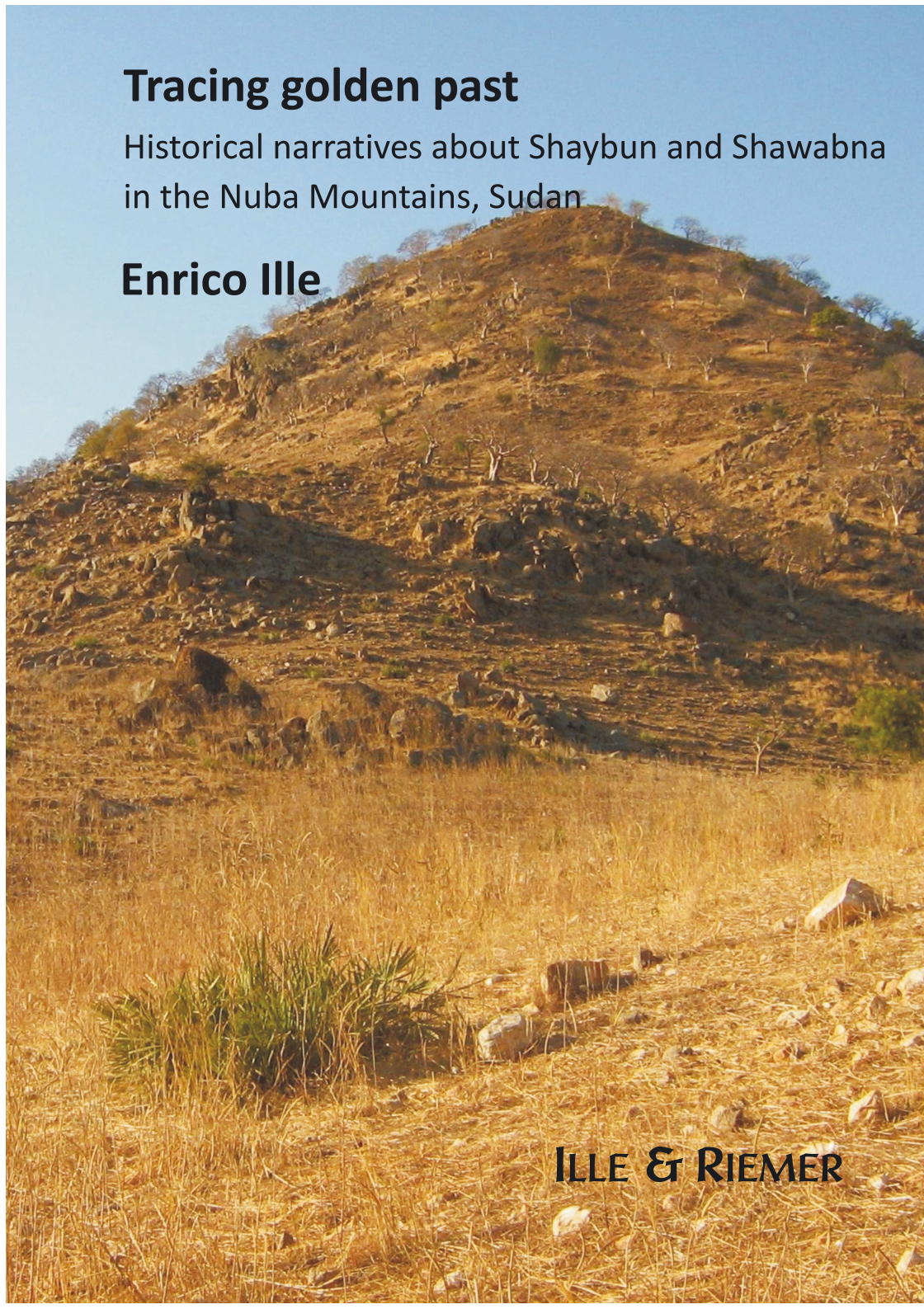


Tracing golden past

Historical narratives about Shaybun and Shawabna
in the Nuba Mountains, Sudan

Enrico Ille

ILLE & RIEMER



Ille: Tracing golden past

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Preface

This book deals with two related puzzles, which can most clearly be expressed with a question: Who has lived on the mountain Shaybūn¹, and why has it been deserted? The answering begins with a present ethnic group, the Shawābna.

Shawābna have a special status in the Nuba Mountains, because they are marginal in terms of population figures and inhabited space, but some of them occupy high political and social positions, and have access to significant economic resources. Nevertheless, their existence as a distinctive group is highly contested, and definitions of them range from complete denial to recognition as a tribal unit with a right to their own territory.

Obviously Shawābna do not exist as a descent group. But strong attempts of their elites can be observed to construct a history of a local community at their alleged place of origin, the mountain Shaybūn, from where it dispersed. Their political actions tend to aim at a 'reunification' on that basis in order to achieve a stronger position as interest group. Thus, the historical construction functions

¹ For Arabic names I use the transcription system of the International Journal of Middle East Studies throughout the book. For non-Arabic names a decision has been made from case to case, according to the version predominantly used. Geographical names of the Sudan are transcribed according to the suggestions of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use, which concern some changes of the spelling of British colonial maps. All Arabic words are written in *italics* and according to the proper numerus. Names of places, persons, and groups are written in roman.

as means of political and economic claims, often more than it serves as a framework for identification and social life.

Although the origin of their existence under the name Shawābna is mostly identified with the mountain Shaybūn inside the Nuba Mountains, they are not regarded as 'autochthonous'. At the same time, there is a claim on that 'ancestral homeland'. Then again, although migration into the Nuba Mountains is accepted as history for at least a part of the group, they do not fit the category of Arab nomadic immigrants, as they are farmers, partly traders, and not unequivocally perceived as Arabs. At the same time, some of them claim Arab origin.

Nevertheless, the mere existence of a group 'Shawābna' is contested as well as the identification of its alleged members as Arab or Nuba.

I encountered Shawābna first during preparations for the final written work for my Magister Artium in Social Anthropology at the University of Halle, Germany, in 2005². A Sudanese colleague pointed out an ethnic group in the Nuba Mountains in central Sudan, emphasizing

² My work was framed by the project "Contested autochthony: land and water rights, and the relation of nomadic and sedentary people of South Kordofan / Nuba Mountains, Sudan" (2004-2008) of the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Halle (Germany). This project was part of a research programme on difference and integration between nomadic and sedentary populations. It was funded by the 'Deutsche Forschungsgesellschaft' (DFG, German Research Foundation). Head of the project was Prof. Richard Rottenburg; senior researcher was Dr. Guma Kunda Komey, whose forthcoming book *Governance, Land, Conflict and the Nuba of Sudan* (James Currey) analyses the conflicts framing my case study.

their unclear origin and their contested position between the lines of being Arab or being Black African. Jokes and stories about these 'mules', who were always in between, promised a rich field for research on shifting identities, integration and difference, cooperation and conflict, and encouraged a multi-perspective approach to the region.

A first look into available written materials supported this impression. In a very limited range of literature, they are pictured very ambiguously: For some European travellers in the 19th century, they were nameless black inhabitants of the trading town Shaybūn, engaging in gold mining and trade, slavery, and other commercial activities. For some British administrators in the 20th century, they were an example of inevitable decadence following a mixture of African and Arab populations. For some present Arab researchers from the region, they are the offspring of Arab tribes and an important force of Islamization in the region. However, all of them based the Shawābna's history with the history of the deserted mountain Shaybūn.

I traced present discourses during two periods of fieldwork³, the first from the beginning of October 2005 until March 2006 in Khartoum and Kadugli, the capital of the state South Kordofan. After completion of the Magister thesis (Ille 2006), I returned to the Nuba

³ I conducted primarily unstructured and semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

Mountains for a second period from January to February 2007, this time mostly in the village (Tira) Mandi⁴.

During my work I was pointed at one constant feature of all narratives, which is the reduction of Shaybūn's history to one resource, the so-called Shaybūn gold. Even more, the great importance and fame of the gold from Shaybūn frequently made this place an object of future prospects, mostly for exploitation of the presumed gold mines. The pre-planning on this alleged affluence of gold triggered several commercial, military, and scientific expeditions to the mountain, even after the gold trade had declined due to the concurrent hunt for another commercial good, namely slaves.

Thus the available historical narratives about Shaybūn and Shawābna give not only insights into an important chapter of the regional history, but they allow looking into the role of imagination when it comes to political claims and actions towards still undiscovered, but assumed, highly valuable resources like gold.

In conclusion, I do not attempt here to solve the historiographical and the ethnographical puzzles. This book rather presents different narratives surrounding these puzzles not with the aim to draw a ready historical picture, but to keep the diversity of perspectives and try to relate the historical narratives to its conditions of creation. Simultaneously I will discuss the political and scientific treatment of yet uncertain, therefore imagined resources, which is inseparable from the narrative representation of Shaybūn's history.

⁴ The brackets around 'Tira' indicate a contested naming of the village, which I will discuss in Chapter 6.

In spite of some theoretical reflections, this book is primarily a case study in a specific geographical area. Thus, there are only a few introductory remarks on the region, although I have tried to introduce details in a way that makes a 'retroactive' understanding possible.

The mountain Shaybūn will be looked at by way of different perceptions in time, seeing it as place of the present, of the past, and of the future. In Chapter 1, I discuss the writings of 18th and 19th century travellers, none of whom visited Shaybūn while it was inhabited, but either relating narratives of those who did or encountering the empty mountain and its adjacent areas and people. Chapter 2 introduces the main lines of thought in historical narratives from the eighteenth century up to today, while Chapter 3 looks at forward-looking constructions of Shaybūn as prospective place of gold extraction. Chapter 4 to 6 finally include an exposition of discourses surrounding Shawābna and their origins.

Given the fact that a lot of the historical sources used here have never been translated into English, I give the text a compilation function by quoting extensively; thus the book presents much of the published material written on Shaybūn and Shawābna⁵.

⁵ All translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.

Chapter 1: Shaybūn as place of the present

He told us a lot about Kordofan and the gold mountains of Scheibun, (not Schabun, like the maps call it), where at the present the Austrian mineralogists survey the gold mines under the leadership of the splendid Russegger with a protection force of 400 men infantry and 200 troopers, but because of the rainy season they are expected back soon. A strong convoy like that had been considered necessary, because the brave and bellicose negroes are a little bit jealous of their gold. They also conduct grit washing themselves very assiduously, though imperfectly, and they carry out trade with this metal to Kordofan, Sennar and also to Darfur. Mustapha Bey made war against them and burned Scheibun, he also subdued some mountain districts, but seemed not to have been able to establish permanently. (Pückler-Muskau 1844, 309)

With these words, Hermann Fürst von Pückler-Muskau⁶ writes in his three-volume travel account “Aus Mehmed Ali’s Reich” (From Mehmed Ali’s Empire) about a visit in Khartoum in 1837, when he was invited into the house of Muḥammad Bey Khusraw al-Daftardar,

⁶ Fürst Hermann von Pückler-Muskau (1785-1871): German traveller and garden architect. As author of travel literature he is known through the anonymously published *Briefe eines Verstorbenen* (Letters of a deceased, 4 volumes 1830-32). Beginning in 1834, wide travels in North Africa, Malta and Greece. Author of the book *Südöstlicher Bildersaal* (South-Eastern picture gallery, 3 volumes, 1840).

the commander-in-chief of the regular troops of the Egyptian Pasha, Muḥammad ʿAlī, in the Sudan.

He mentions the only European, Joseph Russegger, who had seen Shaybūn before the 20th century and left an account about it. At that time, the mountain was deserted; but apart from Russegger's writings, all narratives about a present-day reality of Shaybūn and the surroundings are based on second- or third-hand descriptions.

Before the Turkish invasion in the Sudan in 1820, Europeans encountered the Sudan only sporadically; but the Turkish troops were already accompanied by several European travellers who profited from the military presence of the invaders. In their writings, they formulated the main topics of later narratives about the Sudan, namely slavery and Islamic expansion. They created principle concepts which culminated in reflections on the Mahdiyya that have dominated some ideas about the Sudan up to today⁸.

⁷ Muḥammad ʿAlī (1769-1849), Albanian soldier, 1805-1811 governor in Egypt under Ottoman rule, 1811-48 Pasha (highest military rank), introduced far-reaching reforms in Egypt, finally almost independent of Ottoman rulers. In 1820 he sent military troops to the Sudan; 1822 after the assassination of his son ʿIsmaʿīl Kamil Pasha by the North Sudanese *mak* Nimr began the long-term punitive expeditions under Muḥammad Bey Khusraw al-Daftardar. 1838-1839 travel through the Sudan.

⁸ Among the most popular examples are the Sudan books of Karl May and A. E. W. Mason's *The Four Feathers*. Sir Winston Churchill's *The River War* (1899) openly glorifies the British campaign against the Mahdist forces in the Sudan and belongs to the myths of origin for British colonial rule. Especially the person of Charles George Gordon incited many popular manifestations of the Euro-American perspective to feel a duty to free the Sudan from religious fanatics, for instance the film "Khartoum" with Charlton Heston (1961). This perspective continues to be

Using several examples of these European travellers, I will search for elements of some reconstructions of the place Shaybūn. In this section, I concentrate on constructions which deal with the place not from a temporal distance, but from a cultural or spatial one. There are often elements present which already appeared in Pückler-Muskau's short sketch: the self-assured 'correction' of previous information, the 'splendid' European researcher, the dangers of nature and the 'natives', the latter's imperfect, under-developed technology, the importance of trade, and the difficulty or even failure of domination and rule.

Conditions

The proof of credibility is at the centre of every travel account. The reader has to be convinced that reality is as it is described, because otherwise these accounts would lose their main function, which is to give non-travellers the feeling of knowing something about areas of

present in European and American policy towards Sudan. However, reactions to a recent scandal of child abduction by the French organization 'L'Arche de Zoé' show the same perspective in reverse, as Sudanese politicians speak of new slavery and European fanaticism (*The Advocate*, November 21, 2007, 3; [News24.com]). This argumentation is one of the many examples of redirection of interior criticism to exterior accusations, especially considering the revival of slavery during the Second Civil War, which seems to have met not the slightest opposition, but rather sympathy from the government (cf. Jok 2001). Mark Leopold provides a short but well-balanced and insightful overview of this complicated issue (Leopold 2003).

the world they have never been to. Therefore, many authors begin with the legitimization of their 'knowledge'.

Eduard Rüppell⁹ clearly goes in this direction in the preface and title of his book *Reisen in Nubien, Kordofan und dem peträischen Arabien vorzüglich in geographisch-statistischer Hinsicht* (Travels in Nubia, Kordofan, and the Petraic Arabia, principally on geographical-statistical matters, 1829), which he wrote after a trip to Kordofan in the early 1920s.

In the preface, he tries to create an aura of scholarliness, which is pretended to be clearly distinct from other travel literature. Therefore, he explicitly expresses his contempt for descriptions more like to patchy, eclectic travel novels than scientific work. Rüppell calls "natural-historical observations" the main purpose of his travels. The publication presented aims at "persons interested in the study of countries and people" (Rüppell 1829, VII); therefore, it is a contribution to the European landscape of science. He wants to offer "no novel-like reading book", but the scientific knowledge of an expert:

Everything is excluded which is only based on private interest; the characteristics of a whole people, not of single individuals, are enhanced, as I have discovered them in many years of contact with many inhabitants. If one does not believe the conclusions, will

⁹ Rüppell, Wilhelm Peter Eduard Simon (1794-1884): German naturalist and explorer of north-eastern Africa, numerous zoological and ethnographical collections, 1817 in Aswān (Egypt), 1822-27 travel through Sudan to Kordofan, 1830-34 in Ethiopia.

one have more trust in the stories of single events based on which I draw my conclusions? (ibid. X)

A basic reason for the frequent style of ‘telling unquestionable truth’ lies in this way of normative argumentation: Rüppell claims that the conclusion has to be accepted in order to accept the underlying observations. With this form of “I-was-there” argument, the reader loses the chance to draw his own conclusions, in other words, to doubt the ‘splendid researcher’.

At the same time, Rüppell tries to defend his statements against scientific doubts with a sudden qualification of his expertise:

Some even had the idea, which I never intended, of accepting the results of my travels as science as if from the iron diligence and astonishing knowledge of Mister *Hemprich*¹⁰ and Mister *Ehrenberg*¹¹ [...] How inappropriate such a comparison would be, since anyone can easily see that all I did was to use part of my property and some of my time to enrich the museum of my home town while renouncing the pleasures of social life. Likewise, should a harsh critic note that I neglected some scientific observations, I can only answer that I never made commitments to anybody concerning my travels. (ibid. 5)

¹⁰ Hemprich, Friedrich Wilhelm (1796-1825): German naturalist, zoologist and medical doctor, 1821-25 travel along the Nile with Ehrenberg, co-author of the book *Reisen in Aegypten, Libyen, Nubien und Dongola* (Travels in Egypt, Nubia and Dongola, together with Ehrenberg, 1828).

¹¹ Ehrenberg, Christian Gottfried (1795-1876): German biologist and explorer, founder of micropaleontology.

His argument of 'many years of contact' is neutralized, when he describes his actual stay in Kordofan, which mutates into a two-month visit marked by illness:

I happily reached [Kordofan's] capital Obeid in the middle of the following January [1825], but I immediately fell ill with jaundice because of the unfamiliar well water. Nevertheless, my short stay was rich in natural-historical pickings in spite of this and other obstacles; the political peace was undisturbed, although one could not trust in its continuation. Maybe I will be criticized for my early return from Kordofan. [...] I hurried back into friendly areas, and as early as the end of March 1825 I greeted my friend Abdin Beg in New Dongola. (ibid. 9)

He adds that he spent one of these two months in a settlement of the Hamr (ibid. 145). We will see that all these qualifications change nothing about his self-confidence to generalize observations.

In a similar way, Alfred Edmund Brehm¹² combines the weakening of his responsibility with a claim to deep expertise. On the one hand, he qualifies his *Reise-Skizzen aus Nordost-Afrika* (Travel sketches from Northeast Africa, 1855) as simple travel diaries which were not written to be published and were brought out without any experience in publishing. On the other hand he writes:

My reports are those of somebody who is almost a naturalized Northeast-African. In the long period of my stay at this place, I

¹² Brehm, Alfred Edmund (1829-1884): German zoologist, in 1847 beginning of five-year expedition with ornithologist Johann Wilhelm von Müller to Egypt, Sudan and the peninsular Sinai.

learned to endure strains which seem unendurable to a novice, to respect people he could not become friends with, and to discover the beauties of areas which are places of horror to him. I lay bare the difficulties I had to bear, the dreadful things I have seen, the sad things I had to experience, but I have also tried to depict the truly exalted in faithful outlines. (Brehm 1855, IV)

His account comes after his surmounting of the seemingly insurmountable and taming of the wild, and although he might sometimes be wrong, he seeks the truth, he writes without adornment, and is faithful to experience (ibid. V-VI). Nevertheless, external conditions of the travels are reported and partly treated as problems, too, still with no, or only little, impact on the conviction of writing facts.

Each trip described here took place during Turkish-Egyptian rule (1821-1881), the first large-scale foreign invasion in the larger part of present-day state of Sudan. Most probably, the aim of this invasion was not colonial administration, but rather extension of accessible resources:

The invasion of the Sudan was undertaken for the usual reasons, the promise of gold, slaves, gum Arabic, and livestock, all of which contributed to the empire. The recruits for Muhammad 'Ali's army were typically Sudanese slaves from the non-Muslim regions [...]. The heavy taxation of subjects, characteristic of Turkish rule, was frequently paid in slaves by free Muslim Sudanese. (Lobban 2002, 299)

But other circumstances have also been considered as reasons. The precarious situation for the central Ottoman government was marked

by challenges from Georgian Mamelukes in Iraq, governors in Syria, Wahhabites in Arabia, and conflict with the Janissaries. These challenges made new, harsher recruitments of soldiers necessary. Muḥammad ʿAlī, preparing independent rule in Egypt, provided an army of 40,000 slaves from the Sudan. Then, he extended his campaign, also to secure himself a realm in case his rule in Egypt should fail (Robinson 1925, 47).

The result was the establishment of a slave trading system which in character and extent was very different from the period before. It was connected with consistent taxation, which was new for conquered inhabitants of the region:

While the Funj sultans had been satisfied with a nominal tribute sufficient to maintain their modest capital in Sennar, Muḥammad ʿAlī sought to use the Sudan in furthering his plans for the economic and military aggrandisement of Egypt. However, his hopes of finding gold in Sudan were not to be realised, while large-scale slave hunting would have necessitated conquering the South, which was beyond his power. Thus, the only remaining way to satisfy the administration's need through heavy taxation, which would force the tribes, who lacked money, to pay the authorities with slaves or cattle. (Warburg 1978, 6)

The slave trade¹³ was often the main point European observers attacked the regime for. For instance, Ruppell saw earlier accounts

¹³ For more detailed studies on the character of this slave trade, see for instance Spaulding 1982, and Johnson 1989. Detailed descriptions by contemporary

by Waddington¹⁴ and Cailliaud¹⁵ discredited by the fact that they travelled with the army of Ismāʿīl Kamil Pasha¹⁶. On the other hand, he praises Burckhardt¹⁷ for “most accurate and most interesting” travel accounts which speak about a time before the “despotism” of the Turkish “trampled on the nations there” (Rüppell 1829, VIII).

Thus for him, external conditions seem to determine the results, but Rüppell never transfers these observations to himself. He merely states that only the Turkish invasion opened to the researcher the areas he aimed for, proving implicitly how much his travels were actually connected to their rule:

At this time one could already visit these formerly hostile provinces with the greatest security; the firm rule of Mehemet Ali Pascha had been consolidated and offered the European traveller every advantage desirable, whether he be travelling for scientific purposes or simply out of a general thirst for knowledge. (ibid. 2)

travellers can be found in *Travels in Kordofan* (1844) by Ignatius Pallme and *Egypt, the Soudan and Central Africa* (1861) by John Petherick.

¹⁴ Waddington, George (1793-1869): British traveller and church historian, author of the book *Journal of a visit to some parts of Ethiopia* (with Barnard Hanbury, 1822).

¹⁵ Cailliaud, Frédéric (1787-1869): French explorer of Africa, professional gold worker, participated in the last expedition of Ismāʿīl Kamil Pasha to Fazughli and Sinnār, author of the book *Voyage à Meroë: au fleuve Blanc, au-delà de Fazoql dans le midi du royaume de Sinnâr à Syouah tc.* (1823-27).

¹⁶ Ismāʿīl Kamil Pasha (1795-1822): third son of Muḥammad 'Alī, commander-in-chief of the Turkish conquest of the Sudan, 1822 killed by *mak* Nimr.

¹⁷ Burckhardt, Johann Ludwig (1784-1817): also called Ibrāhīm Ibn ʿAbd Allāh, Swiss traveller, after adoption of Muslim life style visited Mecca and other places in the Middle East and North Africa, author of the books *Travels in Nubia* (1819), *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (1822), and *Travels in Arabia* (1829).

This paradox intensifies when Rüppell idealizes the life before the Turkish invasion as the Golden Age, a continuing motif in the following descriptions.

One of the main publications on Kordofan in the 19th century was written by the Ignatius Pallme¹⁸. His intention was to make use of the new mercantile chances in the Sudan and beyond after annexation by the Turkish dominated Egyptian kingdom. In 1832, he founded a trading company in Cairo and started a trip to the Sudan at the end of 1837. He seems to have stayed mostly in the capital al-Ubayyid, but at the end of November 1838 he joined a slave hunt in the Nuba Mountains when the central government of Muḥammad ʿAli demanded 5,000 slaves from the provincial government (Zach 2002, V-VIII).

Joseph Russegger¹⁹, who travelled in the Sudan in 1836 and 1837 in order to find minerals for the viceroy of Egypt and to prepare its exploitation, was even more dependent on the regime. Therefore, his every movement was connected with the Turkish-Egyptian army. Russegger writes about the conditions in al-Ubayyid when the exploration of the unknown south, especially Shaybūn, was being prepared:

Among today's [April 19, 1837] visitors [...] there was an Egyptian officer of the garrison here, who has among others been ordered

¹⁸ Pallme, Ignatius: Bohemian merchant and traveller, author of *Beschreibung von Kordofan* (Travels in Kordofan, 1843) about a journey in 1838-39.

¹⁹ Joseph Ritter von Russegger (1802-1863): Austrian geologist in state service, 1836-38 with Thomas Kotschy exploration journey to Cilicia, Syria, Egypt and Sudan.

to escort us to Scheibun and according to whom nothing had been done for the expedition soon to start, in the sense that the detailed soldiers had received neither money, nor food, nor camels. (Russegger 1844, 132)

Finally, he started with 300 infantrymen, 'Negroes' and 'Mograbins'²⁰, under Turkish and Arab officers, an "irregular cavalry in the service of the viceroy" (ibid. 159).

Alfred Edmund Brehm emphasizes the aspect of slavery, "the unfortunate fate of being considered a tradable commodity", a portion of whose victims he calls the 'Negro tribe' "Scheibuhn" (Brehm 1855, 241). From this practice, he concludes:

The hatred of the dark people is justified; the extreme cruelty with which captured whites are slaughtered is only the execution of a dreadfully justified revenge. The slave hunt is the reason why the explorer's path into inner Africa is closed. (ibid. 248)

According to Brehm, a consequence of this 'justified hatred' is a flood of retaliation campaigns in the plains during the rainy season. The former victims of slave hunts become the "horror of the settled and nomadic inhabitants of the Sudan" (ibid.), the 'wild gangs' of Shilluk, Dinka, Nuba, inhabitants of Darfur and Tagali, and finally also the "Scheibuhn's" raid men and animals to take revenge.

Russegger also stressed the dangers of the route, the inhabitants, and the climate, making the travel an act of self-sacrifice:

²⁰ This was a general term for Berbers who had moved in huge numbers from Northwest Africa to Egypt and to the regions south of it.

The area near the mountain Kordofan has a bad reputation because of the marauding Negroes at Dschebel Deier, and we were very cautious. (Russegger 1844, 134)

I laid my fate and the fate of my companions in the hands of Providence and looked with confidence towards the near future in a country whose climate is not less infernal than that of the Niger or of Sierra Leone and causes the death of three quarters of the Europeans who confront themselves with it completely. (ibid. 11)

Nobody encouraged me in my plans and everybody described to me the near beginning of the rainy season as insurmountable danger, the dark nights, the attacks of wild Negro tribes, the swampy ground, the torrents in Khors without bridges, without roads, and without walkways. In a word, they drew a horrible picture. But I thought to myself that there will always be time to turn around, so I insisted on carrying out my plans, and my success showed that I was right. (ibid. 132)

But as if he would like to explain his motivation, he adds to the latter thought a description of the gold of Shaybūn. “It was extremely beautiful and, as all pure gold from there, finer than our best ducats” (ibid.). He is not the only one to limit the existence of Shaybūn to the gold deposits. How did this focus occur?

Descriptions

The localization of Shaybūn takes place in different ways. Ruppell wrote the following:

I have more exact information about the road which leads from Obeid to Schabun, an old storage yard, well known to all traders in Sudan. The main direction of the road is south-southwest, and the whole distance is seven days' march [...]. *Browne*²¹, *Burckhardt* and my collected notes agree that there are rich goldmines here. The zone with a lot of this metal begins here, bordered to the south by a primordial mountain range, inasmuch as one can deduce such a geological condition by analogy. (Rüppell 1829, 176-177)

Abstractly seen, this information localizes in terms of infrastructure, function, geography, and logistics, in addition to a geological speculation with economic implications. Russegger is more complex in his description. Geographical and botanical details alternate with exact information on time distances, extended by aesthetic, emotional expressions:

All trees in fresh green, all covered with their peculiar, partly magnificent flowers. Moreover, the smell of jasmine and some mimosa blossoms, the mild morning air, the bright, ethereal lighting, and I have to admit that after all these years I still feel all warm inside when I think of this sight, which is among the most beautiful in vegetative splendour I have seen in the tropical world and which is even more impressive than our Nordic fir and beech forests. (Russegger 1844, 191)

²¹ Browne, William George (1768-1813): British traveller in Central Africa and the Middle East, detained in Darfur (1793-1796), author of the book *Travels in Africa, Egypt and Syria* (1799, enlarged 1806).

A specific kind of tree, the deleb palm tree, marks the place as an exotic botanical space, especially through its characteristic shape, with a thickening in the second upper third of the trunk. Its fruits appear as a precursor of the mountain and its vegetation. In this sense Russegger speaks about an encounter with inhabitants of Hadra, north of Shaybūn:

These Negroes came from the area of Scheibun, and from them we got our first fruits from the beautiful deleb palm tree, which we still had not seen, but which exists in huge numbers in the forests around Scheibun. (ibid. 189)

But it is just the outside appearance which makes nature seem so paradisiacal, because the most important life-giving substance, water, revealed pure nature's hostility to man. Although there is enough water in the river beds, its quality is sickening:

This water is prevented from seeping away by layers of clay and outside the rainy season is in constant contact with organic substances in the process of chemical decomposition. As drinking water, it is the most disgusting water I have ever encountered. I would even prefer the brine of Mur-hat-el-Mora. The water has a green colour, which after some moments of contact with the air turns black, its temperature is lukewarm, its smell and taste are foul, and finally with the development of ever more hydrogen sulphide it becomes unbearably repellent. Filled into water bags it was already impossible, at least for us Europeans, to drink it on the second day. (ibid. 194)