

# The Habab and Hedareb

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## THE HABAB TRIBE

by O. G. S. CRAWFORD Editor of Antiquity

The accompanying genealogical table is a conflation from the following sources

1. Newbold's File ii, 484: a mere list of names showing the ancestry of Sheikh Mahmud for 54 generations, through Adnan to Nuh. No authority is given for this list.
2. Ibid. 317: a genealogical table of the descendants of Hassan, son of Hidad, and a list of his ancestors up to Hibteis, attached to C. H. Thompson's history of the Habab.
3. Ibid. 318-20: a history of the Habab by Hassan Kantibai Mahmud who lived eight years in Akkele Guzai, where he learnt it: written down in January, 1932.
4. Giuseppe Sapeto: *Viaggio e missione cattolica* (Rome, 1857), 160.
5. Carlo Conti Rossini: *Note sul Sahel Eritreo*, *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, Vol. VI (Rome, 1914), 381. This pedigree agrees with the others, but omits three generations between Hadembes and Bumnet.
6. Enno Littmann: *Bemerkungen über den Islam in Nordabessinien*: *Der Islam* I, 1910, 68-71.

Of the above, the last three sources are certainly independent of the first three and probably of each other. The third is probably independent of the first two. There are thus at least three independent sources, and perhaps four. It is satisfactory that they are all consistent.

Adopting c. 1920 as the date of Kantibai Mahmud, who was alive (but deposed) in 1932, we get, by dead reckoning backwards at 30 years for a generation, a date of c. 1680 for K.Habtas, c. 1500 for Asgade and c. 1200 for Zoudi.

The middle date is in agreement with an independent source of 1482 (1) which mentions "un altro Signore chiamato Aschadi". This tribal chief was encountered by Suriano eight days after leaving another called Syonsirave; this seems to mean the Shum (chief) of Seraé, and may safely be identified with Debaroa, the chief residence or capital of the Barnagash.

Now Mansfield Parkyns marks a district called Asgaddy, W.N.W. of Axum. It was part of the province of Shire, and if we take about eight days to represent about 80 miles in hilly and difficult country, it is possible to equate the Asgaddy of Mansfield Parkyns with the Aschadi of Suriano.(2). (It is quite usual for the personal names of prominent chiefs to be used as the names of districts.)

The exact location is not, however, important for the present purpose, which is to point out that, in 1482, Asgade had not yet migrated northwards into the present Habab region; and that this passage of Suriano's enables us to date the formation of the Habab tribe there not long after 1482, which agrees very nicely with the date (c. 1500) already assigned to Asgade by dead reckoning.

Tribal tradition puts Asgade's first home in Akkele Guzai, which Lejean calls Kollo Gouzay,

in 'Tigré-but it is not and never was in 'Tigré. According to the author he three sons, Abil, Takles and Tamariam, from the first of whom the Habab were descended. (Littmann (3) makes these three the sons of Maflas, the Asgade.)

The names indicate that they were Christian; according to Littmann Takles means Takla Iayusus, the plant of Jesus; Hebtes means Habta Iayusus, the gift or Jesus; Temariam means Habtamariam, the gift of Mary.

Rossini puts (4) Asgade's arrival in the Habab district at about the first half of the sixteenth century-a date based presumably on dead reckoning only. He settled on a plateau (rora) at a place called I.aba, which is the name of a tributary wadi of the Anseba immediately south of Asgede Bakla, near the ruins of Tzertzera where lived the Fung. He had many quarrels with the Fung, mostly the usual nomad squabbles about cattle.

When Asgade came there he found the Balau and the Fung in occupation, but on his arrival the Fung went away, and there remains of them only one family. The Balau came from the Baraka, and there still remains a few of them.

Both these accounts were certainly based on traditions recorded by the two authors who were personally familiar with the regions. They agree in the main with a rather confused, but independent, account written down in January, 1932, by, Kantibai Mahmoud.(5)

The ancestor of the Habab, Zed Abu Sahl, emigrated from Akilli Kazai at the Muslim conquest. Later he occupied Nacfa and Rora. Asgedi, son of Babinit, came to Rora, in a district called Indilal (6), and with his brother Bigilai formed clans.

They then divided up the country between them and made treaties with the Bellu and Baira.(8) (this seems to correspond with the reference to the Balau and Fung in the preceding account.) These were tribes of the Baraka, and they intermarried with them. (The rest of the story does not concern us here.)

Sapeto, a missionary who lived for some years in the region and knew it and its inhabitants well and could speak their language, states that the Habab were no about their original home. Some said that it was Tzana Dagié in Kolugusa: Tedarar in Hamasen. (This would appear to be Munzinger's Tadarar in Akkele Guzai 37 miles S. by E. of Asmara.)

In any case it was certainly from such places that they came, for amongst their progenitors (antenati) he had found the names of Barnagashes of Addi Baro and Dbaroa, such as Karm-medas, 'Taluq, Giammin-oi, Giann-oi, Addam-bas, Abu-amnat. At Enzelal Sipeto found considerable (grandissime) ruins of an "Abyssinian" city with remains of churches and monasteries, "e alcune lettere d'iscrizione" defaced by Muslims. He concluded that the city was like that of Ilha [Yeha] in 'Tigré and the letters Himyarite.

His companion and guide Muhammed Faqaq (also called Naod) insisted that Enzelal was the same as Asgade Baqle, where there was nothing to be seen but a sheepfold or village like Tzertzera. This latter place was a large ruined village with many burial-cairns (sepolchri a bica).

Sapeto states that Habab was the plural of a personal name Habib, and that Habib was the father of Te-Miriam. His language is not always exact and his meaning sometimes obscure; but his book contains much valuable information. He was the first European to explore the region, though Mansfield, Parkyns had passed through the Southern parts in 1843.

The ruins of Anzelal are marked on the Italian 1: 400,000 map of Eritrea (Sheet 2, Nacfa) 19 kilometres E.S.E. of Ghirghir, and those of Tzertzera 8 kilometres S. by E. of Enzelal, both sites being on high ground some 10 to 15 kilometres E. of the Anseba. A full account of them has been published By Conti Rossini.(9)

The traditional history of the Habab is important because it may confirm one theory of Fung origins. It speaks of the Fung as a tribe of nomads who are bracketed with the Balau, and not as the rulers of an empire; and for this reason it probably reflects events that took place before that empire was founded. The date of those events, as estimated by dead reckoning, is in close agreement with a contemporary reference to Aschadi, and cannot be much (if at all) later than 1500.

The word Asgedi is not Geéz or'Amharic. A certain Asgade was one of the captains of Ras Sela Chrestos in the Galla war of 1618,(10) and the name is regarded by Dillmann (11) as a personal name derived from the Greek word exedra, a court. (I assume that Asgedi and Asgadr are the same.)

Interesting confirmation of the Habab tradition comes from the Ethiopian province of Shire in Tigré. Shire is a tract of rolling uplands between the Mareb on the north and the Takkaze on the south; it is bounded on the east by the famous Aksum and on the west by Adiabo on the Eritrean frontier.

In the north-western part of Shire, next to Adiabo, is the district mentioned above which is still called Asghede. Local tradition, recorded (12) by the late Giovanni Ellero, whose death as a prisoner of war was a great loss to Ethiopic studies, still remembers the origin of the name.

Asghede was the grandson of a certain Ras Degen, a Christian, who left his home in Agame in the first decade of the sixteenth century,(13) accompanied by a Muslim called 'Abdalla. Some of Ras Degen's followers settled in Mai Ducuma (Enticcio) and Mai Hasebo near Aksum; Ras Degen and the rest went on further westwards towards Adiabo.

His son Zerabruch had seven sons: Asghede Zegai, who took the district called by his name; Redaa Tsembella, whose descendants now live in Addi Neccas Adghi; Asbe, stationed in Adiabo; Zahaman, in Medebai Tabor; Atiscium, whose descendants are to be found in Dembe Arcai and many villages in the Selaclaca district; Tedai, in Addi Ghidad; Tsada, round Mai Guscela. The leading families of Shire trace their descent to-day from these seven sons, through twelve or fourteen generations.

It is to be observed, first, that in the accompanying genealogy, derived from wholly independent sources and other regions, twelve generations exactly separate Asghede from Mahmud (1920).

Then the home of Asghede's grandfather in Agame borders on Akkele Guzai whence according to the other tradition Asghede himself came. There are certain verbal similarities, too; Giabiburuc the uncle of Asghede in my genealogy must surely be the same as Zerabruh his father according to the Shire tradition. Addi Ghidad (the village of Ghidad) recalls Asghede's brother Gheedad or Qa'adat.

Habab genealogy.

1200 Zoudi I

Hotai Fasel I

Takal Hayamanout I

Howai I

Nafas I

Hadembes//Hadimbasi I

Tanaai I

Gamganaie I

Mayai I

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II

Babint Jabibrok

Semir Babinet

Giabiburuc

Bummet Beit Jock I

Begiuc I

III

c. 1500 Askadi Bigilai Atkilmi Qa'adat 5 others

Asghede (in the west: at his Adcheme Gheeded

Asgade death the tribe conquered.

By the Beni Amer Bahailai)

Daflah I

Kabirkitous I

Kantabai Gargies I

K. Ibitar I

K. Maflas I

c. 1680 K. Habtes (Hibteis) Takles

Abib Hebtas (Temaryam)

K. Bahr Nakasi Fikak Tekles Gherenat

K. Nawdad Izad Teodros Gabres

K. Fikak Nawit Galauchios Abu Emnat

K. Hidad Derar Sukur

K. Hassan Nasseh Faqq

K. Hamid

Azaz (1850) Sukar (1840)

I

c. 1920 K. Mahmud

The date suggested by Ellero is a little too late. The Itinerary of Suriano proves that Asghede was already in existence in 1482, even if (as is possible) the name there had a general and not a personal connotation.

The migration of Ras Degenā must therefore have taken place at least a generation before 1482. In my Fung Kingdom (p. 150) I put Asghede's northward trek and the foundation of the Habab at about 1500, referring in advance to this article for the evidence on which it was based.

It will now be seen that that is partly dead reckoning backwards, partly Suriano's mention. It is, of course, merely an approximation, but if Asghede was alive in 1482 it cannot be far out; these petty barbarian chieftains did not have long lives, nor would such a migration be led by an old man.

The importance of this episode for us in the Sudan lies in the possibility that Asghede's northward trek may have started the Fungs on the move, as indeed one tradition says in so many words that it did.

One final point requires clearing up. One of Asghede's brothers, according to the Shire tradition, was called Atescium. The word looks very like Addi or Adi Shum, two words meaning "village" and "chief."

Now on the route that Suriano must have followed the I: 1,000,000 map (Asmara Sheet) marks a village called Adi Scium Ascale, just north of the Mareb (Mr. Derek Matthews verified the name recently). Is Ascale a form of, or a mistake for, Ascade? Is there any tradition locally about the origin of the name? The village is not Shire but in Serāe, just across the Eritrean frontier.

#### FOOTNOTES.

1. Etiopia Franciscana, Vol. 1, part I (Florence, 1928), p. lxxxiv.
2. The 1/m. map (Asmara Sheet) marks a place called Adi Scium Ascale in Serāe, Eritrea, between Adi Quala on the N. and the Mareb, 29 miles N. by W. of Aduwa. The confusion of "l" and "d" is quite normal; c.. are the forms Lalibeda and Lalibela. This place cannot be identical with that of Parkyns, if its location is correct, but may contain the same personal name. It is on the main north and south thoroughfare.
3. Voyage aux deux Nils, 142. (Abil is spelt Abib in his genealogical tree, and made the ancestor of the Temaryam.)
4. Bemerkungen über den Islam in Nordabessinien, Der Islam i, 1910, 68.
5. Note sul Sahel Eritreo; R.S.O. vi, 365-92.
6. Newbold's file ii, 318~20.
7. Heuglin's Enzelal, a ruined village at the foot of Asgedē Bakla: Pet. Erg. No 13 (1864) map 1.
8. Sapeto (Viaggio e missioni, 1857, 347) states that in ? live the E'den and the Hallenga. This seems to locate the Baira, if they are to be equal to the Bairo, are between Kassala and the Baraka at Danguaz.

9. Antiche rovine sull Rore Eritréé, Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Vol. xxxi, ser. 5a, fasc. 7-10 (Sept., 1922), pp. 241-78.

10. Pereira, Susenyos, 147.

11. Lexikon linguae Aethiopicae, c. 1405.

12. Bollettino della R. Societa Geografica Italiana, Vol. I,XXVII, 1941, 95-6.

13. The date is not one I should wish to find fault with, hut one would like to know how "the ancients" from which Ellero heard the story reckoned it-certainly not in terms of the Christian era.

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#### THE HADAREB

A Study in Arab-Beja Relationships

by A. PAUL, Pages 75-78

It is, I believe, one of the most firmly held tenets of anthropologists that where Hamite and Semite have intermingled it is the latter strain which predominates in language, custom, and racial characteristics in general.

There are, however, exceptions to this as to nearly every rule, and one of them is to be found among the medieval Beja of the Sudan. Although for hundreds of years the descendants of Arab immigrants from the Hadramaut and Egypt were the dominant force in the Atbai, yet in nearly every respect they are indistinguishable from the indigenous Beja among whom they settled.

At a date never precisely determined, but certainly in the Days of Ignorance prior to the Moslem era, and most probably about the end of the sixth century A.D. sections of a Himyarite tribe from Shihir in Southern Arabia found its way across the Red Sea and settled in the Atbai and possibly also further south in the vicinity of Sinkat and Erkowit.

It is probable that their arrival found the nomadic Beja tribes of that area in a more than ordinary state of flux and confusion because, not so many years before, their domination of the southern Thebaid between Ibrim and Assuan had terminated with their decisive defeat by Silko, King of the Nuba, who had ejected them from their riverain settlements and thrown them back into the inhospitable deserts from which they had come.

Crippled temporarily as a fighting power the Beja relapsed into an anarchic period of petty inter-tribal wars and disputes in which they had ability to harm none but themselves. The newcomers were not, therefore, annihilated or driven into the sea as they might have been, but were able to survive and further to improve their position by marriage with the daughters of local chiefs.

Then by reason of the matrilinear system of succession still practised among the Beja their sons succeeded to tribal leadership, and by virtue of this and a superior culture were able to

establish themselves as a dominant aristocracy, partly Arab in blood, ruling over a very much larger number of indigenous Beja serfs.

The newcomers were described as Hadareb, a local corruption of Hadarma (inhabitants of the Hadramaut) and it is quite probable that they were also one and the same people as the Bellou (derived from the Tu-Bedawie *belawiet*=to speak a foreign tongue).

They are so referred to by the anonymous historian of the Amara and by Idrisi, though the name does not appear to have come into general use until about the end of the fourteenth century, when the Bellou are found struggling unsuccessfully for survival against the newly emerged and aggressive tribe of Hadendowa.

Further study of admittedly obscure and conflicting evidence leads me firmly to the conclusion, and in this I am supported strongly by local tradition, that the Bellou were in fact the Hadareb at a later stage in their history.

But while they established a political and social autocracy in the Atbai the Hadareb at the same time lost almost completely their racial individuality in adoption of Beja language, habits and religion, which at that time was a very nominal sort of Christianity.

Late in the sixth century they had been converted by the mission sent to Nubia by the Empress Theodora, but it is to be believed that their observance of the new religion was neither very thorough nor very strict, and they did in fact at this time worship a great variety of gods: Isis, whose statue they had once been allowed to remove from Philae for adoration in their desert fastnesses; Mandulis, for whom the Romans had built a temple at Talmis; and Min, possibly Apollo, the god of thunder.

A very considerable number also were still pagans, worshipping devils, and very much under the awe-inspiring demoniac influence of their shamans. Writing very much later, at the end of the ninth century, the Arab historian and geographer, Ya'qubi, gives a description of a Beja kingdom which he calls Tankish, lying between Assuan and Khor Baraka, containing gold and emerald mines, and inhabited by Hadareb and their very much larger serf community, the Zenafiq.

The capital of the kingdom was Hadjr or Dherbe, lying in the gold country between Kus and Aidhab on the coast, and it does not seem too fanciful to identify this with Derheib in the Wadi Allagi where the remains of medieval strongholds may still be seen.

About A.D. 850 after an interval of nearly three hundred years, the Beja went raiding again into Egypt with the result that the Tulunid sultans sent against them a series of expeditions in which they were defeated and compelled to acknowledge the Sultan's suzerainty. A further result of thus calling down upon themselves the attentions of the rulers of Egypt was the renewed exploitation of the ancient gold workings in their hills.

The Wadi Allagi mines were re-opened in 878, and there followed for some years a steady influx of freebooting Arab tribes, mainly of the Rabi'a, the Beni Tamim, and the Mudr, who fought ferociously among themselves for the mastery of the mines. Final victory went to the Rabi'a who had allied themselves to the Beja by marriage with Hadareb wives, and were successful in persuading them to abandon Christianity for Islam, but who were otherwise

racially assimilated as easily and as completely as their Himyarite predecessors had been before them.

From the various accounts of Arab travellers and historians such as Ibn Selim, Masoudi, Ibn Jubayr, Ibn Batuta, and others, it is possible to piece together a very general picture of conditions in the Atbai in this the heyday of Hadareb rule.

It is a picture not very different from that of the present day. There were a great number of petty tribal sections each under its own chief, leading a pastoral nomad existence each within the limited orbit of its own well-fields and grazing grounds, and only vaguely admitting the paramountcy of the Hidirbi, the chief of the Hadareb.

They were expert camel masters, but seem also to have owned considerable numbers of cattle, much admired for their colour and yield of milk, and in time of war the Hidirbi could assemble a small force of Hadareb cavalry, and a much larger one of camel-mounted spearmen recruited from the Zenafig.

From twentieth century survivals among the Beni Amer it is possible also to have some idea of the relationships of the Hadareb and their serfs. The latter were camel or cattle herdsmen, paying tribute and otherwise ministering to the needs and comforts of their masters, supplying whatever animals or produce they might from time to time require, and enabling them to live a life of indolent ease.

Serfs might be transferred like chattels from master to master, but they might not be bought and sold, and in the rare event of a serf killing a Hadarbi compensation took the form of the transfer of the offender and five of his kinsfolk to the family of the deceased. Serfs might own property, but their social inferiority was emphasised by certain outward signs—they might not ride a horse, use riding saddles on their camels, or carry swords, though it does not appear that inter-marriage of Hadareb with serf women was so strictly forbidden as later on among the Nabtab aristocracy of the Beni Amer.

Serf obligations to their masters were thus considerable, but in return they benefited by patronage and protection, which in those days of constant tribal warfare and ferocious blood feuds were benefits of no little value.

Judging by the great wealth which the Sultans of Egypt were able to extract from the gold and emerald mines of the eastern deserts a very considerable amount of treasure must also have found its way into Hadareb hands, yet despite it all they seem never at any time to have risen much above the level of desert nomads, and have left behind them no discernible traces of their existence, a most remarkable fact when it is remembered that for nearly eight hundred years they were masters of the Atbai with its wealth of gold and emeralds, and that for much of that time also they had control of one of the richest ports of medieval times.

This was Aidhab, whose ruins are still to be seen on the coast not far north of Halaib, an unlovely spot, where water was scarce, and food and fuel not much more plentiful, yet nevertheless in its day one of the most important ports of the known world, being the terminus of the Far East trade with Egypt and the west, as well as being the main pilgrim port for north Africa, much as Suakin is today.



Its trade was sufficiently lucrative for the Sultan to maintain an agent there for the collection of port dues of which, however, he was able to secure only a third, the remainder being collected by the Hidirbi. Ibn Jubayr, who spent several months there in the hottest part of 1283, describes it as lacking in all forms of amenity, such water as was available being less agreeable than thirst, and the inhabitants an unpleasant breed of no regard.

Even so he is much less critical of them than Maqrizi who states tersely that they were brute beasts rather than men, and that no human characteristics were therefore to be expected of them.

What between its climate and the unscrupulous greed of its inhabitants, who fleeced the pilgrims by every known device, Aidhab must have been as near an approach to hell on earth as makes no difference, and it is no wonder perhaps that the graveyards on the landward side of the dunes are as extensive as they are, and that legend marks it as the spot where Solomon was wont to imprison refractory demons.

About the middle of the fourteenth century the fortunes of the Hadareb in the Atbai began to decline as the mines became exhausted, and trade and the pilgrim traffic began to move to other more convenient ports.

They no longer had ability to exercise such strict control over their subject peoples, and the end of the century saw the emergence of the Beja tribes which we know today, the Beshariin, the Hadendowa, and the Amara whose first struggles were for freedom from Hadareb authority.

The end came finally early in the fifteenth century. The Beshariin claim to have driven them from the northern Atbai about this time, and in 1426 Aidhab was destroyed by Bars Bey, the Mamluke Sultan of Egypt, as punishment for the plunder of a caravan on its way to Mecca.

The Hadareb fled south and, if Leo Africanus is to be believed, suffered final annihilation at the hands of their trade rivals, the Arteiga of Suakin. This may be so, but it seems nevertheless that a section of them managed to maintain themselves in the glens and hills round Sinkat and Erkowit until once more driven south beyond Khor Baraka by the Hadendowa, who refer always to their opponents in these early tribal wars as the Bellou.

Beyond Khor Baraka they were able to survive and retain their feudal system intact until late in the sixteenth century when they suffered a crushing defeat at Asaramaderheib at the hands of a Fung, or more probably an Abdullab, army.

The broken remnants fled to the Samhar (the coastal plain behind Massawa) where their descendants still remain; and their position as overlords of a large serf population was usurped by a contingent of Sha'adinab/Ja'aliin who had fought in the Abdullab army, and who remained on as masters of the country, and gave to themselves and their newly conquered dependants the generic name of Beni Amer.

The name Hadareb still survives, firstly as applied to the Tu-Bedawie-speaking sections of the Beni Amer, possibly because they were remnants of former Hederib serfs, and secondly, in slight amended form, Hadarba, to all traders of Arabian origin, the Sheikh of the Arteiga in Suakin for long being known as the Emir el Hadarba.

There seems little doubt that the three great tribal confederations mentioned above have for their ancestors the one-time serf peoples of the Atbai who were under Hadareb rule. So anxious have they been, however, to claim Arab ancestry, the Beshariin and Amarar from the Aulad Kahil, and the Hadendowa from the Ashraf, that their true tribal antecedents have been forgotten, and their knowledge of their pre-Islamic history is more than usually vague and incorrect.

And yet despite the infusion from Arabia of not a little of the blood both of Joktan and of Ishmael they remain in nearly everything essentially and unmistakably a Hamitic people.

Source: Carolina Rediviva University Library  
Uppsala - Sweden