

# Struggle for the Control over the Red Sea



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*Ottoman British Relations  
in Sudan 1821-1914*

By

Kenan Aksu and Süleyman Kiziltoprak

**Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing**



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This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN: 978-1-0364-4961-2

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-4962-9

With heartfelt gratitude, I dedicate this book to my wife, Aylin, and my children, Timur and Idil, whose unwavering support and encouragement have been my constant source of strength.

—Dr Kenan Aksu

I dedicate this book to my wife, Ayşe Amine, and my children, Fahri Selman, Melih Cihan and Serra Naz, for their endless support and encouragement.

—Professor Süleyman Kızıltoprak



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## INTRODUCTION

# SUDAN'S HISTORICAL TAPESTRY: UNRAVELLING THE OTTOMAN AND BRITISH INFLUENCE (1821–1914)

This meticulously researched book seeks to shed light on the intricate historical fabric of Sudan, with a particular focus on the transformative period spanning from 1821 to 1914. During this epoch, Sudan witnessed the arrival of the Ottoman Turks, a pivotal event that later on, set the stage for intense power struggles between the Ottoman and British Empires. The ensuing dynamics would shape Sudan's destiny and today reverberate across its socio-political landscape.

The mid-16th century marked the advent of the Ottoman Turks in the region, leaving an indelible mark on Sudanese history. Their presence catalysed significant shifts, from economic structures to cultural norms. Most notably, the groundwork for modern Sudan as a nascent state began to take shape during this era. As historians dig into the archives, they recognize the Ottoman legacy as a critical precursor to Sudan's modern statehood.

However, the narrative extends beyond the Ottoman influence. The British arrival in Sudan in 1880s introduced yet another chapter of transformation. Their presence sparked socio-political and cultural clashes, leaving a permanent imprint on the nation. The British legacy reverberates through Sudan's institutions, legal systems, and even language. English, as a lasting legacy, remains woven into the fabric of Sudanese society.

Yet, this book does not merely dwell on the Ottoman and British epochs. It also casts a retrospective glance at Sudan's pre-Turkish history, tracing the contours of its civilization, trade routes, and indigenous cultures. Furthermore, it contextualizes Sudan within the broader African context, exploring the continent's tumultuous encounter with colonial powers. By weaving together these threads, readers gain a comprehensive understanding of Sudan's past—a rich tapestry of resilience, conflict, and cultural fusion.

In essence, "Sudan's Historical Tapestry" invites readers on a captivating journey through time, unravelling the intricate threads that have shaped this remarkable nation. Whether you are a seasoned historian or a

curious explorer, this book promises to illuminate Sudan's past with depth and nuance.

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed an intensification of geopolitical rivalries, with the British and French vying for control over Egypt. This period, especially second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, also saw the British expanding their influence in East Africa. These historical events set the stage for the intricate power dynamics that unfolded in Sudan and the Red Sea regions.

The Ottoman Turks had long established their presence in the Red Sea region, including Yemen and Egypt. Their rule left an ineradicable imprint on the cultural, architectural, and administrative landscape. Yemen and the Red Sea Trade Routes were significant to Ottoman trade avenues. Yemen served as a vital link between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Ottoman control over Yemen facilitated maritime commerce, connecting Africa, Arabia, and Asia. The bustling port cities of Aden and Mocha thrived as centres of trade and cultural exchange. Egypt on the other hand was undeniable as the Jewel of the Ottoman Empire. Egypt, with its fertile Nile Delta, ancient heritage, and strategic location, became a prized possession for the Ottomans during Selim II's reign. Cairo, with its grand mosques and bustling bazaars, stood as a testament to their legacy. Yet, beneath the surface, tensions simmered as local rulers navigated between Ottoman suzerainty and aspirations for autonomy. In this intricate historical backdrop, Sudan and the Red Sea regions emerged as theatres of power struggles, cultural fusion, and shifting allegiances. The echoes of these events reverberate through the modern contours of the region, reminding us that history's threads are woven across time and space.

British and French rivalries in Egypt reshaped the regions fortune during the colonisation of East Africa. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed a fierce contest between two European powers—the British and the French—for dominance over Egypt. Their strategic interests converged upon this ancient land, which held the key to vital trade routes, access to the Red Sea, and the gateway to the Indian subcontinent. It started with the French targeting Ottoman Egypt in 1798.

In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte led a daring expedition to Egypt, aiming to disrupt British trade routes and challenge British naval supremacy. The French forces landed on Egyptian soil, capturing Cairo and Alexandria. However, their dreams of establishing a lasting empire were short-lived. By 1801, British and Ottoman forces had expelled the French, leaving behind a legacy of cultural exchange and archaeological discoveries.

The Ottoman Egypt's ruler, Kavalalı Mehmet Ali Paşa (from now on Muhammad Ali Pasha as he is known in the English speaking world),

and other Turkish speaker elites around him established the Turkish presence in Sudan in 1821 in the name of the Turkish Sultan Mahmud II with a major campaign which started the “*Turkiyya*”<sup>1</sup> period in Sudan's history. Muhammad Ali was of Albanian origin but, as Collins puts forward

“The decisive components of the expedition and Sudan's subsequent administration derived from Turkish-speaking elites. The Sudanese themselves described the conquerors as “Turk” (Turks) and the established regime as “*Turkiyya*” (the Turkish regime).”<sup>2</sup>

The Ottoman Empire became interested in the Red Sea coast of today's Sudan in the early 16th century. Hadım Süleyman Pasha landed troops at Kuseyr Port on his return from the Yemen expedition. They wanted to secure this region. Özdemir Bey, of Mamluk origin, was tasked with annexing the surrounding areas to the Ottomans. He subjugated some Arab tribes. He captured the castles of İbrim and Der and the cities of Mağrak and Say. He had a castle built in Say. He established a district called Sevakın in the lands of the Func Sultanate and connected it to Egypt. The task of suppressing the rebellions in the region was given to the governor of Egypt.

Özdemir Bey was appointed governor of Yemen. He became the Habesh commander in 1554. He founded the Habesh Province in 1555. He first chose the island of Sevakın (Suakin afterwards) as the capital. When Massawa was captured in 1557, the provincial center was moved here. Suakin became a sanjak attached to Massawa. Özdemir Pasha also conquered Ethiopian lands. He died in Debarva in 1560. His tomb was later moved to Massawa. His son Osman Pasha succeeded him. He regained the lost territories and re-established the Ottoman order. In the 19th century, the provincial center was moved back to Suakin. Sanjak beys who had served in Egypt were usually assigned to the region. Sometimes administrators were sent from Istanbul.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the advancements made by the Turks in the region, European powers remained determined to assert their influence over Egypt, which was strategically positioned at the crossroads of imperial ambitions. The period known as the *Turkiyya*, characterized by Ottoman rule, persisted until the official British intervention in Egypt and Sudan in 1882. Motivated by the desire to protect their interests in India and ensure control over the

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Shoup, *The Nile: An Encyclopaedia of Geography, History and Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2017), 194.

<sup>2</sup> Robert, O. Collins, *A History of Modern Sudan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmet Kavas, *Sudan*, (TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi, Vol. XXXVII, İstanbul, 2009), 461.

Suez Canal, the British launched a military intervention. The ensuing Anglo-Egyptian War of 1882 culminated in the British occupation of Egypt. Although Egypt continued to be nominally part of the Ottoman Empire, it effectively became a “veiled protectorate” under British dominance. Due to its strategic role as a vital maritime link between Europe and Asia, the Suez Canal assumed paramount importance and became a driving force behind further British expansion into East Africa.

As the 19th century unfolded, the British Empire cast its gaze beyond Egypt. The second half of the century witnessed a remarkable expansion of British influence in East Africa. During the period known as the Scramble for Africa, which followed the Berlin Conference, European powers penetrated every corner of Africa. Driven by economic interests, missionary zeal, and strategic considerations, the British were able to establish footholds along the East African coast. They sought control over key ports, such as Suakin, Mombasa and Zanzibar, to facilitate trade and secure maritime routes. The construction of the Uganda Railway (1896-1901) further solidified their presence inland. While rushing to control the region the French and the British had to face off each other. One of these moments of high tensions took place in Fashoda, situated along the White Nile, known as the Fashoda Incident (1898).

In the heart of East Africa, near the Nile River, a tense standoff occurred between British and French forces. The Fashoda incident epitomised imperial rivalries. Both nations claimed the region, and their clash nearly escalated into war. Diplomatic negotiations eventually defused the situation, but it underscored the high-stakes competition for African territories. The faceoff between the British general Horatio Kitchener and the French expedition led by Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand ended peacefully due to the clever manoeuvres of Kitchener. Upon landing at Fashoda, Kitchener, clad in an Ottoman Army uniform, confronted the French tricolour flag fluttering in the breeze by raising the Turkish flag at a respectful distance. The symbolism was unmistakable—the clash of empires was underway. His actions spoke volumes and Ottoman-Egypt’s claim to Fashoda symbolically became non-negotiable, even as French ambitions loomed large. Although it ended peacefully, the Fashoda incident exemplified the late 19th-century scramble for African territories. Diplomats in London and Paris exchanged tense missives, fearing that a single misstep could ignite war between two European powers. Ultimately, a delicate compromise was reached. The French withdrew from Fashoda, recognizing British dominance in Sudan, while Kitchener’s measured assertiveness secured Ottoman Egypt’s foothold. As it will be discussed at length later on in this book, the Fashoda Incident left an lasting mark on

colonial history. It underscored the fragility of imperial ambitions, the clash of national pride, and the delicate dance of diplomacy. Kitchener's calculated moves on that distant Nile riverbank reverberated across continents, shaping the contours of Africa's destiny.

While explaining the imperial rivalries over its land, this book also investigates the Mahdist movement in Sudan, a significant uprising against the Turkish-Egyptian rule and foreign influence. It highlights key figures like Muhammad Ali Pasha of Egypt and his successors, British General Charles Gordon, who served under the Ottoman rule and then under the British Empire until his death in Khartoum, and their roles in shaping Sudan's history. The narrative further explores the reasons behind the British takeover of Sudan, activities of the Englishman Evelyn Baring, providing a nuanced understanding of the colonial ambitions and strategies in the wider East African regions and the Red Sea, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in November 1869. It will also shed light to the ways in which the Ottoman Empires attempts in trying to keep the imperial powers away from their lands.

This book represents the culmination of rigorous research efforts, drawing upon an extensive array of primary and secondary sources from Türkiye, Britain, Egypt, and Sudan. Our methodology is uniquely characterized by archival investigations, encompassing original documents, use of all reliable literature from prominent scholars such as Holt and Daly's *a History of the Sudan*, Robert o. Collins *Modern Sudan*, Süleyman Kızıltoprak's various works including *Mısır'da İngiliz İşgali*, *Osmanlı'nın Diploması Savaşı*, *Mısır'da İngiliz İşgali; Osmanlı'nın Diploması Savaşı: 1882-1887*, *II. Abdülhamid'in Dış Politikası ve Taşöz Operasyonu*, *Important Documents Of Ottoman Egypt ; From Muhammad Ali to Husayn Kamil-15 Numaralı Mühimme-i Mısır Defteri: Mehmed Ali Paşa'dan Hüseyin Kamil'e Mısır Siyasi Tarihinin Önemli Belgeleri*, Muhammad wad Dayfallah's *Tabaqat*, *Funj Chronicle* by Ahmad ibn al-Hajj Abu Ali (Katib al-Shuna), Eva Hope's, *Life of General Gordon, the Christian Hero*, H.C.Jackson's, *Black Ivory and White or the story of El Zubeyr Pasha, slaver and Sultan as told by himself*, Kegan Paul's, *Suakin, 1885, Being a sketch of the campaign of this year, an officer -Major Gambier Parry- who was there*, Edward Gliechen's, *The Anglo Egyptian Sudan*, Phillip Warner's *Dervish: the Rise and Fall of an African Empire*, Winston S. Churchill's *The River War: An Account of the Re-conquest of the Sudan*, Edward Gliechen's *The Anglo Egyptian Sudan*, Anthony Nutting's *Gordon of Khartoum: Martyr and Misfit*, Carl Christian Geigler (by Richard Hill)'s *The Sudan Memoirs of Carl Christian Giegler Pasha*, Charles Royle's *the Egyptian Campaign 1882: the Mahdist Campaign, Sudan 1884-98; the*

*British Army at war in North Africa during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Ali Salih Karar's *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan* and visual materials, such as photographs and drawings, maps, and first-hand interviews with the Sudanese people.

By synthesizing insights from diverse perspectives, this volume seeks to address a notable gap in existing scholarship concerning the intricate time period in Sudan's history under scrutiny. The core focus of our research lies in unravelling the complex interplay between the Ottoman and British powers over Sudan. Through meticulous analysis, we aim to contribute significantly to the historiography of this critical period. Our exploration examines the multifaceted dynamics of imperial rivalry, shedding light on Sudan's past with scholarly rigor. By bridging historical lacunae, this work invites readers to engage deeply with the intricate tapestry of events that shaped Sudan's destiny.

This volume is composed of six chapters, each of which investigates distinct facets of Sudan's historical narrative. The chronological scope of the book spans from the early history of Sudan, prior to 1821, and extends up until the onset of World War I in 1914. The following is an elaborated synopsis of each chapter:

**Chapter one** focuses on the history of Sudan in General for the reader to understand the dynamics of the past to be able to evaluate the developments after 1821. The inaugural chapter of this book provides a comprehensive overview of Sudan, elucidating its geographical, socio-political, and cultural dynamics until the arrival of the Ottomans to the region in 1821. Through a meticulous examination of historical records and ethnographic studies, this section offers a nuanced understanding of Sudan's pre-colonial landscape, shedding light on its indigenous societies, economic structures, and geopolitical significance within the broader African, Red Sea and Mediterranean contexts.

**Chapter two** briefly contextualizes the beginnings of European colonial incursions in West Africa. This chapter is included with the aim of furnishing the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the underlying motives and far-reaching impacts of colonization across the entirety of Africa. By delving into the early European colonization's in Western Africa, encompassing the endeavours of Portuguese, British, and French powers, this segment serves as a crucial contextual backdrop for comprehending the broader colonial dynamics that unfolded across the African continent. Through an examination of colonial archives, historical narratives, and scholarly analyses, this chapter elucidates the multifaceted motivations driving European colonial enterprises in Africa, ranging from economic exploitation and geopolitical rivalries to civilizational ambitions and



ideological justifications. Moreover, it critically assesses the enduring legacies of colonization on African societies, economies, and politics, thereby providing essential insights into the complex historical processes that have shaped the contemporary African landscape. It complements the reader's understanding of the African landscape prior to the emergence of Ottoman and British rivalry in the Nile Valley and Red Sea regions. Furthermore, it underscores the interconnectedness of European colonial enterprises in West Africa with broader global dynamics of trade, commerce, and imperial expansion, thus providing crucial context for understanding the subsequent power struggles in these strategically significant areas.

**Chapter three** embarks on an exploration of the Ottoman arrivals to the African continent, tracing their initial forays into the region during the 16th century and then focusing on their penetration into the Red Sea and Sudan. The Ottoman Empire's engagement with Africa was multifaceted, marked by both military expeditions and commercial ventures aimed at expanding the Empire's influence, preventing western colonisation of East Africa (especially the Muslim regions) and securing strategic footholds. This chapter meticulously examines the process of Ottoman expansion into Sudan, which gained momentum notably in 1821 with the establishment of what came to be known as the **Turkiyya**. Drawing upon a rich array of Ottoman archival materials, this section unveils the intricate dynamics of Ottoman-Egyptian administration in Sudan, shedding light on the complexities of governance, economic policies, and cultural assimilation efforts under Ottoman suzerainty.

The Ottoman-Egyptian administration's initiatives in Sudan were shaped by a confluence of internal and external factors, reflecting the interplay of imperial ambitions, local power dynamics, and regional geopolitics. Notably, the chapter elucidates the pivotal role of British officers, among them General Charles Gordon, whose involvement in Sudanese affairs left an indelible imprint on Ottoman-Egyptian policies and strategies. General Gordon's service as governor-general of Sudan from 1877 to 1880 and his succeeding return in 1884 in response to the Mahdist uprising exemplify the intertwining trajectories of Ottoman and British ambitions in the Nile Valley. Through a nuanced analysis of primary sources and historical accounts, this chapter unveils the intricate dynamics of Ottoman presence in Sudan, charting its evolution from initial engagements to the establishment of administrative structures and the implementation of economic policies. Moreover, it interrogates the broader implications of Ottoman rule for Sudanese society, economy, and culture, shedding light on the complexities of cultural incorporation, religious

dynamics, and socio-political transformations under Ottoman suzerainty. By unravelling the complexities of Ottoman and British interactions in Sudan, this chapter offers crucial insights into the entangled histories of imperial rivalry and colonial encounters in the Nile Valley, thereby enriching our understanding of the broader historical processes that have shaped the eastern part of the African continent.

**Chapter four** of this work examines the inception of British interests in the Red Sea and East Africa, particularly catalysed by geopolitical shifts following the Crimean War and the initiation of the Suez Canal's construction. The mid-19th century witnessed a confluence of factors propelling British involvement in the region, including strategic imperatives driven by the burgeoning significance of maritime trade routes and colonial ambitions aimed at securing dominance over key strategic nodes. The struggle for control between the Ottomans and the British intensified against the backdrop of European power dynamics, exacerbated by the de facto independence of the Egyptian Khedives from Istanbul and the weakening of the Ottoman Empire following its defeats in the Ottoman-Russian wars of 1877-78.

The aftermath of the Ottoman-Russian wars saw a scramble for influence over Ottoman-controlled territories, with British and French ambitions converging on lands such as Cyprus and Egypt. This period witnessed a significant escalation in European rivalries, as major powers sought to capitalize on the perceived vulnerabilities of the Ottoman Empire. The strategic importance of Egypt as a gateway to the Indian Ocean trade routes further heightened the contestation between European powers, with British and French interests converging on the Nile Valley and the Red Sea littoral.

This chapter meticulously chronicles the multifaceted contestation between the British and the Ottomans for dominance over the Red Sea and East Africa regions while also evaluating the French intensions in the region. Through a nuanced analysis of strategic manoeuvres, diplomatic negotiations, and military engagements, this segment elucidates the intricate dynamics of imperial rivalry and geopolitical competition that unfolded between the two powers. Furthermore, it underscores the divergent objectives and competing agendas driving British and Ottoman interests in the pursuit of maritime supremacy and territorial expansion, thereby enriching our understanding of the complex historical processes shaping the Red Sea and East Africa regions during the late 19th century.

**Chapter five** of this scholarly exploration offers a meticulous scrutiny of Sudan in the aftermath of the commencement of the so-called Veiled Protectorate of the British in Egypt, a pivotal period initiated in 1882.

This chapter enquires the far-reaching consequences of the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 and its profound impact on Sudanese affairs, marking a significant juncture in the region's historical trajectory.

Following the British intervention in Egypt, spearheaded by figures such as Evelyn Baring (Lord Cromer) and entailing the deposition of Khedive Tewfik (1879-1892), Sudan found itself increasingly enmeshed in the broader currents of British imperial administration and geopolitical strategy. The return of General Charles Gordon to Sudan in 1884, amidst the backdrop of the Mahdist uprising, and then the eventual murder of him further underscored the centrality of Sudan within British colonial ambitions and the broader dynamics of imperial rivalries in the Nile Valley.

Through a comprehensive examination of literature, this chapter meticulously charts the transformation of Sudanese governance structures, economic policies, and social dynamics in the wake of British colonial rule. The establishment of British administrative apparatuses, epitomized by the appointment of British officials such as governors and commissioners, heralded a profound reconfiguration of Sudanese statecraft and governance practices. Additionally, British economic policies, including the promotion of cash-crop cultivation and the expansion of commercial infrastructure, engendered fundamental shifts in Sudanese agrarian economies and social relations.

Moreover, this chapter critically investigates the emergent patterns of resistance and collaboration among Sudanese elites and indigenous populations in response to British imperial policies and interventions. The imposition of British colonial rule elicited a spectrum of responses from Sudanese society, ranging from outright opposition and armed resistance to forms of accommodation and collaboration with colonial authorities. The emergence of nationalist movements and anti-colonial struggles, epitomized by figures such as the Mahdi and his followers, reflects the complex dynamics of colonial encounter and indigenous agency in shaping Sudanese responses to British imperialism.

By unravelling the intricate dynamics of British colonial rule in Sudan, this chapter offers crucial insights into the enduring legacies of colonialism on Sudanese society, politics, and culture. Furthermore, it enriches our understanding of the broader historical processes underpinning the entangled histories of imperialism, resistance, and socio-economic transformations in the modern Sudanese context.

**Chapter six** focuses on the departure of Ottomans from Sudan and the British ascendancy and total control of Sudan after the beginning of WWI in 1914. The final chapter chronicles the denouement of Ottoman influence in Sudan and the ascendance of British hegemony in the region.

By drawing upon diplomatic archives, testimonies of contemporary observers, and military records, this segment examines the circumstances leading to the Ottoman withdrawal from Sudan and the ensuing consolidation of British control. Moreover, it scrutinizes the enduring legacies of Ottoman-British rivalry in shaping Sudanese state formation, identity politics, and socio-cultural dynamics in the post-colonial era.

Overall, this book offers a holistic and meticulously researched narrative of the protracted Ottoman and British rivalry over Sudan, elucidating its multifaceted dimensions and enduring legacies within the broader trajectories of imperial expansion and colonial encounters in the modern era.

# CHAPTER 1

## SUDAN:

### A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW UNTIL THE OTTOMAN ARRIVAL IN 1821

The word "Sudan" is the plural of the Arabic word *sud*, meaning "black".<sup>4</sup> Since the 8th century, Islamic geographers have called the vast African region extending from Senegal and Gambia on the Atlantic coast to the western borders of Abyssinia and south of the Great Sahara "Bilad al-Sūdān" (Land of the Blacks). The present-day Republic of the Sudan (Jumhūriyyat as-Sūdān) is situated in the eastern part of this region.

Bilad al-Sūdān is bordered by the Great Sahara and Libya to the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, Abyssinia to the east, and approximately 10° north latitude to the south. The region is geographically divided into three main parts: Western Sudan (Senegal, Gambia, Upper Volta and Central Niger basins), Central Sudan (Lake Chad surroundings) and Eastern Sudan (upper basin of the Nile, i.e. Egyptian Sudan). French Sudan includes today's Mali, Niger, Chad and the Central African Republic; Anglo-Egyptian Sudan includes today's Republic of Sudan.

Sudan's current borders were shaped in the late 19th century during the Khedivate of Egypt. Accordingly, it extends from Nubia in the north to the Great Lakes region in the south, stretching eastward to the Red Sea coast and westward to the frontier with Chad. Sudan has had strategic importance throughout history thanks to the transportation opportunities it provides north-south along the Nile River and its ports on the Red Sea coast.

According to historians such as PM Holt, MW Daly and Kızıltoprak, Sudan as the name of the country was first used by the Ottoman's after Muhammad Ali Pasha's campaign in the region.<sup>5</sup> As Colburn wrote

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<sup>4</sup> Eva Hope, *Life of General Gordon, the Christian Hero* (London and Felling on Tyne: the Walter Scott Publishing Co. Ltd., 1885), 126.

<sup>5</sup> Süleyman Kızıltoprak, *Mısır'da İngiliz İşgali, Osmanlı'nın, Diplomasi Savaşı 1882-1887* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2010) and PM Holt and MW Daly,

“The Ottoman Empire’s Khedivate of Egypt conquered the independent states of Sennar, Metamma, Dongola, and Darfur between 1820 and 1879, creating a ‘united state,’ connected to Ottoman Egypt, called Sudan. The earliest use of the term Sudanese was in 1826, after the Turkish arrival to the country.”<sup>6</sup>

Sudan, with its capital in Khartoum, is one of Africa's largest countries, sharing borders with Egypt to the north, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, and Uganda to the south, the Red Sea, Eritrea, and Ethiopia to the east, and Chad, the Central African Republic, and Libya to the west. However, by Sudan we don’t exactly refer the Modern Sudan and its boundaries but rather a region below Egypt and Libya, covering some parts of modern Chad, stretching all the way down to Congo, Uganda and Kenya in the map of Africa.

In the historical context of Sudan, the period spanning from 1820 to 1885 is characterized by Ottoman rule, during which Sudan was a part of Ottoman Egypt. This period in Sudan’s history is known as “*Turkiyya*.”<sup>7</sup> As well as creating a centralized administration, Turkiyya, established military garrisons, constructed telegraph lines, and collected taxes in the north.<sup>8</sup> Following this era, the reins of power were seized by the forces of Mahdi Muhammad Ahmed (1844-1885). This following phase, lasting seventeen years from 1881 to 1898, is often referred to by historians as the “*Mahdiyyah*” period in Sudanese history.<sup>9</sup> The final phase of foreign control commenced in 1885 with the onset of British rule, which persisted until Sudan’s proclamation of independence in 1956. These successive periods of foreign domination have indelibly shaped the socio-political landscape of modern Sudan. Here we look at background to Sudan’s pre-1821 history very briefly.

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*A History of the Sudan from the coming of Islam to the present day*, Fifth Edition, Harlow: Pearson, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Henry Colburn, *the New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, New Burlington Street, London, 1826, (1814-1845), Vol 16. The New Monthly Magazine 1826: Vol 16 Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive

<sup>7</sup> The *Turkiyya* (*al-Turkiyya*, Arabic: التركية) was the common Sudanese term for the period of Ottoman-Turkish rule in Sudan, lasting from the conquest in 1820 until the Mahdist takeover in the 1880s.

<sup>8</sup> Ann Mosely Lesch, *Sudan: contested National Identities* (Oxford: Indiana University Press, 1998), 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> R. S. Bray, *Armies of Pestilence: The Impact of pandemics on history* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2020), 122 and Shoup, *The Nile: An Encyclopaedia of Geography*, 193.

The historical trajectory of Sudan extends to the Pharaonic Era, wherein it emerged as the largest and notably geographically diverse state on the African continent. However, following South Sudan's declaration of independence in 2011, Sudan's territory diminished and its population in 2024 was approximately 49 million.

The region now known as Sudan was first inhabited by African communities during the Mesolithic era (approximately 30,000–20,000 BCE), particularly in the area surrounding present-day Khartoum. These early groups lived as hunters and gatherers, producing pottery and, in later phases, tools fashioned from ground sandstone. By the close of the Neolithic period (New Stone Age, circa 10,000–3,000 BCE), they had begun domesticating animals, marking a shift towards more settled forms of life. Additionally, these early populations maintained contact with the pre-dynastic societies of the lower Nile Valley in Egypt, indicating early cultural and economic exchanges between the two regions.

Sudan's history was profoundly shaped by its early relations with ancient Egypt. By the close of the 4th millennium BCE, rulers of Egypt's First Dynasty had extended their control into Upper Nubia, south of Aswan, bringing with them strong elements of Egyptian culture that began to influence the indigenous populations settled along the Nile. In the centuries that followed, Nubia continued to experience repeated Egyptian military incursions, further entrenching Egyptian presence and cultural impact in the region.

## **Nubians**

Nubia, recognized as one of the earliest cradles of civilization in Africa, was renowned for its abundant gold reserves. It served as a critical conduit for the transfer of luxury commodities like incense, ivory, and ebony from their sub-Saharan origins to the more advanced societies of Egypt and the broader Mediterranean world.

The military prowess of Nubian rulers was significantly bolstered by archers of extraordinary skill. Due to their skills in archery, the Egyptians called Nubia the Land of the Nine Bows and some Egyptian rulers hired them at their courts as security personal. These Nubian rulers eventually ascended to power in Egypt, maintaining their reign for approximately a century (from roughly 744 to 656 BC). Even today, remnants of their grandeur persist in the form of cities, shrines, and imperial pyramids in contemporary Egypt and Sudan, marking the locations where rulers of Nubia once held sway. In fact, there is more pyramids in Sudan than Egypt.

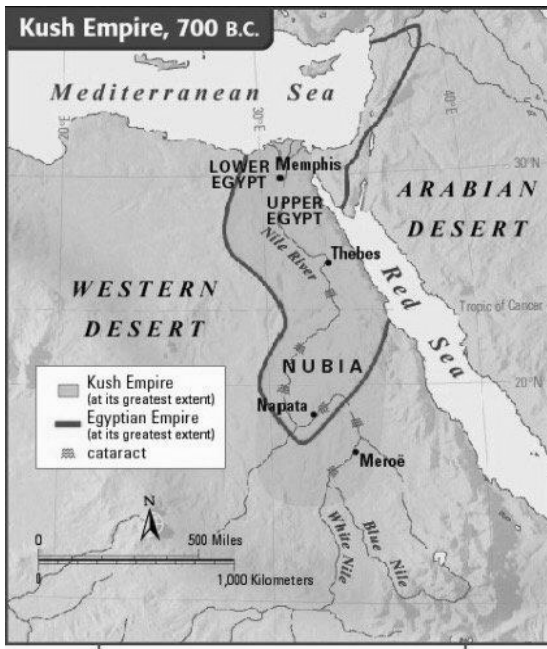


### *Nubian Pyramids*

Around 5000 BC, African communities from what is now known as the Sahara began migrating towards the Nile in Nubia, bringing with them the craft of pottery-making. Initially hunters and herdsman of large animals, they gradually transitioned into farming and fishing. Over time, the region saw an influx of new settlers from the south, resulting in a diverse amalgamation of African cultures in Nubia.

Winding northward through the arid landscape, the Nile served as a crucial artery of life for the Nubian peoples. Along its banks, they grew staple crops such as grains, lentils, peas, melons and dates, though livestock—particularly cattle—held the greatest economic and social value, often serving as indicators of status. In the surrounding desert terrain, Nubians also exploited natural resources, including gold and carnelian. Trade with Egypt to the north was conducted primarily through barter, with Nubians offering goods like cattle, ivory, carnelian, gold, animal hides, hardwoods, incense, and dates in exchange for essentials and luxuries such as grain, linen, oils, beer, wine, and crafted items.





*Map of Ancient Nubia*

The history and culture of ancient Nubia are primarily revealed through archaeological excavations and the analysis of sites and petroglyphs uncovered in the region. However, the art and writings of the Nubians and their contemporaries also provide valuable insights. Ancient Egyptian records offer extensive information about Nubia's history, reflecting the deep and complex ties that existed between the two regions. In addition, inscriptions and architectural remains in the Egyptian language, commissioned by Nubian rulers who ascended as pharaohs during the 25th Dynasty around 750 BCE, further enrich this historical narrative. During the Meroitic period, around 200 BC, Nubians developed alphabetic writing systems. While the Meroitic language remains largely undeciphered apart from isolated words and phrases, considerable information about Meroitic Nubia is available through the art and literary accounts of Greek and Roman sources, whose empires bordered Nubia after 330 BCE.

The name "Nubia" first appeared during the Roman era, though its precise etymology is still debated. One theory connects the term to 'nwb', the ancient Egyptian word for gold, reflecting the region's rich mineral resources. Another view suggests it derives from 'Noubades', the name used

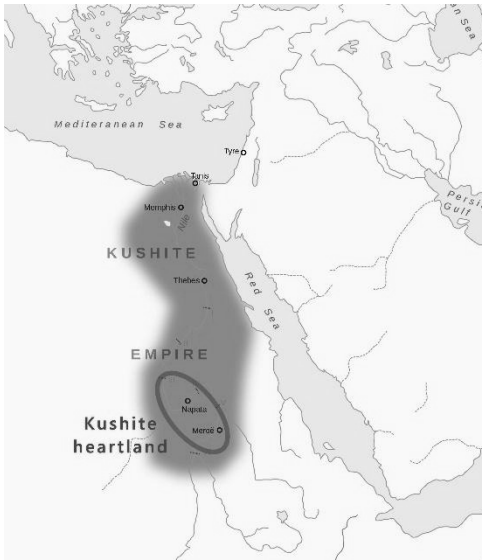
by Greek writers to describe a group that settled in northern Nubia in the 4th century CE.



*Sphinx of Taharqo, 25th Dynasty, From Temple T at Kawa, Sudan kept at the British Museum*

For nearly two thousand years, the area lying south of the Nile's First Cataract was referred to as Kush—a name that appears in ancient Egyptian inscriptions as well as in classical and biblical sources, though it remains uncertain whether it originated from the local population. The Kushites founded powerful kingdoms, beginning with one based in Kerma (circa 2000–1650 BCE), followed by prominent centres at Napata (800–270 BCE) and Meroe (270 BCE–370 CE).

Several Nubian societies have been classified by archaeologists using terms such as A-Group, C-Group, X-Group, and Kerma, named after the nearby modern settlement adjacent to the site of the early Kushite capital. These labels reflect the archaeological framework imposed on distinct cultural phases uncovered during excavations in the region.



*Map of Kingdom of Kushite*

Nobadia, in conjunction with the other two Nubian realms, Makuria and Alodia, succeeded the Kingdom of Kush. Following its inception circa 400 AD, Nobadia embarked on a gradual expansion, overpowering the Blemmyes in the north and incorporating the region between the second and third Nile cataracts in the south. In 543 AD, it embraced Coptic Christianity. Subsequently, in the 7th century, it was subsumed by Makuria under circumstances that remain obscure. By 707 AD, Nobadia had been absorbed by Makuria, its southern neighbour. The specifics of this amalgamation are not known, nor is the fate of the Nobadian royal lineage.

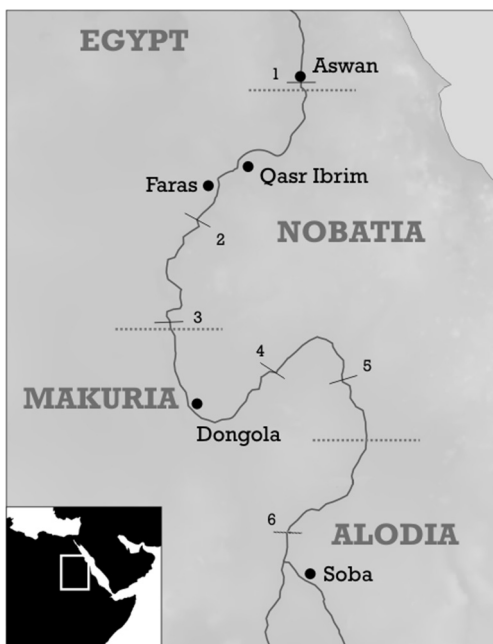
The unification likely transpired prior to the Muslim conquest starting after 642 AD with the First Battle of Dongola where the Muslim Rashidun armies fought the Christian Nubians of the Makuria. Muslim conquest was concluded in the Second Battle of Dongola in 652 AD with a clear Arab victory. Arab historical accounts of the time reference only a single Christian state in Nubia, extending at least as far as Old Dongola suggest there was a unified kingdom. Despite the merger, Nobadia seems to have maintained a certain level of autonomy within the new state. It was governed by an eparch of Nobadia, who also held the title of the Domestikos<sup>10</sup> of Pakhoras. Initially, these positions were appointed, but

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<sup>10</sup> Responsibility of civil and military office in ancient Greece, Rome and Byzantium.

they appear to have become hereditary in later periods. Records discovered at Qasr Ibrim (Fort Ibrim), an archaeological site near lower Nubia located in modern Egypt, attest to a figure wielding considerable authority.

In medieval Arabic historical accounts, Nobadia is frequently referred to as al-Maris (they meant Lower Nubia which included Aswan). The eparchy of Nobadia persisted as a fundamental component of the Kingdom of Makuria until the latter's demise, as corroborated by a document from 1463 AD that mentions an eparch named Teedderre.



*Nubia*<sup>11</sup>

By the 14th and 15th centuries, much of present-day Sudan had been gradually settled by Arab nomadic groups. From the 16th to the 19th centuries, the Funj Sultanate emerged as the dominant power in central and eastern Sudan,<sup>12</sup> while the Sultanates of Darfur and Wadai<sup>13</sup> held sway in the west. The Sultanates of Bagirmi and Bornu also exerted considerable influence in the broader western regions of Sudan. Ottoman relationships

<sup>11</sup> SimonP- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Christian\\_Nubia.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Christian_Nubia.png), CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=761534>

<sup>12</sup> Also referred to as Funjistan or the Sultanate of Sennar, after its capital Sennar.

<sup>13</sup> Recorded as Uday in some Ottoman and Arabic sources

with the above-mentioned kingdoms were developed via Ottoman North Africa, in particular Libya and Egypt.

Ottoman engagement along the Barbary Coast—covering parts of what are now Algeria, Tunisia, and western Libya—commenced in the 16th century. Remarkably, the formal beginning of Anglo-Ottoman relations also dates to similar time periods. Historians agree that the Ottoman-English relations started with the correspondence between Elizabeth I and Murad III in 1579. In May 1580, English merchants were granted trading rights within Ottoman-controlled ports and waters across the eastern Mediterranean and the Barbary Coast of North Africa, which led to an Ottoman pledge of safe conduct for their commercial activities. This document is usually considered equivalent to a grant of trading privileges to the English.<sup>14</sup> During this period, the Ottoman Empire backed corsair leaders—referred to as “reis” in Ottoman Turkish—operating along the North African coast. These commanders waged war against Charles V, the King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, acting on behalf of the reigning Ottoman sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent.

One of the most famous of these commanders was the legendary Barbaros Hayreddin Pasha, (known as Barbarossa or Hızır Reis, d. 1546).<sup>15</sup> The sultan bestowed upon him the title of Beylerbeyi in recognition of his support in naval campaigns alongside the Ottoman fleet. In 1533, Barbarossa was elevated to the position of commander of the imperial navy with the title Kapudan Paşa (Captain Pasha), marking the beginning of a lasting collaboration between the Ottoman naval forces and former corsairs—a pattern that persisted into the seventeenth century. In 1551, under the leadership of Grand Vizier Sinanüddin Yusuf Pasha (d. 1553) and with strategic guidance from seasoned corsair and former governor of Djerba Turgut Reis (d. 1565), the Ottoman navy successfully expelled the Knights of St. John from Tripoli. Subsequently, Murat Ağa was appointed the first governor-general of Tripolitania. He later gained local reverence, becoming associated with a Sufi order, and the mosque he constructed in Tajura, near modern-day Tripoli, was eventually transformed into a Sufi shrine.

With the support of the Barbary corsairs, Istanbul ultimately secured supremacy in the western Mediterranean during the sixteenth century—a period some historians have referred to as the era of the “Ottoman Lake.” Yet this dominance proved fleeting. By the 1570s, the empire's influence had begun to wane, mirrored by the diminishing power

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<sup>14</sup> Christine Woodhead, University of Durham, <https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/christine-woodhead-england-ottomans-barbary-coast-late-sixteenth-century>

<sup>15</sup> Mostly known in Türkiye as Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa, his tomb is in Istanbul.

of Istanbul-appointed governors in Tripolitania, as efforts to modernise the military and administrative structures failed to keep pace with contemporary challenges.



*Murat Ağa mosque in Tajura*

As the 17<sup>th</sup> century dawned, Istanbul's shaky control over the Barbary Coast waned significantly, paving the way for local "Deys"<sup>16</sup> (rebels) who assumed rule of the region, officially on behalf of the Ottoman Sultan. These deys were deeply dependent on the trans-Saharan slave trade and actively participated in the infamous Barbary piracy targeting European and American vessels. This state of affairs continued until 1711, when Karamanlı Ahmed Pasha, also known as Ahmad al-Qaramanli, launched an armed uprising against the ruling dey, Muhammad Khalil ibn al-Ginn. He successfully seized Tripoli and ousted the governor-general appointed by Istanbul. Originally from the Karaman region of Türkiye, Karamanlı Ahmet Pasha established his own dynasty that lasted until 1835 when eventually Ottoman Empire took back the full control of the region. Karamanlı's activities were later copied by Muhammad Ali Pasha of Egypt as he followed the same path. An interesting figure of the Karamanlı dynasty was the Karamanlı Yusuf Pasha who supported piracy toward European and American shipment in the Mediterranean but also expanding Ottoman

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<sup>16</sup> The title *Dey* originates from the Turkish honorific *dayı*, which literally means 'uncle' (specifically, the maternal uncle). However, in local usage, it also referred to a powerful figure or strongman.