

MAGIC VS ACT OF PROVIDENCE:
EGYPTIANS AND JUDAEANS BEFORE THE FACE
OF FOREIGN ENEMIES IN ARAB LITERATURE

Crucial epochs in history of every country provide us with unique, authentic narratives, which cannot be interpreted just as a list of more or less adequate historical events and facts. Such critical moments inspire much more complicated texts which describe events of supernatural or fantastic character, especially in respect to the defeated side. Gods who help people, powers of nature controlled by the magician or the prophet, magical artefacts used for protection constitute material of such stories. We will concentrate our attention on Egypt and Judea in Arab Mediaeval historical literature: both countries became the victims of stronger ones, and the memories about these catastrophes remained in folklore and historical tradition.

We will talk especially about the first millennium BC, full of events both for Syro-Palestinian region and for Egypt: in 743 started the third Newassirian invasion to the Eastern Mediterranean, in 701 Assirian king Sinahherib found himself in Palestine, and a bit later, in 671 another Assirian king Assarhadon took Egypt. After the fall of Assiria and the rise of Babylonian empire Syro-Palestinian region became the centre of struggle between Egypt and Babylon and suffered the raid of the latter with its well-known siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. The Persian invasion to Egypt in 525 became the next step.

These invasions were usually more or less disastrous for defenders: neither Egypt, nor Judea were able to hold the adequate resistance to Assirian, Babylonian and Persian troops.

But some peculiarities in the process of saving and transmitting of the traditions about such crucial epochs are worth taking into account: some folklore and semifolklore fragments, retained by Arab authors Masudi, Tabari and ibn Abd al-Hakam, depict, contrary to historical truth, more or less successful resistance of defenders against intruders. The most striking feature is that these successes are not of military character and were obtained not by means of force (a motif of military impotence of defenders is always presented quite vividly, in accordance to historical truth), but by supernatural means – magic power or direct divine intervention. Moreover, some of such texts narrate us not about the defeat but on the contrary about the victory and infamous retreat of enemies outside the country. This leads to direct contradiction with historical truth; of course the wish to decorate and diminish relevant tragic events for the benefit of the native country is rather natural, but the methods of such decorating and distortion of historical reality are of significant interest: on the one hand these methods correlate with specific

cultural traditions to which their authors belong, and on the other they have something in common throughout all ages and cultures.

First we will deal with images of Egyptians in Arab literature. The ninth century author Ibn Abd al-Hakam and the tenth century author Masudi in slightly different ways tell the story about Egyptian Queen Daluqah. After the death of Pharaoh and his men in the Red Sea during the pursuit of Moses and Judeans noble, women had chosen one of them, Daluqah, to rule over Egypt. She was famous for her intelligence, knowledge and experience. Having fears of invasions by neighbour kingdoms she encircled all the land of Egypt with a wall with watch-towers. Moreover, the queen asked the sorceress Tadura, who served the previous Pharaoh, for creating a magical protection for the country, saying that after the death of the Pharaoh and his army there was no other hope for Egypt than in magic. Tadura erected the temple in Memphis and created the images of enemy horses, oxen, donkeys, ships and soldiers and said, that if an enemy would have reached Egypt by land or by sea, the images on the relevant destination would move, and damage dealt to images would match the real magic damage to enemy's armies. When the enemies decided to use the military weakness of Egypt and tried to invade it this magic was activated, and neighbours stopped their pretensions and bewared it.¹

In Masudi's version, in case of attack the images disappeared under the earth and the same occurred with enemy's troops. This author also claims that Delukeh erected the wall to protect her son, who was fond of hunting wild animals, Nile beasts and the traps of neighbouring kings". In this version the queen used magic herself, without the help of a magician.²

Our second case is contained in Jakut's geographical dictionary, it is connected with the deeds of Delukeh's sons: when the Greeks invaded their territories, they joined together the Western Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea by means of magic, and because of this many cultivated lands became flooded.³

The third relevant example is to be found in total compendium of Arab historical tradition written by Makrizi, in the fifteen century, it is also dedicated to the deeds of the sorceress queen: when the neighbour king started to threaten her land, she made a special magical artefact and dropped it into

¹ Абд ар-Рахман ибн 'Абд ал-Хакам. *Завоевание Египта, ал-Магриба и ал-Андалуса* [Abd ar-Rahman ibn Abd al-Hakam, *Conquest of Egypt, al-Magrib and al-Andalus*], Moscow, 1985 (henceforward: *Абд ар-Рахман ибн 'Абд ал-Хакам*), p. 46-48.

² Ali b. Husayn al-Masudi, *Les praires d'Or (Kitab Murug ad-dahab)*, texte et traduction par C. Barbier de Meynard et Pavet de Courteille, Paris, 1861-77, vol. 2, p. 398-400.

³ А.С. Норов, *Исследования об Атлантиде* [Exploration of Atlantes], Sankt-Petersburg, 1854, p. 6.

Nile, the river had overflowed, different illnesses had spread, crocodiles and scorpions became much more dangerous for people.⁴

As a supplementum we can use two examples contained in Greek historical works, it is stories about two rulers – Setos and Nektaneb. The first is cited in Herodotus's account [Herod. IV. 141]: when Assyrians led by their king Sinahherib came to invade Egypt, the king, who has quarrelled with his military elite before, appealed to gods for help, and in the morning, the Assyrian army found itself with all the leather ammunition cut and eaten by mice. Thus the intruder was forced to retreat. The second story kept by Pseudokallisthenes [Pseudo-Callisthenes I. 1-3] tells us about the king Nectanebo, who had a special magical bowl. When enemy's ships and vessels were reaching Egypt, he filled it with water put the figurines of ships and sailmen, and figurines of Egyptian fleet always won the battles. But once upon the time he looked at the bowl and saw, that the gods of Egypt support enemy's fleet, not Egyptian one. Having realised his defeat, he left the country.

As we can see, all these plots have some common features. First, the king or queen uses magic in order to protect the country. Second, the same context of situations – the crisis, the threat of being invaded, military weakness expressed implicitly or explicitly. For security and protection, the ruler uses magic as a last decisive weapon, and in the majority of cases it works and thus danger is prevented. But in one case – in the story of Nectanebo, historical Nectanebo II, the last independent ruler of prepersian Egypt, even magic seems to be useless to save the country from the catastrophe of foreign occupation.

Let's turn to the examples of Judeans folklore, kept by Arab authors. It is not necessary to introduce the history of Exodus, fixed not only in the Old Testament, but in the Arab historical tradition as well. When Egyptians have overtaken Judeans, Moses prayed to his lord. As we remember, in the version of Old Testament Moses made waters opened before his people, pursued by the Egyptian army, and then rained it down on the latter. Arab versions also mention fire, which covered water, or the fog, which have hidden Judeans, or special attention is paid to Gabriel's help, or the staff of Moses is depicted as the most important artefact.⁵

The next relevant plots are mentioned in "The History" of Tabari, ninth century. When the army of one of forward-Asian rulers started for subjugation of Jerusalem, the prophet Isaia prayed, and a risen send storm destroyed all the army. This story is told to another king, Sinahherib, as edification and in order to prevent him from the same raid. But Sinahherib turned the deaf ear to this

⁴ Al-Makrizi, *Description topographique et historique de l'Égypte*, in *Memoires publies par les membres de l'Institut français d'archeologie orientale*, vol. 1, Cairo, 1895, p. 105-110.

⁵ Абд ар-Рахман ибн 'Абд ал-Хакам, p. 41-46.

advice, and his expedition to Jerusalem finished shamefully – he and his nobles were lead tied throughout the city the whole day, and then left for “a whole world must respect Jerusalem.”⁶

The next relevant story can be read in Tabari’s work: when Nebuchadnezzar invaded Egypt, he had found the throne of Solomon. But when he tried to seat down of it, the lions on the pedestal of the throne smashed his legs and damaged it, and no one dared to try it again.⁷

Thus, as we could see, the Egyptian and Hebrew plots have some specifying features: the main figure of Judaeen historical folklore in discussion is a prophet, and his main method is a pray, a request for divine intervention and help, which method succeeds due to the prophet’s closeness to God – contrary to relevant Egyptian plots where the main figure appears to be a king or queen who uses magic being a wizard. This deep difference confirms that the stories in discussion are not inventions of Arabs, but Arabian perceptions and preservations of Egyptian and Judaeen legends themselves. Thus we see there not Arabian concepts on Egyptian or Judaeen history, but Egyptian and Judaeen images of their own history respectively.

The historical background is the same in both cases – it is a crisis, caused by some external threat. Both sets of plots, Egyptian as well as Judaeen, have strictly compensational character, because in all cases when we know the historical event which has inspired respective story (Sinahherib’s, Nebuchadnezzar’s and Persian western campaigns), Judaeans and Egyptians were in fact undoubtedly defeated by invaders. Nevertheless the reflections of these events in historical folklore of defenders appear to be not so hopeless for them due to compensational modifications which they add to the historical core of the corresponding plots. These modifications show two quite different variants. The first is applied in such cases when the historical defeat was so heavy and catastrophic that it was fully remembered as such by the people and could not be just rejected (e.g., the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar). In these cases the heaviness of catastrophe was not diminished in historical folklore, but some additional “revenge stories” were created (e.g., the legend about Nebuchadnezzar’s attempt to sit on the Solomon’s throne which caused only damage to Nebuchadnezzar himself). The second variant is realised when the historical defeat was not so hard or when it was only one in the consequence of similar defeats. In these cases historical folklore would diminish such a defeat or even re-interpret it and present it as a victorious success achieved in especially hard circumstances by some exotic way (e.g. the story about Setos, where the mice damage the equipment of

⁶ Tabari Muhammad ibn Jarir, *Chronique de Tabari*, traduite par M. H. Zotenberg, vol. 1, Paris, 1867-74, p. 488-503.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 488.

Sinahherib's Assirian army thus causing it to retreat, while in real history Sinahherib has defeated Egyptians on a battle-field).

Thus we can trace that historical folklore reacts not only to the very fact of defeat of people to which it belongs, but to the degree of this defeat as well. The most crucial defeats are not diminished in national memory, but on the contrary are preserved there as a great tragedy; yet the national feelings take their partial revenge in fabrication of stories which would somehow discredit the success and reputation of winning foes. As for lesser defeats, they often come being fully "re-written" in historical folklore which ends with depicting them as national victories, in strict contradiction to reality. But even in this case folklore can not avoid fully the historical truth - the victories in question are presented as caused by some magic or supernatural factors, not military ones.

ANASTASIA A. BANSCHIKOVA

Institute for African Studies,
Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow

MAGIE VERSUS PROVIDENȚĂ.
EGIPTENII ȘI EVREII ÎN RAPORT CU INVADATORII STRĂINI ÎN
LITERATURA ARABĂ

Rezumat

Scopul lucrării este de a reliefa atitudinea a două popoare, egiptenii și evreii, în fața invadatorilor pe baza mărturiilor păstrate în literatura arabă medievală. Sursa principală de inspirație, folclorul, a fost fructificată în operele unor scriitori arabi precum Masudi, Tabari și Ibn Abd al-Hakam. Ideea centrală a acestor scrieri constă în atribuirea victoriilor unor cauze supranaturale, precum puterile magice sau intervenția divină directă. Conform narațiunilor respective, de fiecare dată când cele două popoare erau în pericol de a fi cucerite, conducătorii lor făceau apel la magie și la intervenția divină ca arme esențiale de apărare în lupta contra invadatorilor.