

## **BLIN AND ARAB HISTORIANS IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY.**

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### **Abstract**

The ancient history of the Blin still needs to be investigated. Within this premise, this paper discusses three Arabic texts written in the twelfth century in relation to the history of the Blin. Two of them were written by El-Idrissi the historian while the third one was a manuscript written by a poet called Ibn al-Qalaqis. I would argue that one of the texts of El-Idrissi and the manuscript of Ibn al-Qalaqis are discussed for the first time. Giving prominence for treatment of the two texts, may contribute to our knowledge of the study of Blin.

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The first inhabitant of the east Africa region is the Nilotic group. They dominated this region for thousands of years, until the advent of the Cushitic group that led them either to mix with them or to migrate out of that area or to settle in specific areas<sup>1</sup>. It is believed that the Cushitic group entered to this region from the Arabian Peninsula via Bab al-Mandab or from the Caucasus through Egypt between the fifth and third millennium BC. They relied on animals that could live in harsh desert life like camels and others. They developed architecture and music, as evidenced by the construction of pyramids in Egypt and the Church of Lalibela in Ethiopia and the ancient port of Adulis in Eritrea and others<sup>2</sup>. The demographics of these groups were spread throughout the region from southern Egypt to northern Kenya. The areas from southern Egypt to northern Sudan were dominated by Nubia, the eastern desert by the Beja and the Abyssinian plateau by the Agaw people while the

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<sup>1</sup> Ghaith, Fathi. , *El Islam fi El-habasha abra tarik* Cairo: Maktabete Elnahda El Misriya, (Islam in Abyssinia throughout history) p ,19 . Nawed, Mohamed Said. *El aroba we El Islam fi elkurn El afriki* ( Arabism and Islam in the Horn Of Africa ) P. 29. Fitsum Asfaha , The Origin of Blin: an overview, presented on the Blin Democracy and Cultural Day workshop in Stockholm, Sweden in September ,09, 2006, p , 1&2

<sup>2</sup> Tamrat, Taddesse , *Process of ethnic Interaction and Integration in Ethiopian History: The case of agaw* .in The Journal of African History , Special Issue in Honour of Roland Olover) 29 (1) , 1986: p.5-18.

southern centre of Abyssinia were under the control of the Sidamo and the Oromo. The coastal areas, from Massawa to the northern Kenya, were controlled by Saho, Afar and Somalis. etc.<sup>3</sup>. However, this demographic map has changed after the arrival of the Semitic Group to the region. They had cultural superiority such as written language and knowledge of advanced farming methods, which led to their domination and decline of the indigenous people's civilization in the area. Today, Cushitic people in the Horn of Africa are represented by the Somalis, Aromo, Sidamo, Afar, Saho, Hidareb, Agaw and Blin<sup>4</sup>.

### **The People of Agaw**

The people of Agaw constitute one of the Cushitic branches which is known as central Cushitic group. They are considered to be among the ancient inhabitants of the region of the Horn of Africa. Their arrival to this region can be dated back to five or three thousand years BC as mentioned earlier. They had ruled the Abyssinian plateau for a long time. However, the advent of the Semitic group, which was stronger than them, had ended their rule. Nevertheless, they re-emerged strongly as a time when the Axumite Kingdom weakened and ruled Abyssinia for more than three hundred years under the reign of the Zagwe Dynasty. Their rule ended in 1270<sup>5</sup>, and they hadn't been in power since then. Today, speakers of Agaw language are spread across four isolated areas—three in Ethiopia and one in Eritrea. The Western Agaw area Qemant and Qwara in Gondar, the Eastern Agaw are the Khmir in Sokota, the Southern Agaw are Awngi and Kunfal in the South-West of Lake Tana. All these three regions are in Ethiopia. Whereas the Northern Agaw inhabit Halhal- Bogos, in Eritrea. The focus of this study is the Northern Agaw who live in Eritrea and who are known as Blin. As such I will discuss the above-mentioned texts in relation to the history of the Blin.

The first historian who discussed and mentioned the Blin by their name according to my knowledge so far is El- Idrissi (1099-1166) in the twelfth century. when he was talking about Aswan, he stated that , “perhaps the horses from Sudan attacked on its edges by so-called Blin , and they claim that they are Rum, and they were Christians on the doctrine of Jacobins from the days of the Copts and before the advent of Islam. They were moving between the land of the Beja and the land of Abyssinia, in the meantime they get to Nubia.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, P5-18.

<sup>4</sup> Ghaber, Michael The Blin of Bogos, Baghdad, 1993. P.57.

<sup>5</sup> For more details See, Trimmingham, J, Spencer. *Islam in Ethiopia*. Great Britain: Frankcass & company limited, 1952.p, 55-56. Tamrat, Op.Cit, : p.5-18. Adhana Mengstaab, *The Strategic Position of Keren in the Massawa- Khassala trade route: in Eritrean Studies Review* , V 5. 2007: 89-112. p.91

They were nomadic and did not stay in one place like what desert people of the Lamtounah tribe do in the Far region of Morocco”<sup>6</sup>.

He stated in another place: “between the land of Nubia and the land of the Beja people of nomadic, they are called Balion they have stringency and determination, and people of other nations around them had feared of their oppression and harm , they make deals with them , they are Christians on the doctrine of Jacobins, as well as all the people of Nubia,Abyssinia and some people of Beja were also Christians on the doctrine of the Jacobins”<sup>7</sup>.

Ibn al-Qalaqis (1138-1172), who had lived at the same time as El-Idrissi, was a prominent poet. He was born in Alexandria, Egypt. However, he lived in different places such as Cairo, Sicily, Zubaid, etc. In 1169 he entered Aden and left it by sea. He was rescued to the island of Dhalak when the ship on which he was on his way to Alexandria had sunk. The governor of the island of Dhalak at the time, Malik Abu Shaddad, had helped him . Ibn al-Qalaqis states in a message he had sent to the **Mamlook(ruler) of his home . While he was there.....** The Blini had violated the sanctity of Islam by demolishing mosques ... as well as preventing access to the coast. All these were happening in the presence of a representative of the Coptic Bishop who had come from Egypt.....<sup>8</sup> "

From above texts the following points can be drawn :

- According to El-Idrissi the Blin embraced Christianity since the time of the Copts and before the arrival of Islam. He points out that they had been followers of the doctrine of the Jacobins which was also embraced by the people of Abyssinia,Nubia and some of the Beja. It is known that Abyssinia converted to Christianity in the 3rd century and Nubia in the 6th century . We can also understand from Ibn al-Qalaqis, that the Blin were Orthodox when he talked about the incident of the demolition of mosques, he said all these happened with the presence of the Bishopwho arrived from Egypt<sup>9</sup> .

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<sup>6</sup> *El-Idrissi, Nuzhat al-Mishtaq fi akhtiraq al' afaq* (penetrating horizons) Cairo: Library of Religious Culture 1994, p.40

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p.47.

<sup>8</sup> Zirkeli, Khair al-Din, *Al'alam , fi qamus tarajim asher alrrijal Walnnisa' min alarab Walmustaribin Walmustashriqin* ( the Dictionary of the Most Famous Men and Women of Arabs and Orientalists) , Beirut: Dar Al-Malayin, p.26. The Ibn Qalaqis's manuscript is in the treasury of almawlawia alssidia , 592 AH . Cairo

<sup>9</sup> Zirkeli, Op.Cit, p.26

- The demolition of mosques it may have taken place in the coastal areas since Islam was not widespread beyond the coastal area.

- The texts also include an element of characterization for the Blin. They characterize them as having “stringency and determination”. Hence El-Idrissi argues that people of other nations around them feared their “oppression and harm”. Thus they would live having made deals with them.

- The Blin were masters in their areas and had the authority to permit or prevent whoever wants to pass through their lands to and from the coastal area as Ibn al-Qala stated. However, in the normal times the relationship between the Blin and its neighbours was good, and convoys of commerce were passing through their lands safely without being exposed to any danger.

-The texts also mentioned the neighbours of Blin as the Beja, Abyssinia and Nubia.

-There was a relationship with the Rum (the Romans is meant the Byzantines who ruled Egypt before Islam)

-The texts of the two authors refer to the Blin as people from the Sudan, not as Arabs or Copts. As such it could be argued that they were ancient inhabitants of this area.

-The text no 1 stated that "They were on the religion of Christianity from the days of the Coptic and before the advent of Islam<sup>10</sup>", and this means that their settlement in this region had preceded the advent of Islam in the seventh century.

- The texts of El-Idrissi and Ibn Qalaqis have identified the area of the Blin as located between Aswan in the west, Aidab in the east and Abyssinia in the south<sup>11</sup>.

-The text of the number 1 stated that “they are nomadic people moving from place to another, such as the powerful tribe of Lamtouna, which was spread in Far Morocco to the south of River Senegal, which established in the eleventh century AC Almoravid state in Andalusia and the Morocco. The two tribes were characterized by strength and courage, and also their lifestyles are similar. The first was spread in the desert between Egypt, Nubia and Abyssinia, while the second was spread in the vast area in Morocco up to the Senegal River. Idrissi was aware of the strength of the Lamtounah tribe because he lived in Sicily,

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<sup>10</sup> El-Idrissi, *Op.Cit.*, . P. 47

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed Elias, *Op.Cit.*, p.2

Andalusia and Morocco, the comparison of the Blin with the Lamtounah, that Blin must be a strong and influential at the time of its existence as Lamtounah in the Far Morocco<sup>12</sup> Also It can be understood as from the text of the number 3 of Ibn Qalaqis that Blin represented strong forces . They had a power to prevent people from passing through their territory during conflict time.

-It is noted in the text of No 1&3 that the word “Blin” is written in Blin pronunciation “Blin

-Texts 1, 2, indicate that the animals used by the Blin were horses which they used for riding and raiding their neighbours .

### **Are these texts talking about the Blin or other people?**

Some scholars like A. Paul , Mustafa Mas’ad and others<sup>13</sup> argue that the Blin which are discussed by El-Idrissi are Blemmyes. Whereas, Others like Crawford, Conte Rossini and others believe that El-Idrissi was talking about the Blin of the Keren not Blemmyes<sup>14</sup>.

I would argue that El-Idrissi was speaking about the Blin, not the Blemmyes. Although scholars have disagreed on explaining one of El-Idrissi texts, however I could not even find anybody who has dealt with his second text in detail. Nevertheless, it becomes evident from the text of Ibn-Qalaqis, who had written his manuscript at the same time of that as El-Idrissi, the Blin had occupied the route that leads to Dhalak. This area is Blin’s current home. As such it could be contended that the validity of Ibn-Qalaqis’s manuscript validates the argument that El-Idrissi was speaking about the Blin of Keren. Not only this but scholars, while researching ancient local heritage of the region, have found connections between the Blin and the tribes of Beja, especially between the Balow, Hedareb and Boqos<sup>15</sup>.The latter are the Blin of Keren .

It is also worth pointing out that the word ‘Blin’ is written in a typical Blin pronunciation. Thus the restriction of this pronunciation to the speakers of the Blin augments the contention that it was taken from native Blin speakers. As such it could be argued that El-Idriss was speaking about the Blin, not the Blemmyes.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 2-3

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.4

<sup>14</sup> Ibid p.4

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.4-5

Blin of Keren refers to the people who call themselves Blin, and this name exists only among those people in this region according to my knowledge.

## Conclusion

These texts have shed some light into the situation of the Blin in the twelfth century. They referred to the Blin as people of the Sudan and described them as owners of horses who had embraced Christianity. The texts also identified the location of their region within today's Eritrea and the areas across which they had moved and inhabited in the past. In addition, the authors of the texts have also characterized the Blin as strong, courageous. Not only the Blin's characters were described but also their life styles as well as their relations with their neighbours at times of peace and war. The texts have shown that the Blin had settled in their current region in Eritrea and have held their current name "Blin" since, at least the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup>C.

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