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The Egyptian prototype of "King John and the Abbot."—
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ONE of the oldest Arabic historical works is Ibn 'Abd el-Ḥakem's *فتوح مصر*, or *Conquest of Egypt*, composed near the middle of the ninth century A. D. Its author, 'Abd er-Raḥmān ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abd el-Ḥakem, a native of Egypt and the son of a man of high rank, died in the year 257 A. H. (871 A. D.). He was thus a contemporary of Ibn Sa'd (d. 230), Belādhori (d. 279), and Ṭabarī (d. 310). His book, which is of about the same extent as Belādhori's *Futūḥ el-Buldān*, is a collection of the traditions relating to the Mohammedan conquest of Egypt, Africa, and Spain. It thus furnishes a welcome supplement to the other early Muslim histories and tradition collections, which give comparatively little space to these countries. Though containing a great deal that is worthless, and written by one who possessed few of the qualities of a good historian, it is, nevertheless, a work of great importance. I hope soon to publish an edition of it based on the three manuscripts in London and Paris, which I have already copied and collated.

Although this *Conquest of Egypt* has been extensively used by the later Mohammedan historians, yet it contains some very interesting material which has apparently not been used by other writers. An example of the kind is the accompanying anecdote, which has never been published, and, if I am not mistaken, has never been brought to the attention of occidental scholars.

In one of the introductory chapters of his book, Ibn 'Abd el-Ḥakem gives a list of the Egyptian kings who reigned in Mem-

phis, beginning with the grandson of Noah, and extending down to the time when the country came under foreign rule. Most of these kings are mentioned only by name; a few, however, are the subjects of more or less extended tradition or anecdote. One of these latter is the king whom the historian identifies with Pharaoh Necho, of Old Testament fame (2 Kings xxiii. 29-35). The spelling of the name of this king, in its Arabic form, varies considerably; the variation being plainly due to the fact that in the oldest sources the diacritical points were usually omitted. In the manuscripts of the *Futūḥ Miṣr* the name is generally unpointed. Where points are given, the form is Baulah, بولاه (attested by all three manuscripts). Mas'ūdī (ed. Meynard, ii. 410) has بلونه; Abu 'l-Mahāsīn (ed. Juynboll, i. 67) has يولوه, يولوه, and other (unpointed) forms; Maqrīzī (Būlāq, 1854, i. 143) and Ya'qūbī (ed. Houtsma, i. 211) read نوله, Naulah; and so on. The tradition relating to this king which is given by all these historians—who derive it, apparently, from Ibn 'Abd el-Ḥakem—is the following (quoted from the *Futūḥ Miṣr*): ثم توفّي [مناكيل] فاستخلف ابنه بولاه¹ بن مناكيل فملكهم مائة سنة وعشرين سنة وهو الاعرج الذي سبى ملك بيت المقدس وقدم به الى مصر وكان بولاه قد تمكن في البلاد وبلغ مبلغا لم يبلغه احد من كان قبله بعد فرعون وطعا فقتله الله صرخته داّبته فدقت عنقه فمات .

That is, though 'Baulah' was the most powerful ruler since Rameses II., yet he was so wicked that God at length put a sudden end to his life; or, more exactly, his horse threw him, and the fall broke his neck. This is given by Ibn 'Abd el-Ḥakem as the 'standard' tradition as to the end of his reign. But he adds another tradition, "derived, it is said, from a native sheikh learned in such matters," according to which the king was deposed by his own people. The story which then follows is a most interesting one. Besides being an excellent example of that

¹ Thus vocalized in the old and carefully written manuscript of the British Museum.

class of popular tales in which the interest centers in the shrewd answers given to a series of hard questions, it is plainly a genuine bit of Coptic folk-lore, which had been current in the land long before the Arab invasion. It has, moreover, as we shall see, some striking parallels in the European folk-lore of the middle ages. The Arabic text here given, which is now published for the first time, is based on the excellent London manuscript of the *Futūḥ Miṣr* (MS. Brit. Mus. *Stowe Or. 6*; No. 520 in Rieu's *Supplement*).

قال واخبرنى شيخ من اهل مصر من اهل العلم أن
الخلوع الذى خلعه اهل مصر انما هو بؤله وذلك انه دعا
الوزراء ومن كانت الملوك قبله تُجرى عليهم الارزاق والجوايز فكانت
استكثر ذلك فقال لهم انى اريد ان اسألكم عن مسائل فان
اخبرتمونى بها زدتُ فى ارزاقكم ورفعتُ من اقداركم وان انتم لم
تخبرونى بها ضربتُ (fol. 11a) اعناقكم فقالوا له سَدْنَا عَمَّ شَتَّ
فقال لهم أخبرونى ما يفعل الله تبارك وتعالى فى كل يوم وكم
عدد نجوم السماء وكم مقدار ما تستحق الشمس فى كل يوم على
ابن آدم فاستأجلوه فأجلهم فى ذلك شهرا فكانوا يخرجون فى كل
يوم الى خارج مدينة منف فيقفون فى ظلّ قرموس ينباثون ما
هم فيه ثم يرجعون وصاحب القرموس ينظر اليهم فاتاهم ذات
يوم فسألهم عن امرهم فاخبروه فقال لهم عندى علم ما
تريدون الا أن لى قرموسا لا يستطيع ان اعطله فليقعد رجل
منكم مكانى يعمل فيه واعطونى دابة كدوايتكم والبسونى ثيابا
كثيابكم ففعلوا وكان فى المدينة ابن لبعض ملوكهم قد ساءت
حالته فاتاه القرموس فسأله القيام بملك ابية وطلبه فقال ليس
يخرج هذا يريد الملك من مدينة منف فقال أنا اخرجه لك

وجمع له مالا ثم اقبل القرموس حتى دخل على بولة فاخبره ان عنده علم ما سأل عنه فقال له أخبرني عن عدد نجوم السماء فاخرج القرموس جرابًا من رمل كان معه فنشره بين يديه وقال له مثل عدد هذا قال وما يُدْرِيكَ قال مُرَّ مَنْ يَعِدُّهُ قال فكم مقدار ما تستحقّ الشمس كل يوم على ابن آدم قال قيراطا لأنّ العامل يعمل يومه الى الليل فيأخذ ذلك في أجرته قال فما يفعل الله كل يوم قال له أريك ذلك غدا فخرج معه حتى اوقفه على احد وزرائه الذى اتعده القرموس مكانه فقال له يفعل الله كل يوم أن بذلّ قوماً ويعزّ قوماً ويميت قوماً ومن ذلك أن هذا وزير من وزرائك قاعد يعمل على قرموس وأنا صاحب قرموس على ذابّة من دوابّ الملوك وعلى لباس من لباسهم او كما قال له وأن فلان بن فلان قد اغلق عليك مدينة منف فرجع مبادراً فإذا مدينة منف قد أغلقت ووثبوا مع الغلام علا بولة فخلعوه فوسوس¹ فكان يقعد على باب مدينة منف يوسوس ويهذى فذلك قول القبط اذا كُلم احدهم بما لا يريد قال شجناك من بولة يريد بذلك الملك لوسوسته والله اعلم .

TRANSLATION.

One day the king, who, it seems, grudged his vezīrs their pay, summoned them before him, and said to them: "I will ask of you certain questions. If you can answer them for me, I will add to your pay and increase your power; but if you fail to answer them, I will cut off your heads." They replied, "Ask of us whatever you will." So he said: "Tell me these three things: *First*,

¹ Thus pointed in the London MS.

What is the number of the stars in the heavens? *Second*, What sum of money does the sun earn daily, by his labor for each human being? *Third*, What does God almighty do, every day?" Not knowing what to answer, the vezīrs besought the king to give them a little time, and he granted them a month's respite.

They used therefore to go every day outside the city of Memphis, and stand in the shade of a potter's kiln;¹ where they would consult together in hope of finding a solution of the difficulty they were in. The potter, noticing this, came to them one day and asked them what they were doing. They told him their story. He replied: "*I* can answer the king's questions; but I have a kiln here, and cannot afford to leave it idle. Let one of you sit down and work in my place; and do you give me one of your beasts to ride, and furnish me with clothing like your own." They did as he asked.

Now there was in the city a certain prince, the son of a former king, whom ill fortune had overtaken. To him the potter betook himself, and proposed to him that he should try to regain his father's throne. But he replied, "There is no way of getting this fellow (meaning the king) outside of the city." "I will get him out for you," answered the potter. So the prince collected all his resources, and made ready.

Then the potter, in the guise of a vezīr, went and stood before King Baulah, and announced himself ready to answer the three questions. "Tell me, then," said the king, "the number of the stars in the sky." The potter produced a bag of sand which he had brought, and poured it out before him, saying, "Here is just the number. "How do you know?" demanded the king. "Order some one to count it, and you will see that I have it right." The king proceeded: "How much does the sun earn each day by his work for each son of Adam?" He replied, "One qīrāt; for the day-laborer who works from sunrise to sunset receives that

¹ The word *قربوس*, which is not found in any Arabic Lexicon, and is all but unknown in Arabic literature, is apparently derived from *κεραμείς*, through the Coptic. The only other place where it occurs, a passage in Ya'qūbī's *History* (ed. Houtsma, ii. 489), to which attention was first called by von Kremer, *Lexicogr. Notizen*, 1886, p. 21 (I am indebted to Professor Macdonald for this reference), is in a narrative of Upper Egypt; and the word is there explained as meaning "a potter's oven." In our story it is used both for the kiln and for the potter himself. I hope to discuss the word at length elsewhere.

amount." He then asked, "What does God almighty do every day?" "That," answered the potter, "I will show you tomorrow."

So on the morrow he went forth with the king from the city, until they came to that one of the king's vezîrs whom he had made to sit down in his place. Then he said: "What God almighty does every day is this; he humbles men, and exalts men, and ends the life of men. To illustrate this: here is one of your own vezîrs sitting down to work in a potter's kiln; while I, a poor potter, am mounted on one of the royal beasts, and wear the garments of the court. And further, such a one (naming the rival prince) has just barred the gates of Memphis against you!"

The king turned back in hot haste; but lo! the gates of the city were already barred. Then the people, led by the young prince, seized King Baulah, and deposed him. He went crazy; and used to sit by the gate of the city of Memphis, raving and drivelling.

And that, adds the narrator, is the reason why a Copt, when you say to him that which displeases him, replies, "You are descended from Baulah on both sides of your family!" meaning the crazy king.

It remains to notice the European parallel already referred to. No student of English literature who reads the foregoing story can fail to observe the close resemblance which it bears to the well-known Old English tale of King John and the Abbot of Canterbury; a tale which appears in one form or another in many parts of Europe.

In the English ballad, which Prof. Child has edited and annotated, King John is introduced as a powerful but unjust ruler, who

". . . ruled England with maine and with might,
"For he did great wrong, and maintein'd little right."

He decides that his Abbot of Canterbury is much too rich and prosperous, and announces his purpose to cut off his head; but finally agrees to spare his life on condition of his answering three questions which the king propounds. The questions are: 1. How much am I, the king, worth? 2. How long would it take me to ride around the earth? 3. What am I thinking? The abbot regards himself as a dead man; but is finally rescued by a shepherd, who goes to the king disguised as the abbot, and answers

the three questions without difficulty. The king is worth twenty-nine pence; since Jesus Christ was valued at thirty. The ride around the earth can be accomplished in just one day, by keeping directly under the sun for that length of time. The answer to the third question turns on the fact of the shepherd's disguise; what the king 'thinks' is this, that the man speaking to him is the Abbot of Canterbury, but he is in reality only a poor shepherd.

For some account of the occurrence of this story, in the same form or slightly varied, in the literature of many of the nations of Europe, see the Introduction to the ballad of King John and the Abbot of Canterbury, in Child's *English and Scottish Ballads*. The most natural explanation of the appearance of such a tale as this in the literature of these neighboring nations, English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Danish, is that it made its way from one people to another by oral and literary transmission. Examples of the kind have always been abundant.

But if I am not mistaken, the European forms of the story are not only all derived from a common source, but their ultimate source is the Egyptian tale. It is true that riddles and hard questions have always played a prominent part in legend and story; that men in all parts of the world think alike; and that tales of this general nature might easily appear quite independently of one another in widely remote places. But in the case before us, the resemblances are too many and too close to be merely accidental. The story of King John and the Abbot is practically identical with that of King Baulah. It is not necessary to argue this point, for the correspondence of the two versions, part by part, is sufficiently striking. The divergences, on the other hand, are only such as we should expect to see. There is, moreover, a fact bearing on the question of the literary transmission which is to be taken into account. This *Futūh Miṣr* of Ibn 'Abd el-Hakem contains one of the oldest and most interesting narratives of the Mohammedan conquest of Spain,¹ as well as of Egypt and Africa. It may therefore be taken as certain that it was well known, and probably extensively circulated, among the Spanish Arabs from the ninth century on. There would seem, therefore, to be sufficient reason for concluding that the Egyptian

¹ Published, with an English translation, by John Harris Jones, Göttingen, 1858.

story of the King and the Potter was brought to Spain in Ibn 'Abd el-Hakem's history; that it became widely popular, and ultimately made its way into all parts of Europe.

In conclusion, it may be interesting to notice a passage in the Jewish Midrash, recently brought to my attention by Professor Siegmund Fraenkel, of Breslau, which closely resembles the third question and answer of our story. In *Bereshith Rabba* § 68, 4 (ed. Wilna, fol. 133^d), Rabbi Yose ben Khalaphta, being asked what God has been doing since the time when he created the world, replies, "He sits and makes ladders, for the purpose of humbling this one and exalting that one, bringing down one and raising up another (יֹשֵׁב וְעוֹשֶׂה סֻלְמוֹת מִשְׁפִּיל לְזֶה וּמְרִים לְזֶה וּמְעַלֶּה לְזֶה וּמוֹרִיד לְזֶה)." This suggests that a popular proverb was the basis of the two replies; but it is possible that the coincidence may be merely accidental. Professor Fraenkel, in his mention of the Jewish parallel, refers to the periodical "Germania (Pfeiffer), xxv. neue Reihe, 288, No. iv." This I have not seen.