

REVIEWS

A CHRONICLE OF BORNU

A Sudanic Chronicle: the Bornu Expeditions of Idrīs Alauma (1564-1576) according to the account of Aḥmad b. Furṭū. By DIERK LANGE. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1988. Pp. 179+71. DM 66.

The Bornu Expeditions of Idrīs Alauma, a chronicle of 1576, describing events of the preceding decade, is the earliest full-length Arabic account from within sub-Saharan Africa. As such, it is of the utmost historical importance. It has long been known, published in one accessible and one rather inaccessible English translation (neither altogether reliable), and in one (again somewhat unreliable, and rare) Arabic text. Now, English and Arabic are together. The Arabic (65 pp., plus two manuscript pages) is beautifully prepared, with scrupulous attention to variant readings between the only two known surviving manuscripts – had Heinrich Barth, visiting Bornu in 1853, not asked for copies to be made for Europe, not a word of Ibn Furṭū would today exist. The Arabic is divided into chapters, and short paragraphs, all numbered for quick English/Arabic cross-referencing. The English translation (75 pp.), amply footnoted, is equally painstaking; there is useful English introductory material (17 pp.), five detailed maps, a gazetteer of identifiable place-names (59 pp. – cross-referencing to specific maps would help here, and perhaps even the inclusion of names as yet unidentified), bibliography, and index (covering all the English except the maps). A glossary of technical terms is promised (p. 23 n. 57) for the forthcoming companion volume on Alauma's Kanem wars. The index is excellent for names and titles; I noticed very few omissions: Kano on p. 51, Sau on p. 129, and Tuareg is misspelt on p. 178. There are no subject entries, e.g. boats, booty, camels, firearms, horses, *jizyah*, mosques, *ribāṭ*. The entire volume is a delight: the detailed sixteenth-century material receives here exactly that meticulous and handsome presentation which its intrinsic value and interest so richly merit: and a fitting European contribution is made, not writing their history for African scholars, but giving them the tools so that they may finish, or at least continue, the job.

Ibn Furṭū develops various major themes, including Islam. Despite high-falutin' Islamic pretensions attributed to Alauma, religion did not interfere much with the serious business of war. Booty and *jihād* illustrate this. War was partly profit-making; booty (*ghanīmah*, *ghanā'im*, *ightinām*, *maghānam*) would be among the longest index entries. Repeatedly the Bornu forces, *ghānimūn*, laden with booty, return cheerfully home. Booty is lawful: full respectability, however, demands careful observance of two sets of regulations. One concerns those from whom booty may be taken: to plunder a Muslim is a heinous offence – there are even instances in law when a man may be killed, but his property remains sacrosanct. Alauma's conscience seems untroubled by such niceties: some enemies were certainly professing Muslims (the people of Kano, and the Tuareg – who (p. 70) swear 'before God (the Most High)'), but the chronicle speaks unashamedly of taking booty from both (pp. 68, 71). The second set concerns the division of booty. This is mentioned, but only (p. 71) on the Tuareg expeditions; we may suspect such unwonted deference to the law, in this case, helped salve the consciences of believers busy looting the property and people of fellow-believers. Once, booty was carried home, and chiefs and guards 'became rich with what they received from the Sultan out of the "sharing" (*khums*) of the booty'. On another

Tuareg expedition, Alauma divided the spoil whilst still in enemy territory, as the law prefers. Obviously, such regulations are exceedingly difficult to enforce, and disregard of legal proprieties agonized the consciences of militant religious leaders. In the nineteenth century, Usuman dan Fodio fretted over the question from whom booty might be taken, while the Sudanese *mahdī* fulminated against those failing to divide it properly. Alauma's apparently very laid-back attitude to all this suggests that his religion sat somewhat lightly upon him, or that his understanding of the finer points was limited.

Much the same applies to *jihād*, holy war. *Jihād* is mentioned frequently (often interchangeably with 'raids' and 'expeditions'), without embarrassment, and with never a hint of the requisite formal preliminaries, such as inviting one's prospective victims to convert, or submit and pay *jizyah*, or fight.

Demography is another crucial theme. There are occasional hints of peaceful mobilization of demographic resources. Amsaka, a fortified town which had long defied Bornu suzerainty, and which was defended with spirited courage until finally overwhelmed by Alauma, was inhabited not by a single tribe, but by a mixed people (p. 58), suggesting, I think, a city of refuge, drawing in volunteers. There is a fascinating account of Bornu peacefully incorporating the hitherto refractory Bīnāwa (pp. 81-2 – though to be sure Lange (n. 27) doubts some of these details). Vastly more frequent are references to slave-raiding, undertaken 'with the mercy of the Benefactor' (p. 58); men were killed, none knowing 'the number of the slain except God (Most High)' (p. 71), women and children became booty, the Muslims rejoicing 'at this sublime favour, with universal delight' (p. 91). Such a divinely-ordained and differentially assisted immigration scheme has many parallels in African history, and needs no special comment. Alauma, however, seems to have overstepped the limits. A chieftain captured by a Bornu officer was killed by Alauma (p. 91); when the friendly ruler of Mafate handed over many boatloads of prisoners, Alauma had them all killed 'without one being left' (p. 94); Alauma first dispersed the Sau (or So)-Gafata, who had surrendered at Damasak, in widely separated settlements (a more humane and sensible policy, followed successfully by some of Alauma's predecessors – p. 154, the gazetteer), but then reversed this, sending troops to massacre them (no mention here of any women-and-children exemptions) at each location on a single appointed day. There was another survivor-less Gafata massacre (again, no suggestion that these were men only), within the main Bornu war-camp (pp. 51-2). Lange thinks these were prisoners; but Alauma and the Muslims, returning from a rather distant expedition against Kano, had to take the camp by surprise at night, suggesting rather that the Bornu fortifications had been left empty, and were then occupied by local people, an interesting sidelight on the small scale and rather unelaborated nature of even Alauma's militarism. Sometimes military action seems designed to cow people into submission within the Bornu sphere (pp. 74-5), but more often to drive troublesome elements out. I have set exam questions, asking undergraduates if Alauma was really outstanding, or simply a run-of-the-mill Bornu king favoured with exceptional P.R. Re-reading the chronicle, now made so wonderfully accessible, I am assailed by an uneasy suspicion that Alauma *was* unusual, not so much as a statesman, but as a Bornuese Stalin, intoxicated by religious megalomania, hyped up by a sycophantic chronicler, and indulging in frantic blood-letting which made little demographic sense.

Similar excess appears in Alauma's military innovations. Some were sensible, including improved mobility through boats and camels, but the chronicle emphasizes much more a scorched-earth policy, burning crops and (something disapproved in Islamic law) felling trees. Alauma's overall policies seem all too likely to provide him sometimes with a depopulated wasteland of burnt stumps. Incidentally, anyone fascinated by the early impact of firearms must read Ibn

Furtū: guns were sometimes used, occasionally significantly, more often (as in the famous siege of Amsaka) only marginally; but on most campaigns the musketeers are unmentioned – in Kanem, indeed, they seem to have seen no action (p. 71 n. 9).

An admirable achievement; we await the Kanem companion.

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