing from the Mountain of the Moon⁷⁸. The map is demarcated by four latitudinal lines representing five climate divisions, the farthest down on the map representing the equator, where one apparently can notice that the Nile River rises many degrees south of the equator⁷⁹. The author's description of the Nile in the chapter on the lakes being situated beyond the equator almost corresponds to the designation of the map⁸⁰.

Al-Mas'ūdī presumably directly cited Ptolemy or perhaps Al-Huwārizmī. He relates how he saw the map (apparently he speaks about Ptolemy's map of the Nile) in *Kitāb al-ġuġrāfiya*. According to his description, the Nile's course was clearly drawn as rising from under the Mountain of the Moon, its head waters flowing from twelve sources. Then the waters collect into two lakes, similar to a swamp, and thence they flow across sandy plains and mountains in the land of the Sudanese, who live near the Zang⁸¹. A similar description, but with more detail, is also represented by Al-Mas'ūdī in his second work *Tanbīh* which is apparently based on Ptolemy. The author refers to the fact that the Nile rises from its source which is in the Mountain of the Moon, seven and half degrees beyond the equator, i.e. 141 *farsahs* and one-third, which is the equivalent of 425 miles. Ten streams flow out of this source, and two groups of five streams collect into one of the two swamps which are south of the equator. Three streams rise out of each swamp and collect into one swamp within the first clime. The Nile of Egypt flows out of this swamp, traverses the country of the blacks, passing near the town of 'Alwa, then to the capital of the kingdom of the Nūba, then to the town of Dunqula, and finally to Aswān and to the land of Egypt⁸². The author relates many legends about the Nile and primitive cannibal people living by its banks and also includes

⁷⁸ See Al-Huwārizmī's map, table 3.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Op. cit., pp. 106-109. It has been said that the idea links the sources of the Nile with mountains south of the equator is beckons to the Greek scientific writer Eratosthenes who sketched a nearly correct route of the Nile up to the meeting point of the Blue and White Niles. He also showed the Ethiopian affluents Atbara and the Blue Nile, and suggested lakes as the source of the Nile. Cf. Al-Mināwī, M.H. *Nahr an-Nīl fī al-maktaba al-'arabiyya*, Ad-Dār al-Qawmiyya li-ṭ-Ṭibā'a wa-an-Našr, Al-Qāhira 1966, pp. 74-75.

⁸¹ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūġ*, vol. I, pp. 81, 288.

⁸² Al-Mas'ūdī, *Tanbīh*, pp. 57-58.

many legends connected with the Nile's crocodiles. Leo Africanus considers this untrustworthy information⁸³.

Other Muslim maps reflect no interest in projecting a similar map for the Nile River nor do they mention longitude and latitude or any sort of demarcation of localities. The geographers and cartographers of the Baḥī school of geography like Al-Iṣṭaḥrī and Ibn Ḥawqal, who probably followed some ancient Iranian traditions of cartography, give us a little information and accuracy in this concern. For example, Al-Iṣṭaḥrī's map of Dār al-Islām, on which the Nile basin is shown, is adopted from Al-Ḥuwārizmī, but it is drawn in a much freer and geometrically abstract Iranian style; thus its depictions are far from reality⁸⁴. The map of Ibn Ḥawqal, which was influenced more-or-less by Al-Ḥuwārizmī's map of the Nile, represents the Nile River with its sources, tributaries, and the delta area, which don't look in harmony with the other divisions of the river.⁸⁵ The detailed map of the Nile likewise only shows the part of Nile flowing through Egypt⁸⁶. Similar to this map, but drawn in the fifteenth century, is the map annexed in the work of As-Suyūṭī. This map's straight lines and general features undoubtedly indicate that it belongs to the Baḥī school⁸⁷.

Al-Mas'ūdī clearly states that the origin of the Nile River is in Ġibāl al-Qamar, which is located near the countries of the Zanġ up to Sufāla and the Island of Qanbalū⁸⁸. Az-Zuhrī asserts that merchants from the town of Dunqula penetrated southward in search of gold in the country of the Zanġ.

⁸³ Leo Africanus, or Al-Ḥasan Ibn Muḥammad al-Wazzān, was an Arab from Africa who was captured and taken as slave to Europe (Rome-Vatican). He was baptised by the Pope, who gave him the name Leo Costantine, and he got the epithet *Africanus* because he was a native of Tunisia. He was known as a merchant and traveler who well knew Africa south of the desert. In Italy he wrote his *Description of Africa*, or more probably dictated a book of memoirs written in debased Italian around the year 1526. Al-Wazzān, *Wasf Afrīqya*, translated into Arabic by M. Hajji and M. Lakhdar, Dār al-Ġarb al-Islāmī, Bayrūt 1983. See the Introductory Chapter, vol. I, pp. 5-12 and vol. II, p. 257; I. Kračkovski, *Istoria arabskoj geografičeskoj literary*, vol. IV, Moscow-Leningrad 1957, pp. 446-447.

⁸⁴ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Šūrat al-ard*, op. cit., p. 5.

⁸⁵ G.R. Tibbetts, *Later Geographic Developments*, in *The History of Cartography*, vol. II, Book one, *Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies*, edited by J. B. Harley and David Woodward, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1992, p. 137.

⁸⁶ See Ibn Ḥawqal's map of Egypt in vol. I.

⁸⁷ As-Suyūṭī, *Husn al-muḥaḍara fī tāriḥ Miṣr wa-al-Qāhira*, edited by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, vol. II. Maṭba'at 'Isā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, Al-Qāhira 1968, vol., pp. 252-253.

⁸⁸ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Tanbīh*, p. 58.

They reached twenty parasang beyond the equator near the Mountain of the Moon, where they came nearest to the Ocean (Indian) in the East⁸⁹.

Buzurg Ibn Šahriyār states that the Nile could be reached from the East African coast. He also told a long story concerning this. It is not my purpose to include here the entire story due to its length, so I will try to only mention the main portion which is closest to the subject. The author tells a story about an Arabian ship which in 310 A.H. traveled to Qanbalū where it lost its route due to unfavourable winds and anchored in Sufāla in the Channel of Mozambique. The crew and the merchants traveling on this ship met the king of Sufāla, who, after a complicated deception, was kidnapped by them and taken to Oman where they sold him as a slave. During the next few years, the slave king changed from one owner's hand another and subsequently from Oman to Baḡdād until he reached Egypt. In Egypt he saw the Nile River, and he asked where it comes from. The people answered that its sources are in the country belonging to the Zanġ. He then asked from which direction it came, and they said that it flows from a great town called Aswān, which lies on the border of the land of the blacks. Then he followed the bank of the Nile upstream, going from one district to the next. He begged for his food from the natives, who always gave him something. At last he came upon black-skinned people who maltreated him, but he ran away until he arrived among a people who seized him and sold him. Again he escaped and continued doing the same from the time of his departure from Egypt until he arrived in a certain place near the country of the Zanġ. At last he reached the coast (Eastern African coast) and took a vessel sailing to a country whose name is not mentioned. From there he embarked again for another place, and during the night the vessel put him ashore in his own country⁹⁰.

Some sources give an astonishing description of the Mountain of the Moon. Al-Maqrīzī maintains that the Nile flows down from the Black Mountains in the country of the Zanġ whose summits look from far like turbans (of course in the colour white). The same information is also

⁸⁹ Az-Zuhrī, op. cit., p. 124.

⁹⁰ Of course I have given an abridged version of this story, which is full of many undesirable details, for our topic. See full story in Buzurg Ibn Šahriyār an-Nāḥudāh ar-Rām Hurmuzī, *Kitāb 'aġā'ib al-Hind barrīhi wa-baḥrihi. Livre des Merveilles de L'Inde*. Publié d'après le manuscrit de M. Schefer. Par P. A. Vander Lith. Traduction française par L. Marcel Devic, Leide, E. J. Brill 1883-1886, pp. 51-58.

mentioned by Al-‘Umarī⁹¹. Here both our authors speak about a mountain whose summit is covered by snow. It is known that Ptolemy wrote in 150 AD that the Nile originated from the high snow-covered Mountains of the Moon, which some scholars identified with the Ruwenzori Range. However, it is difficult to determine, in this instance, whether this information was derived from Ptolemaic tradition or whether it is exclusively Arabic information.

Ibn Sa‘īd al-Mağribī and Abū al-Fidā cited the lost work attributed to Ibn Fāṭima⁹². It seems that the latter was well-versed in the sources of the Nile south of the equator. We know that many sources speak about East African gold and powder gold, and most of these sources maintained that this gold came from the Sufāla region. Other sources mention that the merchants in this purpose could have reached Ṣiyūna, which is located inland in the country of the Zang̃. Ibn Faṭima confirmed this information, mentioning that the town of Ṣiyūna lies on a gulf where a great river comes from the Mountain of the Moon and pours into the aforementioned gulf⁹³. About Ṣiyūna, G. Ferrand says that this is undoubtedly the Chiona of Barros, which is located between Malindī and Mombasa. Another opinion leaning toward Al-Bīrūnī’s information states that it would seem preferable to equate Ṣiyūna with the market town of Sena on the Zambezi which is considered by Ibn Sa‘īd the capital of the King of the Sufālians⁹⁴. Al-Idrīsī adds that in the town of Ṣiyūna the Arabs and people from India and the Zang̃ live together⁹⁵. If we accept Ferrand’s argument, this may suggest that merchants penetrated westward far inland searching for gold up to the source lakes of the Nile⁹⁶.

Ibn Fāṭima may be the first who names the great lake from which the Nile springs the Lake of Kūrī. According to his data, the Nile comes out of

⁹¹ Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī, *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār*, vol. I, edited by Aḥmad Zakī Bāšā, Maṭba‘at Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, Al-Qāhira 1924, p. 70; Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Ḥuṭaṭ*, vol. I, p. 104.

⁹² There is a common denominator among these three geographers and their works which prove that they utilised the same sources to a remarkable extent. Moreover, the sequence of them lean on the prior. For instance, Abū al-Fidā cites Ibn Sa‘īd and Al-Idrīsī, and Ibn Sa‘īd cites Al-Idrīsī. Kračkovskij, op. cit., p. 296.

⁹³ Ibn Sa‘īd, op. cit., p. 83-84. Abū al-Fidā, op. cit., p. 152.

⁹⁴ G. Ferrand—[G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville], article: *Sofāla*, E.I. N.E.

⁹⁵ Al-Idrīsī, op. cit., pp. 67-68.

⁹⁶ Al-Idrīsī describes in detail the abundance of the gold powder and gold nuggets and the places where could be find in the country of Zang̃ and Sufāla, op. cit., pp. 68-69.

this lake at 51° 0' East longitude and ½ ° latitude in the first clime south of the equator, and the river flows in a zigzag but in one direction⁹⁷. East of this Nile there are the end frontiers of the Barbary countries (Ethiopia) and the beginning of the Zang countries, where the famous town of Malinda (Malindi), which belongs to the Zang, is located⁹⁸.

On one hand it is reasonable to assume that such information indicates that the knowledge of Arabs about the source of the Nile is good. In addition it would not be a mistake to confirm that the slaves and gold merchants knew their routes in these territories which penetrated inland towards the sources of the Nile well, but they kept them a secret⁹⁹. On the other hand, this knowledge shows many gaps, since it is derived from scant and disparate sources, which does not allow us to build a compact Arabic theory on the sources of the Nile.

The Ethiopian Sources

The first contact between the Ethiopian and Islamic realm was took place when the Muslim followers of the Prophet Mohammad were being persecuted in Mecca. The prophet told his companions to immigrate to Abyssinia as refugees. Many groups of Muslim refugees began to cross the Strait of the Red Sea to Ethiopia. The knowledge of Muslims of this period about Ethiopia was scanty, and the accounts given by these refugees about Abyssinia are not trustworthy.¹⁰⁰

In A.H. 83 Abyssinian pirates raided and sacked Jeddah and caused such a scare in Mecca that the Muslims were forced into taking active measures against them. In order to protect the Red Sea commerce, they

⁹⁷ Ibn Sa'īd, op. cit., p.82. The Lake of Kūrī was also mentioned by Al-Idrīsī and An-Nuwayrī. Al-Idrīsī, ibid.; An-Nuwayrī, op. cit., p. 262.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ It seems that the sources of gold near Lake Victoria were not exploited before colonial times. G. Ferrand - G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville], ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tarīḥ ar-rusul wa-al-mulūk*, edited by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, vol. III, IV, IX., Dār al-Ma'ārif, Al-Qāhira 1979., vol. 1, pp. 546-549. Muṭahhar Ibn Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī, *Kitāb al-bad' wa-at-tārīḥ*, Maktabat aṭ-Ṭaqāfa ad-Dīniyya, Al-Qāhira n.d., vol. IV, p. 150; Ibn Kaṭīr, *Al-Bidāyā wa-an-nihāyā*, op. cit., vol. III, p. 326. J. S. Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, Frank Cass, London 1976, pp. 44-46; H. I. Hasan, *Intiṣār al-islām wa-al-'urūba fīmā yalī aṣ-Ṣaḥārā*, Ġāmi'at ad-Duwal al-'Arabiyya, Al-Qāhira 1957; Suhrāb (Ibn Sirapion), *Ağā'ib al-aqālīm as-sab'a*, edited by H. von Mžik, Otto Harrassowitz, Leipzig 1929, p. 116.

decided to obtain anchorages on the opposite coast and occupied the Dahlak Archipelago, which lies off Maṣawwā'. Although the Muslims established the first bridgehead on this coast, it seems that they couldn't penetrate deeply into the Ethiopian highlands for many centuries¹⁰¹.

The Arabs also knew that the Nile is formed by many other principal streams, some of which spring from the highlands of Ethiopia. Suhrāb refers to the fact that there is another river which flows into the Nile, coming from a circular lake. This river enters the Nile near the town of the Nūba.¹⁰² Qudāma Ibn Ğa'far also mentioned the Ethiopian sources, and the author contends that the river has its center on the equator. A river rises out of it and flows into the Nile basin and later joins the Nile near the city of the Nūba¹⁰³.

Throughout Muslim sources we meet many statements which claim that the Abyssinians are the guardians of the course of the Nile for its descent to Egypt. During the reign of the Mamluk sultan An-Nāṣir Muḥammad, and due to his persecution of the Copts of Egypt, the King of Abyssinia sent an envoy to Cairo in the year 1321 A.D. to protest to the sultan and ask him to restore the churches and refrain from persecuting the Copts. Otherwise he would divert the course of the Nile¹⁰⁴. Based apparently on what is mentioned by the Egyptian merchant Aḥmad Ibn Salīm al-Aswānī, Al-Maqrīzī states that people could reach far south of Dunqula to the capital of Ethiopia¹⁰⁵. According to many sources, scholars are in agreement that the Nile also originates in Ethiopia¹⁰⁶.

Although the Nile River with its delta and valley up to Aswān and sometimes south of it belonged to the territory of the Islamic caliphate, we have no clear information about any kind of serious attempts on the part of Arabs to explore the Nile, its streams, tributaries, and sources either in the region of the Great Lakes or in Ethiopia. However, some authors refer to such attempts, but without sufficient reports. For instance, Ibn Taġrībīrdī states that the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mutawakkil wanted to invade the country of the Zang from Nubia, and one of his generals, Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd

¹⁰¹ Aṭ-Ṭabarī, op. cit., vol. II, p. 517; Al-Muqadassī, op. cit., vol. IV, p. 239.

¹⁰² Suhrāb (Ibn Sirapion), *'Aġā'ib al-aqālīm as-sab'a*, edited by H. von Mžik, Otto Harrassowitz, Leipzig 1929, p. 143.

¹⁰³ Qudāma, op. cit., pp. 230-231.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Hiṭaṭ*, vol. I, op. cit., p. 118.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 97. Al-'Umarī, *Masālik al-abṣār*, op. cit., p. 69.

Allāh al-Qummī, was announced to carry on this campaign¹⁰⁷. Ibn Taḡrībīrdī mentions that when Al-Mutawakkil was properly informed by the experts about the real situation (in the southern border of Egypt), he dropped his plan of a punitive expedition to that country (the Nubian country). Al-Mutawakkil passed the instructions on to ‘Anbasa Ibn Ishāq, who was at that time the agent of Egypt to supply Al-Qummī with all the provisions he needed and to give him absolute power over the remotest upper Egypt. According to our author, the expedition was marched along the Red Sea from Suez and by road from Aswān penetrated southwards into the Nubian country up to Dunqula¹⁰⁸.

It seems that the Muslims took little interest in exploring the Nile since its sources lie far from them and through rough land and jungle. The journey on the Nile, south of Aswan, was by no means safe from danger. Only very scanty geographical information trickled through to them from the Muslim merchants who could penetrate inland from the east African coast, or from the countries of Nubia and Ethiopia. Az-Zuhrī states that the people from Nubia and Ethiopia may have been able to reach the Mountain of the Moon and the lakes where the Nile River originates during their hunting journeys¹⁰⁹. Another statement also mentioned by the author, explains how the people of Dunqula traveled and penetrated southward behind the Mountain of Gold twenty *farsaḥs* south of the equator where they reached the Mountain of Moon. From there they could divert the Nile eastward until they reached the Sea of Yemen and the Indian Ocean. From this place, the gold was brought to Egypt and Yemen¹¹⁰. Such statements, however, offer little in terms of geographical information concerning the Nile River and its sources near of equator.

Muslim sources cited a legendary story attributed to Ptolemy connected with the discovery of the Nile River’s sources. According to Ptolemy, a group of people decided to explore the source of the Nile, and they followed the river from Egypt downward until they reached one of the valleys of the Mountain of the Moon, where there was no way for any human being to pass through because of the ruggedness of the tracks and

¹⁰⁷ According to Ibn Ḥawqal, this expedition was already ordered by the caliph not to explore the Nile River but to subdue the Nubians south of Aswān. Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-ard*, vol. I, pp. 54-57.

¹⁰⁸ The full story of this campaign is told by Ibn Taḡrībīrdī, *An-Nuḡūm az-zāhira*, vol. II, pp. 297-299.

¹⁰⁹ Az-Zuhārī, *Kitāb al-ḡuḡrafiyā*, op. cit., p. 6.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

the density of jungles there. One of them climbed the summit of the mountain which oversaw the watercourse of the river, and when he reached the summit, he gave a great shout and threw himself from the top while his companions were looking at him. Another one of them did the same thing, and then they decided to tie a rope to the next to see what was on the other side of the summit. The man did the same, but his companions were mindful of that; and they quickly pulled him up. When the man regained consciousness, he informed his companions about the splendid view and the glorious sight which he beheld behind this mountain, mentioning that his friends threw themselves because they were charmed by the Nile source's outlook. This exploration group returned home without reaching the main source of the Nile River and without seeing anything more than what that man saw from the top of the mountain¹¹¹. Obviously, the last story is imagined and at best is a testimony to the importance of the River Nile and the obscurity surrounding its origins. Not surprisingly, some Muslim authors criticised this story and considered it a legend similar to that of the Nile bride¹¹².

Al-Maqrīzī also mentions many of the exploring missions which had been commissioned by Egyptian kings to discover the source of the River Nile, but it seems that he cited this information from the lost work of Al-Mas'ūdī entitled *Alḥbār az-zamān*¹¹³. The author mentions that the Copts say that the increase and the decrease of the Nile flood is caused by some springs which can be observed by those who travel and explore its upper course¹¹⁴.

It seems that the aforementioned story of Ptolemy cited by Ad-Dimašqī is connected with Al-Mas'ūdī's statement. The latter mentions that Ptolemy, in his book *Al-Madḥal ilā aṣ-ṣinā'a al-kariyya*, refers to the Zang' land behind the equator and the sources of the Nile River. He also maintains that Ptolemy had got all this information from the ancient Egyptian books which were based on eyewitness and official missions dispatched by Egyptian pharaohs to learn everything about the Nile sources and the peoples living there¹¹⁵.

¹¹¹ Ad-Dimašqī, op. cit., p. 76.

¹¹² Ibn Kaṭīr, *Al-Bidāya wa-an-nihāya*, vol. I, p. 27.

¹¹³ Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Ḥiṭaṭ*, op. cit., p. 95.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Tanbīh*, p. 70.

In a confusing statement, Al-‘Umarī¹¹⁶ refers to the endeavors to discover the sources of the Nile from the time of ancient Egypt to his time. The author mentions a certain traveler, Sa‘īd ad-Dukālī, who claims that he traveled along the Nile River and saw its seven tributaries. The author says that some people reached its sources and climbed the mountain where the Nile rises¹¹⁷. We have no clear evidence concerning the actual exploration of the Nile River either from the Nubian or from the Ethiopian regions¹¹⁸. Although Naṣīr Ḥusraw states that he had been told that the Sulṭān of Egypt sent an expedition to travel along the Nile for one year to explore it, no one succeeded in finding out the true position; and they only said that it comes from the south, from the mountain called Ġabal al-Qamar¹¹⁹.

Additionally, there were a few authors among the Muslim geographers whose work predominately concerned this. In this connection it will be appropriate if we cite here a few extracts from the necessary description of the Nile sources written by Al-Iṣṭaḥrī. It seems that the author had adequate information about the equatorial and Ethiopian origins. He states that: “The Nile of Egypt flows through the towns and villages of the Nubians. Their homes extend as far upstream as a sandy place of the Zang country and beyond it, up to the impassable desert. Beyond this desert, the river ends in the land of Zang proper, which lies opposite Aden and extends down to the sea (the Red Sea). Someone told me that in the remotest lands of the Zang there are cold regions inhabited by Zang people of white complexion. This side of the Zang country, however, is sparsely inhabited and the people are sun-burnt. All kinds of the fruits common to the Muslim countries are found on the mountainsides. The slaves who are sold in the countries of Islam come from there. They are neither Nubians, nor Zang, nor Ḥabaša, nor Buḡā. They are from another race of Blacks whose complexion is darker than any other.”¹²⁰

Although many of the recent scholars have maintained that Ibn Ḥawqal usually cites Al-Iṣṭaḥrī, the latter’s knowledge about the sources of

¹¹⁶ The author certainly confuses here the Niger and the Nile River.

¹¹⁷ Al-‘Umarī, op. cit., pp. 70-72.

¹¹⁸ According to Fr. Giovanni Vantini, the words *Nūba* and *Ḥabaša* were vaguely used by medieval Arab geographers to indicate all peoples living between the Tropic of Cancer and the equator, from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. Fr. Giovanni Vantini, *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia*. Collected and translated by Fr. Giovanni Vantini FSCJ. Heidelberg and Warsaw 1975, p. ix.

¹¹⁹ Ḥusraw was in Egypt around the year 441-2 during the reign of the Fatimid Caliph, see Nāsir Ḥusraw, *Safar nāma*, p. 81.

¹²⁰ Al-Iṣṭaḥrī, op. cit., p. 32.

the Nile, in particular the Ethiopian, are very accurate and more detailed¹²¹. It may also reflect his good knowledge of the summer rainfall of Abyssinia and the Upper Nile that produces the Nile floods¹²². Concerning the tributaries coming from the Ethiopian plateau, the author mentions that the main rivers flow into the Nile, even the seasonal rivulets like that of the Baraka. He relates that the length of the territory of the Dunqula kingdom is equivalent to a one-month journey along the Nile, where its width is the distance between the Nile and Taffīn, which requires an eight-day journey toward the east. The author also states that this territory is crossed by the Sansābī River (possibly the Atbara River), and in the upper part of 'Alwa there is a river coming from the east, which is called Awr. This river flows into the Nile. At a distance of a two-day journey upstream there is the Atamī River inhabited by a section of the Nūba called Kursā, a numerous tribe which settled along this watercourse and border of Al-Ḥabaša (Abyssinia). These rivers have a big discharge (perhaps the Blue Nile), and they join the River of Sūbā (most probably the Sobat River), and then flow toward Muqurra, which is the territory of the Dunqula. About Baraka River, the author maintains that this river has its source in Ḥabaša, and heads toward the land of the Buḡā¹²³.

It seems that the three main Ethiopian tributaries the author maintains flow into the Nile correspond to the Atbara, the Blue Nile, and the Subat Rivers. He refers also to the seasonal Baraka and Gash River by the name Duḡn¹²⁴. On this point Al-Maqrīzī also asserts that everyone well knows that the Nile rises also from Al-Ḥabaša (Ethiopia).¹²⁵

The great gap representing the limitation of Muslim knowledge about the sources of the Nile is the part which is known as "the swampy area" located south of the White Nile. Many Muslim authors alluded to this. Many statements were written about that and are plausible enough. In reference to this fact, Al-Ḥasan Ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Wazzān (Leo Africanus) states that the merchants travel south of Dunqula, and he adds that the river gradually gets more and more vast as one travels upstream until becoming a very spacious lake. In this place it is really difficult to

¹²¹ I. Kračkovsky, op. cit., p. 207.

¹²² The summer rainfall of Abyssinia and the Upper Nile is due to the monsoon wind blowing from the Gulf of Guinea in the Atlantic Ocean. W. B. Fisher, *The Middle East A Physical, Social, and Regional Geography*, op. cit., p. 30.

¹²³ Ibn Ḥawqal, op. cit., vol., pp. 57-58.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

¹²⁵ Al-Maqrīzī, op. cit., p. 97. See also Ibn Ḥaldūn, *Al-Muqadima*, op. cit., p. 95.

know its original watercourse. In the extreme south, the river divides into many river sources to the east and west¹²⁶. This forms a great obstacle which prevents people from crossing its watercourses or even going around. Many nomads who had lost their camels which fled southward for more than one thousand miles maintained that in their travels searching about for their camels they had seen only great swamps and many branches belonging to the Nile¹²⁷.

Al-Wazzān had summed up the Muslim's knowledge about the Nile River by mentioning that all the major information about the Nile sources are mere assumptions. Some people thought that it rises from the Mountain of the Moon, where the river strongly flows down these highlands. Others say that the river rises from many springs located below the mountains in a very vast plain. Both opinions are just assumptions because it's still impossible to see it¹²⁸.

Al-Mas'ūdī refers to the fact that Ptolemy had got his information about the regions south of Egypt from the old books of the ancient Egyptians who frequently sent their military missions by the Nile and by land to discover the sources of the Nile¹²⁹. Al-Mas'ūdī cites Ptolemy who also states that to the south of the Tropic of Capricorn there are black people living there who look like those blacks who live south of the Tropic of Cancer¹³⁰.

The information about the Nile in Muslim sources forms a characteristic example of the indiscriminate amalgamation of data pertaining to different periods of Greek and Islamic geography. One finds the reports derived from Greek sources side by side with those of Al-Ḥūwārizmī, Ibn Ḥurrādāḍbih, and Al-Mas'ūdī, up to Al-Idrīsī and Ibn Sa'īd al-Maḡribī. It would be hardly expedient to attempt to analyze the mass of information contained in legends, myths, or geographical facts. About the Nile River we really miss here such traveler reports either written by

¹²⁶ Al-Wazzān, op. cit., vol. II, p. 257.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 257.

¹²⁸ Ibid., pp. 256-257.

¹²⁹ Certainly the ancient Egyptians were familiar with the Nile as far as the VI cataract near the meeting point between the White and Blue Niles. They probably reached the point where the Subat meet Baḥr al-Ġazāl. They know also the Blue Nile and the Atbara in Ethiopia, but it is hard to assert that the source of the Nile was known to them. J. Szaflarski, *Poznanie Czarnego Łądu*. PWN, Warszawa 1968, pp. 16-17.

¹³⁰ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Tanbīh*, pp. 69-70.

travelers or by traders, but we have nothing like that written during the period of this study.

Al-Maqrīzī earmarks a special book dealing only with the position of the Nile flood and its shortages and surpluses. The author also discusses the influence of this flood over the political and economical situation of Egypt during its history, maintaining that the long shortage resulting from the Nile flood during the Fatimid Caliphate was the main cause of the demise of this dynasty¹³¹.

Among the African rivers, later Muslim geographers from the twelfth century were informed by merchants and travelers about the Zambezi River in southeastern Africa. From Ibn Saʿīd al-Maġribī, we know that the main source of the information about this river and this region is a certain traveler known by the name Ibn Fāṭima. We know little about this traveler, but it seems that his knowledge about Madagascar, the coast of Mozambique, and the Gulf of Mozambique is very rich and considered direct and first-hand information¹³². Arab geographers such as Ibn Saʿīd al-Maġribī and Abū al-Fidā utilised his data about Eastern Africa in a wide range of their works. Ibn Saʿīd bases his arguments on Ibn Fāṭima who maintains that there are two rivers pouring into the Gulf of Al-Qumr—which most probably corresponds to the Mozambique Channel. The two rivers rise from the Mountain of Al-Qamar. One of these rivers is the River of Ṣiyūna which pours into the Ḥūr of Ṣiyūna (the inlet of Ṣiyūna) and then into the Gulf of Al-Qumr¹³³. This describes the Mozambique River or Zambezi River, whereas the second river may refer to the Lulangane River¹³⁴.

In general the information of Muslim geographers about rivers in Africa south of the equator is very little and confusing. One must be careful in using this data to build a complete idea on the issue.

¹³¹ Al-Maqrīzī, *Iġāṭat al-umma fī kašf al-ġumma*, p. 41.

¹³² I. Kračkovsky, op. cit., p. 358.

¹³³ Ibn Saʿīd, op. cit., p. 85; Abū al-Fidā, *Taqwīm al-buldān*, op. cit., p. 152.

¹³⁴ Ismāʿīl al-ʿArabī, his comments on Ibn Saʿīd's work, *Kitāb al-ġuġrāfiyā*, op. cit., p. 220.