



BRILL

# An Embassy from the Sultan of Darfur to the Sublime Porte in 1791

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## Abstract

This article presents documents relating to the embassy sent by Sultan ‘Abd al-Raḥmān of Darfur to the Ottoman Sultan Selim III in 1791. These include an original Arabic letter which is an unusually early surviving example of sultanic correspondence from the Sahel. The documents permit a new interpretation of the purposes of the embassy, as well as an examination of chancery practice in Darfur, and offer an insight into Darfuri views of the outside world. To aid the analysis, the article compares this letter with a second surviving letter from ‘Abd al-Raḥmān addressed to Napoleon Bonaparte around 1800, of which the Arabic text has not previously been published.

## Keywords

Sudan – Darfur – Sahel – Ottoman empire – diplomatics – correspondence – Arabic

Historiography on Islamic Africa has rarely taken account of Ottoman influence south of the Sahara. Yet from the sixteenth century onwards, the Ottoman empire was a major African power. Quite apart from its occupation of the coastal strip of Sudan and Eritrea, which was constituted the Ottoman province of Habeş, founded in 1555,<sup>1</sup> the empire also extended into the Fezzan,

1 On the Ottoman presence in the Sudan see Cengiz Orhonlu, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Güney Siyaseti: Habeş Eyaleti*. İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Yayınları, 1974; A.C.S. Peacock, 'The Ottomans and the Funj Sultanate in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth

and possibly as far south as the Kawar oasis in northern Niger (figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The Ottomans' interest was in securing access to the trans-Saharan trade, in particular the valuable commodity of slaves, and this brought them into contact with the kingdoms of the Sahel, in particular Bornu (southern Chad and northern Nigeria), with whose ruler Ottoman correspondence is preserved from as early as 1577.<sup>3</sup> The Ottoman presence in the region coincided with the emergence of new Muslim states in the Sahel in the sixteenth century. Neighbouring Habes province was the Funj kingdom of Sinnar, to the west of which lay the newly Islamised state of Tunjur, whose history is extremely murky but which by the seventeenth century had split into the sultanates of Wadai and Darfur.<sup>4</sup> Yet the dealings of these Sahelian states with the Ottomans has remained largely unstudied, as a result of a sparse local source base for these sultanates and a lack of awareness among Africanists of Ottoman materials. Nonetheless, tantalizing hints in the published nineteenth century travel literature attest the existence of links. Gustav Nachtigal, for instance, reported that the sultan of Wadai 'sometimes sends a number of eunuchs to Constantinople, and pious gifts of money to the holy shrines of Mecca and Medina', and 'The sultan in Constantinople is recognised by the people of Wadai as superior to their own'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Nachtigal notes that the sultan of Darfur at the time of his visit in 1874, Ibrāhīm, was recognised as an independent ruler by the Ottomans, to whom he sent an embassy requesting assistance against the Turco-Egyptian advance.<sup>6</sup> The last sultan of Darfur, 'Alī Dīnār (r. 1898–1916), seems to have tried

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Century,' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 75 (2012): 87–111; A.C.S. Peacock, 'The Ottomans in Northeast Africa,' *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of African History* online edition.

- 2 On the Ottomans in Fazzan, which itself had strong links with Hausaland and Bornu, see Ḥabīb Wadā'a El-Ḥesnāwī, *Fazzān under the Rule of the Awlād Muḥammad: A Study in Political, Economic, Social and Intellectual History*. Sebha: The Centre for African Researches and Studies, 1990, esp. pp. 99–134, 229–256; B.G. Martin, 'Kanem, Bornu and Fazzan: Notes on the Political History of a Trade Route,' *The Journal of African History* 10 (1969): 15–27; a further useful general survey of Ottoman-African relations is Ahmet Kavas, *Osmanlı-Afrika İlişkileri*. Istanbul: Kitabevi, 2013.
- 3 B.G. Martin, 'Maī Idrīs of Bornu and the Ottoman Turks 1576–78,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3 (1972): 470–490; Cengiz Orhonlu, 'Osmanlı-Bornu Münasebetine Âid Belgeler,' *Tarih Dergisi* 23 (1969): 111–130.
- 4 R.S. O'Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate: A History*. London: Hurst and Company, 2008, pp. 24–33.
- 5 Gustav Nachtigal, *Sahara and Sudan*, trans Allan G.B. Fisher and Humphrey J. Fisher, vol. 1v, *Wadai and Darfur*. London: C. Hurst and Co, 1971, pp. 175, 193.
- 6 Nachtigal, *Wadai and Darfur*, p. 375; however, the factual accuracy of this claim is somewhat dubious: see O'Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate*, p. 272. See also for evidence of these nineteenth century links from the Ottoman archives, Ahmet Kavas, 'Osmanlı-Darfūr Münasebetleri,' *İstanbul Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 16 (2007): 105–120.



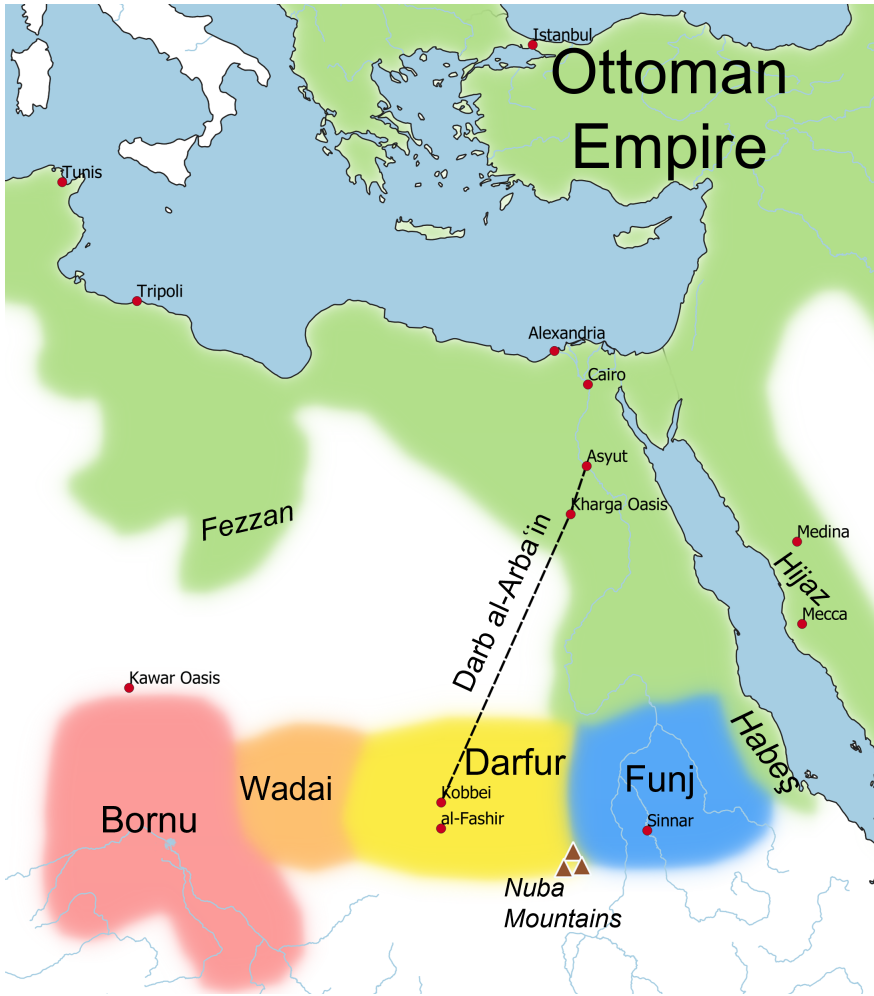


FIGURE 1 Darfur and the Ottoman Empire

to protect himself from British encroachment by becoming an Ottoman vassal, requesting an Ottoman flag be sent to Darfur. Indeed, ‘Ali Dīnār’s response to the Ottoman declaration of jihad at the beginning of the First World War provided the excuse for the British annexation of Darfur in 1916 and the abolition of the sultanate.<sup>7</sup>

7 See İlhan Zengin, ‘Ali Dinar Dönemi (1898–1916) Osmanlı-Darfur İlişkileri,’ *Tarih İncelemeleri Dergisi* 33 (2018): 593–624; also O’Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate*, pp. 295–7; M.W. Daly, *Darfur’s Sorrow: A History of Destruction and Genocide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 109–112.

However, the earlier history of Darfur-Ottoman relations remains largely unstudied. New information is provided by the documentation surrounding an embassy sent in 1791 by Sultan ‘Abd al-Raḥmān of Darfur (r. 1787–1803) to the Ottoman ruler Selim III (r. 1789–1807). The embassy brought two letters, of which the Arabic original of one is now preserved in the Presidential Ottoman Archive in Istanbul, while the second survives only in Turkish translation. A further document from the same archive records the unidentified ambassador’s oral summary of his mission. While the existence of this embassy has long been known, being mentioned by the British traveller W.B. Browne in his account of Darfur published in 1799 and occasionally briefly referred to in the subsequent scholarly literature,<sup>8</sup> the Istanbul documents, which have never previously been published, offer new insights into its purpose. This was not limited to just political relations, but also trade. Moreover, the original Arabic letter of 1791 is an unusually early example of sultanic correspondence from Darfur. Although quite a number of documents have survived from the Darfur sultanate, the majority are land-grants;<sup>9</sup> a handful of examples of sultanic correspondence with other local rulers have been published, but most of these are much later, dating to the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.<sup>10</sup> The 1791 letter sheds new light upon the Darfur sultanate’s self-representation and legitimisation through the titulature and rhetoric deployed and may represent the earliest surviving original diplomatic letter from the Sahel. These features can be better understood when compared with our other surviving example of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s correspondence, a letter sent to Napoleon Bonaparte in 1800,<sup>11</sup>

8 W.G. Browne, *Travels in Asia, Africa and Syria from the year 1792 to 1798*. London: T. Cadell Junior and W. Davies, 1799, pp. 214–5; Na‘ūm Shuqayr, *Ta’riḫ al-Sūdān*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm. Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1981, p. 161; O’Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate*, pp. 68–9; Kavas, ‘Osmanlı-Darfūr Münasebetleri,’ p. 111, who refers to one of the Turkish documents presented here.

9 R.S. O’Fahey and M.I. Abu Salim, *Land in Dār Fūr: Charters and Related Documents from the Dar Fur Sultanate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; similar ground is covered in Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, *al-Fūr wa’l-Arḍ: wathā’iq tanlīk*. Khartoum: Markaz Abū Salīm lil-Dirāsāt 1426/2006 (1st ed. 1975); useful surveys of other Darfur documents are R.S. O’Fahey, ‘Publishing Sudanese Documents: a Preliminary Bibliography,’ *History in Africa* 16 (1989): 383–387; R.S. O’Fahey, *Darfur Historical Documents: A Catalogue* (<https://org.uib.no/smi/darfur/Darfur%20Docs%20Catalogue4%20pdf.pdf>, last accessed 8 January 2021).

10 Lidwein Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding, *After the Millennium: Diplomatic Correspondence from Wadai and Dar Fur on the Eve of the Colonial Conquest, 1885–1916*. Fontes Historiae Africae, Series Arabica X. Michigan State University, 1988; twelve of the documents published in the volume are from Darfur itself and date from 1888 to 1915–6, the others are from Wadai or more minor sultanates in the region such as Dar Masalit. A few further examples of royal correspondence from Darfur are mentioned in O’Fahey and Abu Salim, *Land in Dār Fūr*, pp. 24–5.

11 On the precise date of the letter see the discussion below, note 73.

which is also presented here, and when contextualised with the diplomatic practices of other major Muslim states in the Sahel, Bornu and the Funj sultanate. Darfur lay in between these two powers, and the diplomatic aspects of the letter present interesting parallels to practices in both, as well as other Sahelian states such as Wadai. The present article thus offers a contribution to the study of diplomatics in the Islamic world more broadly by publishing documents from a region often neglected by such scholarship, with previous publications of Darfuri and Sudanese documents concentrating more on their contents than their formal characteristics.<sup>12</sup> Both elements, however, can enrich our understanding of political, diplomatic as well as textual practices. In addition, the article addresses our understanding of the relationship between the written word and power in Islamic Africa,<sup>13</sup> for, as we shall see, not just the words but also the format of the letters conveyed distinct messages about the status of sender and recipient.

### Sultan 'Abd al-Raḥmān's Letter to Selim III: Text and Translation

Below are presented the diplomatic edition and translation of the original Arabic letter preserved in the Presidential Ottoman Archive in Istanbul,<sup>14</sup> of which a facsimile is reproduced in Figures 2 and 3. The letter is catalogued as Hatt-ı Humayun 117/4735/3; the Hatt-ı Humayun series comprises imperial correspondence, both original documents and their Turkish translations and synopses. In the edition, the orthography of the original has been scrupulously respected and there has been no attempt to standardise it. The original letter measures 31.5 x 44 cm and is of thick, high quality unwatermarked paper.<sup>15</sup>

12 A further important publication of Sudanese documents from the period, this time from the Funj sultanate, is Jay Spaulding and Muhammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm (eds), *Public Documents from Sinnār*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989; a handful of eighteenth century Funj documents are also published in facsimile in Sadik el Nur, 'Land Tenure in the Time of the Funj,' *Kush* 4 (1956): 48–53. Funj diplomatics seem to have differed in some respects from those of Darfur.

13 For some recent literature on this topic, see two special issues of journals: Anaïs Wion, Sébastien Barret and Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye (eds), 'L'écrit pragmatique en Afrique.' *Afriques. Débats, méthodes et terrains* 7 (2016); Rémi Dewièrè and Silvia Bruzzi (eds), 'Paroles de Papier.' *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 36 (2019).

14 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi (known until 2018 as the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive).

15 The paper is of the type described in Turkish as *âharlı*, i.e. polished in preparation for calligraphy.

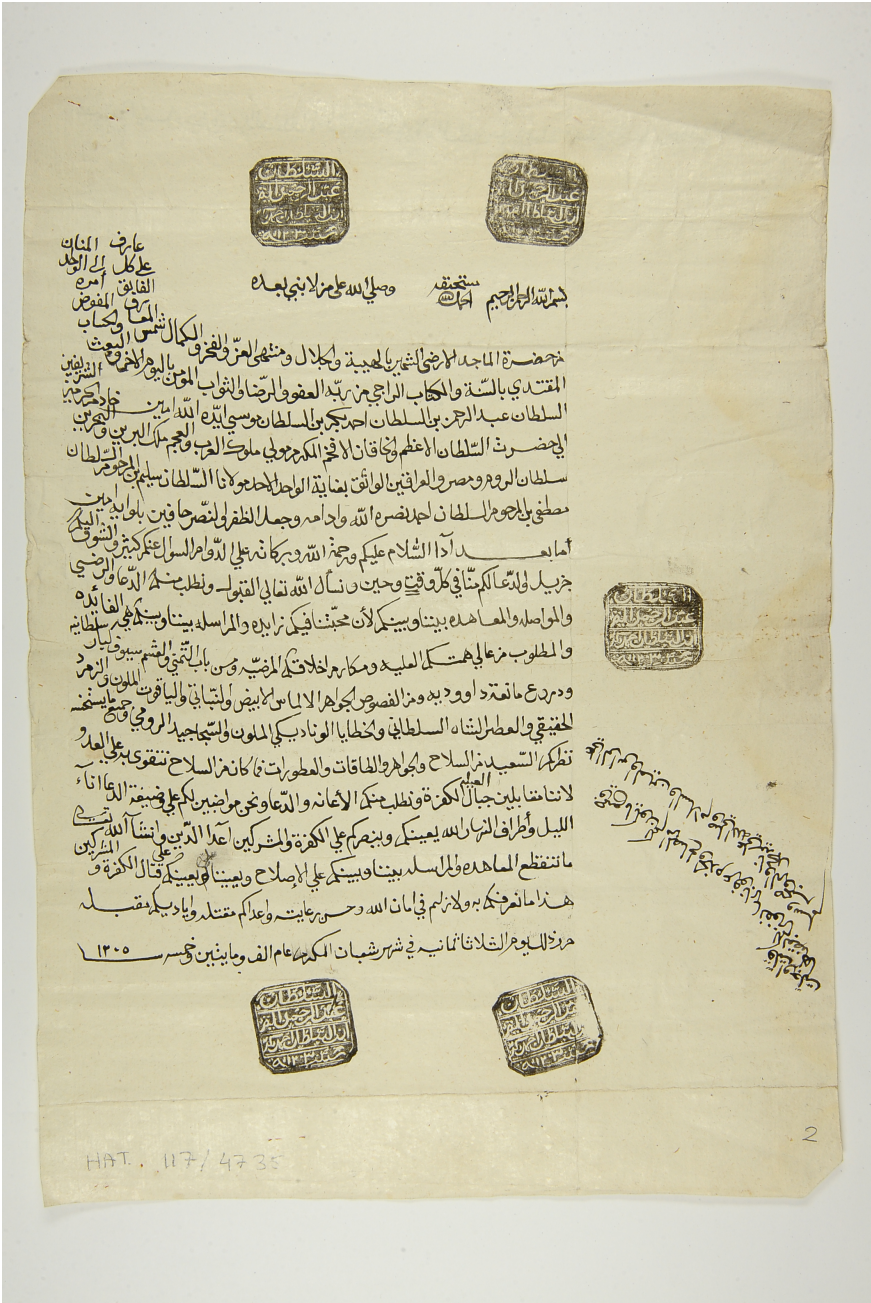


FIGURE 2 Letter from 'Abd al-Rahmān of Darfur to Selim III, recto. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, İstanbul, Hatt-ı Humayun 117/4735/3

HAT. 117/4735



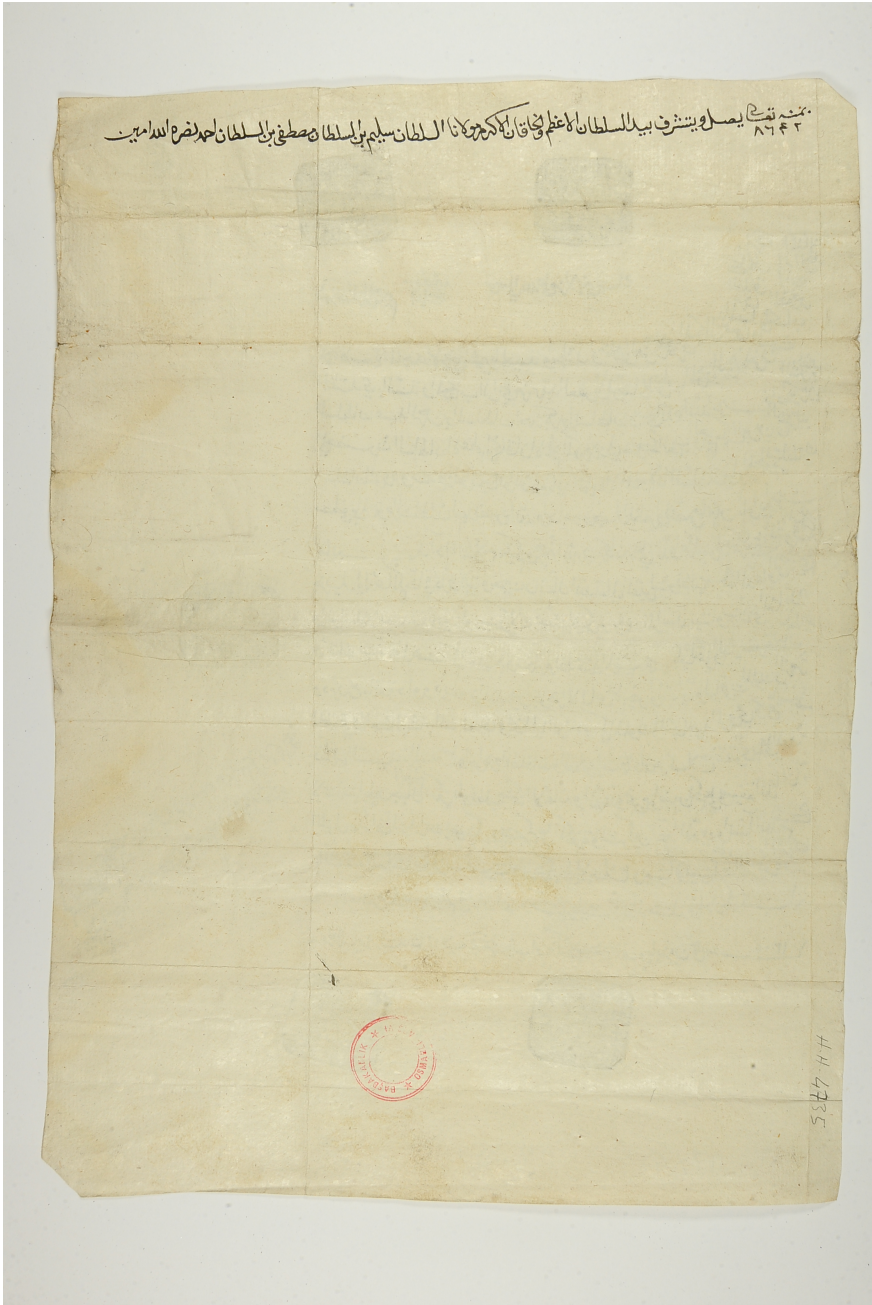


FIGURE 3 Letter from ‘Abd al-Rahmān of Darfur to Selim III, verso. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, İstanbul, Hatt-ı Humayun 117/4735/3

*Recto*

- [seal] السلطان / عبد الرحمن اليتيم / ابن السلطان احمد بكر / سنة ١٢٠٣
- 1 بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم الحمد لله مستحقه وصلي على من لا نبي بعده
- 2 من حضرة الماجد الارضى الشهير بالهبة والجلال ومنتهي العز والفخر  
والكمال شمس المعارف الفائق على كل عارف
- 3 المقتدي بالسنة والكتاب الراجي من ربه العفو والرضا والثواب المومن  
باليوم الاخر والبعث والحساب المفوض امره الى الواحد المنان
- 4 السلطان عبد الرحمن بن السلطان احمد بكر بن السلطان موسى آيده الله  
امين
- 5 الي حضرت السلطان الاعظم والخاقان الاقح المكرم مولي ملوك  
العرب والعجم ملك البرين والبحرين خادم الحرمين الشريفين
- 6 سلطان الروم ومصر والعراقين الواثق بعناية الواحد الاحد مولانا  
السلطان سليم بن المرحوم السلطان
- 7 مصطفى بن المرحوم السلطان احمد نصره الله وادامه وجعل الظفر  
والنصر حافين بلوايه امين
- 8 اما بعد ادا السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته علي الدوام السوال عنكم  
كثير والشوق اليكم
- 9 جزيل والدعا لكم متا في كل وقتٍ وحين ونسأل الله تعالي القبول ونطلب  
منكم الدعا والرضي

10 والمواصلة والمعاهدة بيننا وبينكم لأن محبتنا فيكم زايدة والمراسلة بيننا  
وبينكم هي الفائدة

11 والمطلوب من عالي همتكم العلية ومكارم اخلاقكم المرضية ومن باب  
التمني والعشم سيوف كبار سلطانية

12 ودروع مانعة داوودية ومن الفصوص الجواهر الالماس الابيض  
والتباتي والياقوت الملون والزمرد

13 الحقيقي والعطر الشاه السلطاني والخطايا الوناديكي الملون والسجاجيد الرومي وجميع  
ما يستحسنه

14 نظركم السعيد من السلاح والجواهر والطاقات والعطورات فما كان من  
السلاح تقوي به علي العدو

15 لاننا مقابلين جبال العيله<sup>16</sup> الكفرة ونطلب منكم الأمانة والدعا ونحن  
مواضين لكم علي وضيقة<sup>17</sup> الدعا انا

16 الليل وأطراف النهار الله يعينكم وينصركم علي الكفرة والمشركين اعدا  
الدين وانشا الله تعالي

17 ما تنقطع المعاهدة والمراسلة بيننا وبينكم علي الإصلاح ويعيننا  
و<sup>18</sup> يعينكم علي قتال الكفرة والمشركين

18 هذا ما نعرفكم به ولا زلتم في امان الله وحسن رعايته واعداكم مقتله  
وايادكم مقبله

16 This word, a Sudanic Arabic colloquialism, is raised above the line, possibly indicating its later insertion by the scribe. See further note 23 below.

17 This spelling doubtless reflects the influence of local dialects; cf. Kapteijns and Spaulding, *After the Millennium*, p. 4.

18 A word above the و has been erased, seemingly علي.



19 حرر ذلك يوم الثلاث ثمانية في شهر شعبان المكرم عام الف و  
 مائتين وخمسة سنة ١٢٠٥  
 [margin] 20 وجميع ما يكون لكم من المصالح والخدم عرفونا بها نفوز لكم  
 بقضاها قلت او جلت  
 [margin] 21 علي الراس والعين والسلام وصلي الله علي سيدنا محمد واله  
 وصحبه وسلم

*Verso*

بمنه تعالى يصل و يتشرف بيد السلطان الاعظم والحاقان الاكرم مولانا  
 السلطان سليم بن السلطان مصطفى بن السلطان احمد نصره الله امين  
 ٦٤٢٨

*Translation*

*Recto*

[Seal]: Sultan ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘the orphan’<sup>19</sup> son of sultan Aḥmad Bukr,  
 year 1203 [1788–9]

In the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate, praise be to God  
 who is deserving of it, and blessings be upon he whom no Prophet has  
 succeeded [Muḥammad]:

From his illustrious, most pleasing Majesty, who is famous for his awe-  
 someness and splendour, the culmination of might, glory and perfection,  
 the sun of knowledge who surpasses every gnostic, he who follows the  
 Prophet’s practice and the Qur’an, who asks his Lord for forgiveness,

19 ‘Abd al-Raḥmān was called *al-yatīm*, ‘the orphan’ because his father died while he was still  
 in utero. See Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Tūnisī, *Tashḥīdh al-Adhhān bi-Sīrat Bilād al-‘Arab  
 wa’l-Sūdān*, ed. Khalīl Maḥmūd ‘Asākir and Muṣṭafā Muḥammad Mus‘id. Cairo: al-Hay’a  
 al-Miṣriyya al-‘amma lil-kitāb, 2007, p. 99.

satisfaction and reward, who believes in the Last Day, the Resurrection and the Reckoning, who entrusts himself to the One Munificent God, Sultan ‘Abd al-Raḥmān son of Sultan Aḥmad Bukr son of Sultan Mūsā, may God support him, amen;

To the greatest sultan, the most magnificent, noble khaqan,<sup>20</sup> lord of the kings of the Arabs and non-Arabs, king of the two lands and two seas, the servant of the Two Holy Shrines, sultan of Rum, Egypt and the Two Iraqs, who relies on the solicitude of the unique One [God], our lord sultan Selim son of the late sultan Mustafa son of the late sultan Ahmad, may God make him victorious and perpetuate [his days], and make victory and conquest line his banner;

Wherefore, peace be upon you, and the mercy and blessings of God in perpetuity; much are you asked about, and abundant is love for you; we pray for you every moment and ask God to accept [our prayers]. We seek from you prayers [for us], satisfaction, communication and alliance, for our love for you is increasing, and correspondence brings benefits.

It is requested, from your exalted, high determination and your pleasing morals, by way of desire and anticipation [as follows]: large sultanic swords and impregnable *dāwūdī* armour;<sup>21</sup> in terms of precious stones: white diamonds, *nabātī* diamonds, sapphires, real emeralds, kingly, sultanic perfume, coloured Venetian silks [*hita’ī*], Anatolian carpets, and whatever you see fit by way of weapons, jewels, necklaces<sup>22</sup> and perfumes. As for the weapons, they will strengthen us against our enemies, for we face the mountains of the infidel ‘ayla.<sup>23</sup> We seek your solicitude and prayers, and we constantly undertake the duty of prayer for you, day and night. May God aid you and give you victory over the infidel, the pol-

20 *Khāqān* is a Turkish term signifying emperor, supreme ruler, which commonly formed part of the titulature of the Ottoman sultans.

21 Armour was called *dāwūdī* in reference to the Biblical David’s skill at making it, which is mentioned in the Qur’an; see R. Paret, ‘Dāwūd’, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 07 January 2021 [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_1754](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1754).

22 I assume *al-ṭāqāt* is a mistake or colloquialism for *al-aṭwāq*.

23 As becomes clear from the Turkish summary discussed below, the Nuba hills are meant. There the term ‘ayla designated the household of a Makk (king, chief): see Janet J. Ewald, *Soldiers, Traders and Slaves: State Formation and Economic Transformation in the Greater Nile Valley, 1700–1885*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990, pp. 83, 89, 115–6; ‘ayla is also recorded with meaning of ‘slaves’, H.A. MacMichael, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922, 11, p. 297.

theist enemies of religion. God willing, the alliance and correspondence between us and you will remain unbroken in accordance with the establishment of peace [between us], and [may God] aid both us and you in fighting the infidels and polytheists. This is what we inform you of, may you remain in God's safekeeping and his fair protection, with your enemies vanquished and your hands kissed [in obeisance].

Written on Tuesday, 8th of honoured Sha'ban, in the year 1205 [7 April 1791].

[Margin] And inform us of everything of advantage and service to you, so that we can accomplish them, whether they are small or great, with the utmost pleasure. Peace and blessings upon our lord Muḥammad, his Companions and Family. Farewell.

### *Verso*

By God's grace may it arrive and be honoured by the hand of the greatest sultan, and the noble khaqan, sultan Selim son of sultan Mustafa son of sultan Ahmed, may God render him victorious, Amen.

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### Historical commentary

Sultan 'Abd al-Raḥmān's embassy to Istanbul was evidently well known in Darfur. As noted above, it is mentioned in W.B. Browne's account of his prolonged and involuntary stay in al-Fāshir, the capital, during that sultan's reign (although curiously, there is no reference to it in our other near-contemporary source for 'Abd al-Raḥmān, the travel account of Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Tūnisī, who visited Darfur shortly after the sultan's death).<sup>25</sup> Presumably drawing on what he was told by courtiers or merchants, Browne related that,

The sultan 'Abd-er-Rachmān, soon after he became possessed of sovereign authority, with the ostensible motive of testifying his attachment to

24 This is the so-called '*budūh*' formula, a talisman to ensure the letter's safe arrival. See D.B. Macdonald 'Budūh', in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 19 January 2021 [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_1395](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1395).

25 al-Tūnisī, *Tashḥīdh al-Adhhān*, pp. 99–131.

the religion of the Prophet, but more perhaps with a view of obtaining greater weight among his subjects, by some mark of the consideration of the first of Mohammedan princes, thought proper to send a present to Constantinople. It consisted of three of the choicest eunuchs, and three of the most beautiful female slaves that could be procured. The Othman emperor when they were presented, had, it is said, never heard of the Sultan of Dar-Fûr, but he returned a highly-ornamented sabre, a rich pelisse, and a ring set with a single diamond of no inconsiderable value.<sup>26</sup>

Na'ûm Shuqayr, whose history of the Sudan was published originally in 1903, adds the detail that the Ottoman sultan bestowed on 'Abd al-Raḥmān the title al-Rashīd.<sup>27</sup> Shuqayr's principal source for Darfur's history, he tells us, was a history memorised by an imam of the mosque of Sultan Ibrāhīm of Darfur who died in Cairo in 1902,<sup>28</sup> suggesting this represents the orally transmitted memory of 'Abd al-Raḥmān's dealings with the Ottomans. Nonetheless, some caution is necessary. Elsewhere in his *Ta'rikh al-Sūdān*, Shuqayr, an officer in Egyptian military intelligence based in Khartoum after the defeat of the Mahdist state in 1898, showed an enthusiasm for stressing dubious Ottoman connections to Sudan, possibly with a view to legitimising Condominium rule, as Egypt was still technically subject to the Ottomans at this point.<sup>29</sup> The jury must remain out on the origins of the title al-Rashīd, for there is no reference to the Ottoman response to the embassy in the Turkish sources currently available.

Ostensibly the text of 'Abd al-Raḥmān's letter supports Browne's interpretation, constituting a simple request for luxury goods, accompanied by proclamations of friendship and prayers. Indeed, there is reason to think that 'Abd al-Raḥmān may, as Browne indicates, have wanted to bolster his legitimacy. Aged around fifty to sixty, he had only recently come to power in the wake of a bitter civil war, and was tainted by the accusation of usurpation, which is reflected in Browne's contemporary account.<sup>30</sup> Two of his relatives had died fighting him, even according to the much more sympathetic narrative of

26 Browne, *Travels in Asia, Africa and Syria*, pp. 214–5.

27 Shuqayr, *Ta'rikh al-Sūdān*, p. 161.

28 Shuqayr, *Ta'rikh al-Sūdān*, pp. 154, 175 'wa-qad ḥafīza fī dhākiratihi ta'rikh Dārfūr bi-rummatīhi fa-'khadhtu 'anhu mu'azzam mā rawaytuhu 'an ta'rikh al-salāṭīn' 'He had memorised the entire history of Darfur, and I took the majority of what I related about the history of the sultans from him'.

29 P.M. Holt, 'Sultan Selim I and the Sudan,' *The Journal of African History* 8/1 (1967): 19–23, offers a demolition of another such Ottoman-related tale in Shuqayr's work that had been widely recycled in subsequent scholarship.

30 Browne, *Travels in Asia, Africa and Syria*, p. 279

al-Tūnisī. Having spent most of his earlier life as a *faqīh*, his reign marked a distinct shift towards the Islamisation of the sultanate and the repudiation of local traditions, even those connected with the sultanic accession ritual.<sup>31</sup> All these factors suggest ‘Abd al-Raḥmān would have had good cause to seek validation for his rule from the Ottoman sultan, who was, even if beset by difficulties, the greatest Muslim potentate of the period.

While the request for various luxuries features prominently in the letter, al-Tūnisī emphasises ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s personal asceticism, one of his first acts on becoming sultan being to distribute the wealth in his predecessor’s treasury among the *‘ulamā’*, *ashrāf* and *fuqarā’*.<sup>32</sup> This would also point to the embassy’s aims being largely political. The luxuries requested were possibly intended for public display or redistribution as a way of emphasising the sultan’s legitimacy and recognition by the leading state of the Muslim world, rather than for his personal consumption, although Browne notes that the sultan used to sit on a “Turkey carpet”, suggesting some items may indeed have been destined for court.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, given the Darfur sultans’ interests in commerce, in which they personally had a major stake, as will be discussed below, the goods sought from Istanbul may have been intended for resale.

Yet the Turkish documents preserved alongside the Arabic letter reveals that in fact the embassy also brought a second letter from ‘Abd al-Raḥmān which was rather different in tone. The original of the second letter seems to be lost,<sup>34</sup> and it survives only in the Turkish translation (Figures 4 and 5). Although the Turkish version removes the elaborate opening compliments, comparison with its translation of the surviving Arabic letter suggests the extant Turkish version is likely to be an accurate rendition on the contents of the original. The lost letter read:

31 O’Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate*, pp. 63–4.

32 al-Tūnisī, *Tashḥīdh al-Adhhān*, pp. 101–3

33 Browne, *Travels in Asia, Africa and Syria*, pp. 211, 213.

34 It is hard to be definitive about the loss of an item given the state of cataloguing of the Istanbul archives and their vast extent.

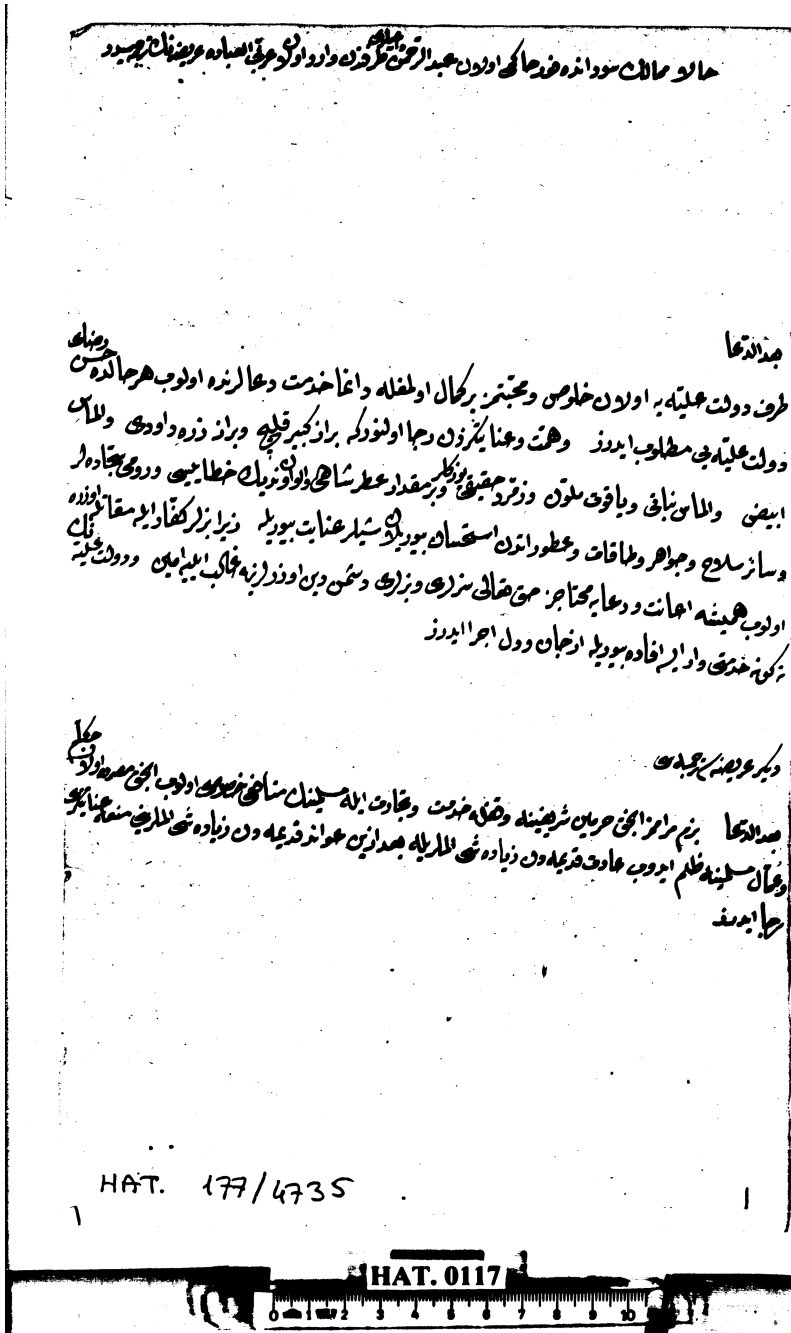


FIGURE 4 The Turkish translations of the letters from the sultan of Darfur. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, Istanbul, Hatt-ı Humayun 177/4735

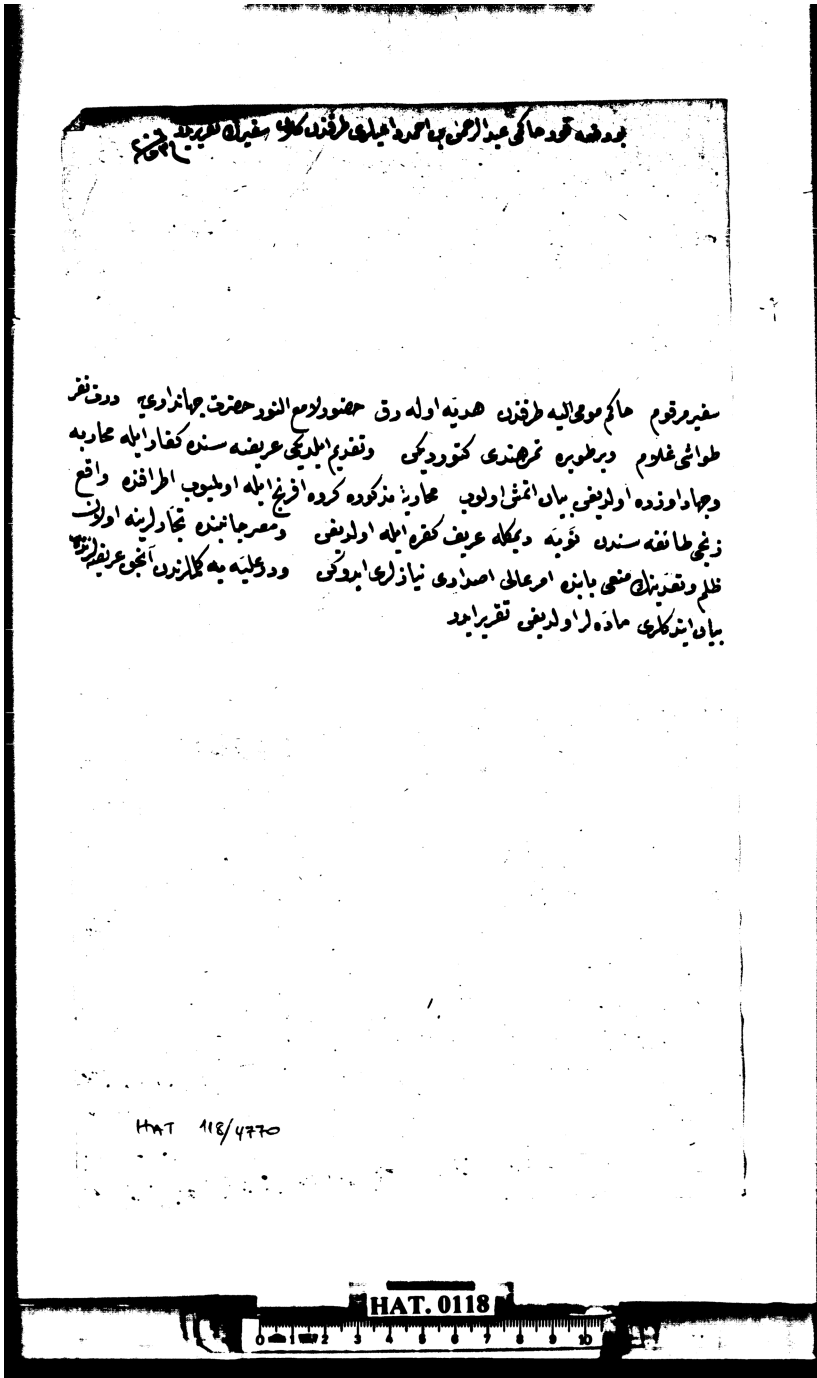


FIGURE 5 The oral testimony of the ambassador from Darfur. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, Istanbul, Hatt-ı Humayun 118/4770



Bizim merâmımız ancak Hameyn-i Şerifeyne vakıfla hizmet ve ticaret ile müslimînin menâfi'î husûsi olup ancak Mısır'da olan hükkâm ve 'ummâl müslimîne zulüm idüp 'âdet-i kadîmeden ziyâde şey almalarıyla ba'd ez în 'avâ'id-i kadîmeden ziyâde şey almalarını men'e 'inâyetinizi ricâ ederiz.<sup>35</sup>

Our desire is only to serve the Two Holy Shrines with waqf and to benefit Muslims by trade, but the rulers and administrators in Egypt oppress the Muslims, taking [in taxes] more than the established custom. We request your assistance to prevent them from taking more than the established custom.

'Abd al-Rahmân again burnishes his Islamic credentials, serving the Muslims both by waqf in Mecca and Medina, and by trade. Although, as far as I am aware, there is no other evidence directly of this sultan's support for endowments in the Hijaz, it is likely to be based in fact rather than rhetoric. There is evidence from as early as the sixteenth century of a waqf being endowed in Medina by a relative of the Tunjur sultan of Darfur,<sup>36</sup> and investment in endowments in the holy cities was a popular way for rulers from across the Muslim world to promote themselves as well as serving pious objectives. Lying on a trans-African pilgrimage route, Darfur would have had plenty of contacts with the Hijaz,<sup>37</sup> and al-Tūnisī mentions an embassy sent by the Sharif of Mecca to 'Abd al-Rahmân.<sup>38</sup>

The Turkish letter shows that the motives for the mission were not limited to establishing contact with the Ottoman ruler and acquiring luxury goods, but also encompassed the practical one of requesting that the Ottoman authorities in Istanbul rein in the exactions of their nominal subordinates in Egypt. This purpose is also reflected in a second Turkish document which summarises the two letters, but also adds some additional information, apparently based on the oral report of the Darfur ambassador:

35 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, HAT 117/4735/1.

36 O'Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate*, p. 31.

37 O'Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate*, pp. 14, 32, 225–6; Rémi Dewière, *Du Lac Tchad à la Mecque: Le sultanat du Borno et son monde (XVIe-XVIIe siècle)*. Paris: Editions de la Sorbonne, 2017, esp. pp. 239–244. Nonetheless, it seems most pilgrims from points further west made their way north via Fazzan and Cairo rather than via Darfur. See El-Ḥesnāwī, *Fazzān under the Rule of the Awlād Muḥammad*, pp. 256–268.

38 al-Tūnisī, *Tashḥīdh al-Adhhān*, p. 117.

Bu def'a Fur hâkimi 'Abdu'l-Rahmân bin Ahmed dâ'ileri tarafından gelen sefirin takrîri. [1]206 3 Cemaziyü'l- Evvel

Sefir-i merkûm hâkim mumâileyh tarafından hediye olarak huzûr-lâmi'î'l-nûr hazret cihândâriye dört nefer tavâşî gulâm ve bir torba demirhindi getirdiğın ve takdîm eylediğı 'arızasında küffâr ile muhârebe ve cihâd üzere olduğın beyân etmiş olup muhârebe-i mezkûrde gurûh-ı Efrenc ile olmayıp etrâfında vâki' Zenci tâ'ifesinden Nube demekle 'arîf kefereler ile olduğın ve Mısır cânibinde tüccârlarına olan zulûm ve te'addînin men'i bâbında emr-i 'âlî isdârı niyâzları ittüğın ve der-i 'aliyyeye gelmelerinden ancak 'arızalarında beyân ettikleri mâddeler olduğın takrîr eder.<sup>39</sup>

This occasion: report of the ambassador coming from the Fur ruler, 'Abd al-Rahmân b. Aḥmad. 3 Jumada I 1206 [29 December 1791]

The aforementioned ambassador of the said ruler reports that he has brought four eunuchs and a sack of tamarind as a gift to [your Majesty's] shining, imperial presence. He explained in the petition he presented that they were waging holy war against the infidel, but these wars were not with Europeans but rather the infidel Blacks known as the Nuba<sup>40</sup> in their neighbourhood. [He reported] that they required an imperial order to be issued to prohibit oppression and aggression towards merchants in Egypt. They had come to the Sublime Porte only on account of the matters mentioned in their petition.<sup>41</sup>

Egypt was Darfur's crucial link to the outside world. The main route by which Darfur's products – of which the most important was slaves – were exported was the famous Darb al-Arba'in, Forty Days Road, which led from Kobbei, a day's journey north of the Darfuri capital al-Fashir, across the desert to the Kharga oasis and then to Asyut on the Nile Valley. Goods – and slaves – were

39 Cumhurbařkanlıđı Osmanlı Arřivi, HAT 118 4770. The catalogue gives the date as Rajab, but this must be incorrect, as it would mean the document had arrived before it was written!

40 Although Nuba might be taken to refer to Nubia, this had been converted to Islam by the sixteenth century. It is therefore more likely this is a reference to the people of the Nuba mountains in southern Kordofan, many of whom were yet to convert, and who were the frequent target of Darfuri slave-raids. This seems to be confirmed by the reference to the 'mountains of the infidel' in 'Abd al-Rahmân's Arabic original, which would fit the Nuba mountains better than Nubia, where much of the landscape is flat or small hills. However, the term Nuba in origin referred to any African peoples living south of Egypt who were subject to slave raiding. On Darfur and the Nuba mountains see Ewald, *Soldiers, Traders, and Slaves*, esp. pp. 45–48.

41 This is doubtless an allusion to the fact that envoys were often entrusted with the most sensitive missives only orally, while the written documents they brought were often largely made up of formulaic good wishes that served to authenticate the embassy.

then transported upriver to Cairo, or occasionally by land. From there, they could be sent on to Istanbul. Darfur was the largest single source of these slave caravans, which were considerably larger than those from Sinnar, the other main supplier in the Bilad al-Sudan.<sup>42</sup> The leader of the caravan, the *khabīr* (pl. *khubarā'*), was appointed by the sultan of Darfur, and was usually a wealthy merchant who might also function as the personal envoy of the sultan, carrying out diplomatic as well as commercial functions.<sup>43</sup> It is possible that the Darfur envoy who brought 'Abd al-Raḥmān's letter to Istanbul was a *khabīr*, and, as is shown by the text of the letter to Bonaparte (present in the Appendix below), *khabīrs* were involved in that mission.

Towards the late eighteenth century, the caravan routes between Egypt and Darfur became increasingly troubled, as the Turkish translation of 'Abd al-Raḥmān's second letter suggests. The Ottoman authorities exerted little influence on the ground in Egypt, which was run, in effect, by its Mamluks,<sup>44</sup> who often relied on extortion to finance their rule. Ismā'īl Beg, the Mamluk ruler of Egypt between 1787 and 1791, is known to have extorted a large sum from the merchants of the Wakālat al-Gallāba, who specialised in the Sudan trade, in late 1787.<sup>45</sup> In addition to fixed customs charges and protection fees, merchants also ran the risk of having to pay illegal taxes to government agents, especially in Kharga and Asyut.<sup>46</sup> Customs records from Cairo dating from 1790 to 1792 indicate a sudden collapse in the Sudan trade in this period. Instead of 17,500 slaves, as would be expected, only 3,780 passed through customs. The reliability of these figures is certainly open to question: they may indicate that merchants were simply avoiding official customs points by paying bribes to officials.<sup>47</sup> Complaints about the treatment of the Sudan merchants in Egypt were not new. Nearly a century earlier, in 1701, the Funj sultan of Sinnar was complaining to the Ottomans of exactly the same problems.<sup>48</sup> Darfuri resentment at what they saw as excessive taxation and 'oppression' of merchants is also reflected in the letter sent in 1800 by 'Abd al-Raḥmān to Napoleon Bonaparte (Figure 6), who had become ruler of Egypt in 1798, vanquishing the

42 On Darfur's trade with Egypt see Terence Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and the Bilād as-Sūdān, 1700–1800*. Cairo: IFAO, 1978; also O'Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate*, pp. 239–59; the Ottoman interest in these slaves, especially eunuchs, is discussed in Jane Hathaway, *The Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem: From African Slave to Power-Broker*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, esp. pp. 29–30.

43 Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and the Bilād as-Sūdān*, p. 24.

44 The Mamluks were the slave soldiers who by the eighteenth century effectively ruled Egypt, although the latter formally remained under Ottoman sovereignty.

45 Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and the Bilād as-Sūdān*, p. 123.

46 Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and the Bilād as-Sūdān*, pp. 54–8.

47 Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and the Bilād as-Sūdān*, p. 57.

48 Orhonlu, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Güney Siyaseti*, pp. 247–8



FIGURE 6 Letter from 'Abd al-Rahmān of Darfur to the 'sultan of France'. Service historique de la Défense (Vincennes), GR B6 6o, cl. M. Tuchscherer.

Mamluk regime.<sup>49</sup> ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s letter rejoiced in the fall of the Mamluks and requested that the French ‘sultan’ lower the dues to earlier rates; its text and translation is presented in the appendix to this article.

For their part, the Ottomans were seriously concerned by the activities of the Mamluks. As recently as 1786 sultan Abdülhamid I had sent an expeditionary force under the famous *kapudan paşa* (grand admiral) Gazi Hasan Pasha of Algiers (d. 1790) to reassert Ottoman control of Egypt, which had succeeded in defeating the Mamluk rulers Murad Beg and İbrahim Beg. However, Gazi Hasan Pasha had been forced to withdraw after a year and a half to face the greater threat of Russia.<sup>50</sup> Although Mamluk rule was restored in 1787, the expedition shows that the Ottomans maintained an interest in the region, and it may have prompted ‘Abd al-Raḥmān to seek their renewed intervention, as it is highly likely that merchants or other intermediaries would have informed him of Gazi Hasan Pasha’s expedition.

Both ‘Abd al-Raḥmān and his Ottoman counterpart shared an interest in the smooth running of trade. Taxes on merchandise were a substantial component of the sultan of Darfur’s income, but the sultan was also Darfur’s ‘chief merchant’, sending prodigious quantities of his own merchandise for export to Egypt, of which slaves were unquestionably the principal component.<sup>51</sup> Many of these slaves were captured by raids in the Nuba mountains, which are alluded to in the second Turkish document. Even if, by the late eighteenth century, black eunuchs no longer enjoyed quite political significance in the Ottoman empire they previously had, they still constituted an important part of the sultan’s household and were employed in other prominent functions such as guards of the Ka’ba and the Prophet’s tomb in Medina.<sup>52</sup> The importance of slaves in relations between the two sides is reflected in the gifts sent from Darfur. As the second Turkish document notes, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān sent Selim the gift of four eunuchs – which, given the high mortality rate of castrated slaves,<sup>53</sup> was doubtless a generous gift. It is unclear whether Browne’s count of six slaves, three male and three female, is simply a mistake, or reflects

49 He had, however, departed for France in summer 1799, leaving his army in Egypt under General Kleber.

50 Aksan, *Ottoman Wars*, p. 235; J.H. Mordtmann and E. Kuran, ‘D\_jezā’irli Ghāzī Ḥasan Pasha,’ in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 20 April 2021 <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_2067](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_2067)>.

51 Browne, *Travels in Asia, Africa and Syria*, pp. 198, 301; O’Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate*, pp. 244, 257–8.

52 Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch*, pp. 224–231.

53 See Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch*, pp. 31–4.



that fact that some died en route and possibly were only partially replaced. In addition, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān sent another principal export, tamarind, which grew in northwest Darfur and Kordofan and on the supply of which the Darfur sultanate enjoyed a monopoly in the late eighteenth century.<sup>54</sup> Tamarind was prized in the Ottoman court (as well as more widely in Ottoman society) where it was used in the drink *demirhindi şerbeti*.<sup>55</sup> The gifts were most likely carefully calculated to reflect the value of the goods ‘Abd al-Raḥmān was requesting. Reciprocity in value was a basic principle of diplomacy, in which gifts played a crucial part both in the Sahel and the broader Ottoman world, and diplomacy was itself closely linked to commercial relations.<sup>56</sup> Gifts also served to advertise the commercial opportunities a ruler and his land could provide, and thus the advantages of a relationship between the two sides.<sup>57</sup> Naturally, slaves and eunuchs were a common diplomatic gift from Sahelian states, although it is noteworthy that the numbers here are considerably lower than those presented by Bornu to the Ottomans (via Tripoli) in the seventeenth century, when twenty or even thirty eunuchs were typically sent, alongside a hundred to two hundred slaves.<sup>58</sup> Whether this reflects changing economics of the slave trade or simply Darfur’s relative impoverishment compared to Bornu is harder to assess. The custom of embassies requesting specific luxuries from foreign powers is also attested in Bornu, including requests for firearms.<sup>59</sup>

The gifts sent by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān thus reflect broader Sahelian as well as international diplomatic conventions. They were also evidently informed by knowledge of Ottoman tastes and commerce, information which was probably mediated by the *khubarā’* who led caravans to Egypt, as well as by the merchants who specialised in the Sudan trade, the *gallāba*, many of whom came from Dongola. Men like the sultan’s agent (*wakīl*) also would have played a role in transmitting knowledge about the outside world. The *wakīl* of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s predecessor, sultan Muḥammad Tayrāb, travelled regularly to Egypt where he ordered books, including the famous, recently published Arabic dictionary *Tāj al-‘Arūs* by Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī; Muḥammad Tayrāb also

54 Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and the Bilād as-Sūdān*, p. 38.

55 Arif Bilgin, *Osmanlı Sarayı Mutfağı (1453–1650)*. Istanbul: Kitapevi Yayınları, 2004, pp. 62, 67.

56 In general on gifts and diplomacy see Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (eds), *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017; for reciprocity in value see Rémi Dewièrè, “Ismaël pria Osman de luy donner quelques Chrestiens”: Gift Exchanges and Economic Reciprocity in trans-Saharan Diplomacy (Sixteenth-Seventeenth Centuries), *Diplomatica* 2 (2020): 223–247, esp. pp. 228–9, 241–246.

57 Dewièrè, “Ismaël pria Osman de luy donner quelques Chrestiens”, p. 246.

58 Dewièrè, “Ismaël pria Osman de luy donner quelques Chrestiens”, pp. 231, 236.

59 Dewièrè, “Ismaël pria Osman de luy donner quelques Chrestiens”, p. 245.

ordered a copy of the same text.<sup>60</sup> Darfur, then, was not isolated from the wider Muslim world and its trends, despite its apparent remoteness. At the Wakālat al-Gallāba in Cairo, the Sudan merchants sold on their goods to others specialising in European or Asian trade.<sup>61</sup> While the importance of contact with Europe has been acknowledged in scholarship on the Sudan trade,<sup>62</sup> it is possible that the Ottoman dimension of the Sudan trade has been underestimated. It is interesting to note that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān sought from the Ottomans not just products for which they were renowned such as armour and carpets, but also Venetian silk, for which he uses the Ottoman term *khiṭāyī* (*hita’i*).<sup>63</sup> Venetian silk was especially prized in Istanbul, and indeed the demands of Ottoman customers led to technical refinements in the Venetian silk industry, which became increasingly orientated towards supplying this market.<sup>64</sup> ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s request thus suggests that routes for the import of European goods to the Bilad al-Sudan were considerably more complex than a simple exchange between the *gallāba* and merchants specialising in European trade in Cairo, and perhaps involved the transshipment of materials via Istanbul or other ports. Testimony to this Ottoman link is the use of the Turkish form for Venice (Venedik, *al-Wanādiki*) in ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s letter rather than the standard Arabic one (Bunduq).

It is clear, then, that the Darfuri mission was prompted not simply by a search for legitimacy but by commercial and political objectives, while the letter suggests the sultan of Darfur was already quite well informed about the Ottomans, their tastes and commercial networks. Yet the mission of 1791 seems to have elicited no response from the Ottoman side. It is possible, of course,

60 Stefan Reichmuth, ‘Murtaḍā al-Zabidī (1732–1791) and the Africans: Islamic Discourse and Scholarly Networks in the Late Eighteenth Century.’ In Scott S. Reese (ed.), *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa*. Leiden: Brill, 2004, pp. 121–153, at p. 144.

61 Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and the Bilād as-Sūdān*, pp. 71–4.

62 Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and the Bilād as-Sūdān*, p. 63, who describes ‘contact with Europe of utmost importance’ for the Sudan trade but rarely mentions trade with parts of the Ottoman empire beyond Egypt.

63 Amanda Phillips, *Sea Change: Ottoman Textiles between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021, pp. 47, 161, 165, 183, 184, 196, 201, 230, 234. The term in fact implies China, or Cathay; Phillips note textiles from Chios described as *hita’i*, but none from Venice. However, other products from Venice certainly were imported to Darfur, including beads, while textiles in general were a major import. See Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and the Bilād as-Sūdān*, pp. 40, 45; Browne, *Travels in Asia, Africa and Syria*, p. 302.

64 Luca Molà, ‘Material Diplomacy: Venetian Luxury Gifts for the Ottoman Empire in the Late Renaissance.’ In Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (eds), *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 56–87.



that further documents may come to light in the Ottoman archives, which are hardly adequately catalogued, but it is striking that there is no reference to the Darfur embassy in the day-by-day account of Selim III's reign compiled by his secretary Ahmed Efendi, which offers notes on most of the embassies that frequented the court.<sup>65</sup> Normally, embassies would be greeted with elaborate ceremonies, and received by the Grand Vizier, and ultimately the sultan himself, who would shower them with gifts.<sup>66</sup> Ahmed Efendi's silence on the Darfur embassy suggests it did not penetrate far into the corridors of power. This is perhaps hardly surprising under the circumstances. The Ottomans had recently suffered devastating losses in their wars with Austria and Russia, and in the month the Darfuri embassy was received in Istanbul, December 1791, the Ottomans were negotiating the Treaty of Jassy that made substantial territorial concessions to Russia.<sup>67</sup> A few years later, Napoleon's invasion of Egypt would again draw Ottoman attention to north-east Africa, but for the moment the foreign policy of Selim III focused almost exclusively on the northern threat the Ottomans faced.<sup>68</sup> Selim also faced severe internal challenges, including rebellions in Arabia, the Balkans and Anatolia; the empire was near bankrupt and in need of radical reform and modernisation, which Selim did attempt to effect. It was not an auspicious time for diplomacy with a remote region of which the Sublime Porte was probably barely aware. However, it is also unclear whether the embassy made the presents to officials that were *de rigueur* for a successful mission, of which there are no mention in the documents,<sup>69</sup> and, as will be discussed further below, the formal characteristics of the letter may also have contributed to a frosty reception. As for Browne's account of the gifts bestowed by the Ottoman sultan in return, it is quite possible this represents popular rumour in Darfur rather than fact.

65 See III. *Selim'in Sırkâtibi Ahmed Efendi tarafından tutulan Rûznâme*, ed. V. Sema Arıkan. Ankara: TTK, 1993.

66 Güneş Işıksel, 'Hierarchy and Friendship: Ottoman Practices of Diplomatic Culture and Communication (1290s-1600),' *The Medieval History Journal* 22 (2019): 278–297, esp. pp. 291–2.

67 Virginia Aksan, *Ottoman Wars 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*. Harlow: Pearson, 2007, pp. 166–7.

68 Aksan, *Ottoman Wars*, p. 235.

69 Michael Talbot, 'Gifts of Time: Watches and Clocks in Ottoman-British Diplomacy, 1693–1803,' *Jahrbuch für Europäische Geschichte* 17 (2016): 55–79.

## Diplomatic Commentary

The message of a letter was communicated not simply through the text itself, but through formal aspects such as styles of address and even layout.<sup>70</sup> In both the Sahel and the central Islamic lands these were governed by specific conventions which indicated the status of sender and recipient, although these differed between the two regions, as will be discussed below. There is evidence for established conventions in correspondence from Bornu as early as the fourteenth century.<sup>71</sup> The letter to Selim III shows influence from the epistolographic conventions of both Sahelian and the central Islamic lands, as befits Darfur's location on the cusp between these two worlds. It has been debated to what extent Darfur in this period had a formal chancery responsible for drawing up documents.<sup>72</sup> Certainly, if there was a chancery, it did not preserve copies of outgoing correspondence (although even in the case of the Ottoman chancery, which certainly did exist, their preservation was far from guaranteed). As a result, letters preserved in archives outside Darfur are perforce our main sources to allow us to deduce information about diplomatic practice. Nonetheless, as noted above, the royal correspondence of the Darfur sultanate has only received attention for the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. As far as I am aware only one other letter from 'Abd al-Raḥmān has been preserved, being his letter to Napoleon Bonaparte (unnamed, but it can only be he who is designated at the 'sultan of France') of which the French translation is dated April 1800 (Figure 6); a later letter, translated in October of the same year survives only in its French version.<sup>73</sup> Considering the extant letters of 1791 and 1800 together allows us to shed fresh light on both.

70 A useful introduction in Malika Dekkiche, 'Diplomatics, or Another Way to See the World.' In Frédéric Bauden and Malika Dekkiche (eds), *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads of Embassies. Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics*. Leiden: Brill, 2019, pp. 185–213.

71 Rémi Dewière, "Peace Be Upon Those Who Follow the Right Way": Diplomatic Practices Between Mamluk Cairo and the Borno Sultanate at the End of the Eighth/Fourteenth Century.' In Frédéric Bauden and Malika Dekkiche (eds), *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads of Embassies. Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics*. Leiden: Brill, 2019, pp. 658–682.

72 On the debate over the existence of a chancery see O'Fahey and Abu Salim, *Land in Dār Fūr*, pp. 22–5.

73 The letters are preserved at the Service Historique de la Defense, Vincennes, B6 60 and B6 54. The French versions were published in A. Auriant, 'Histoire d'Ahmed Aga le Zantiote. Un projet de conquête (1796–1799) du Darfour,' *Revue de l'histoire des colonies françaises* 14 (1926): 181–234. The letters have been dated to 1798, see for example, O'Fahey and Abu Salim, *Land in Dār Fūr*, p. 24; O'Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate*, p. 71. However, no date appears on the text, but the French translations are dated April 1800 (B6 60) and 13 October 1800 (B6 54). While it is possible there might have been a time lag between their dispatch, arrival and

The reader cannot but be struck immediately by the very different form of each letter. While the missive to Selim III is written in a professional scribe's mashriqi *nashk*, that to Bonaparte is untidy in appearance, written in an amateurish hand somewhat reminiscent of Maghrebi scripts, and violates the near-universal principal of Islamic diplomatics that the left margin should be justified. In the letter to Selim, the first line ends with the 'stacking' of words one above each other, a practice that can ultimately be traced back to 'Abbasid precedents but which was common in Ottoman documents,<sup>74</sup> as well as those of other chancelleries of the central and eastern Islamic world (although it was apparently unknown in Bornu and the Maghreb).<sup>75</sup> For example, stacking is used in the Persian correspondence of the sultan of Muscat in the late eighteenth century, although curiously his Arabic letters do not employ this device.<sup>76</sup> The stacking is entirely absent from the letter to Bonaparte. As one might expect, the letter to the unbeliever entirely omits the religious *invocatio* with which that to Selim III starts.

A further contrast is in the positioning of the seals. Although the seal in the 1800 letter is illegible, it is positioned firmly in the middle of the top of the letter, and evidently has a different design from 'Abd al-Raḥmān's other known seals.<sup>77</sup> A similar size and positioning of seal is found on a letter from

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translation, it seems unlikely to have been quite so long as two years. B6 54 is accompanied by a note from General Donzelot, the French commander at Asyut, where the translation was made, where he remarks he had mentioned the correspondence from Darfur in a letter dated 11 October, suggesting it had reached Asyut only very shortly before the translation was made. The Arabic text of a letter purporting to be from 'Abd al-Raḥmān to Bonaparte is given by Shuqayr, *Tarīkh al-Sūdān*, p. 162. However, it does not reflect either the French translation of the October 1800 letter, which is much longer, or the Arabic text of the extant April 1800 letter. 'Abd al-Raḥmān is styled simply '*sulṭān dārfūr*', which does not resemble the titlature used in any other document issued by him. As noted above, Shuqayr relied on an oral informant, an imam, for his information about Darfur, and he is very likely to have tidied up the language in preparing the materials for print, quite apart from the inaccuracies that may very probably have entered the text over the course of oral transmission of a good hundred years. If anything, the discrepancy between the two documents is a stark warning of the dangers of relying on versions of documents preserved in literary sources rather than their original forms.

74 The best treatment of Ottoman diplomatics remains Mübahat S. Kütükoğlu, *Osmanlı Belgelerinin Dili (Diplomatik)*. Istanbul: Kubbealtı Yayınları, 1998; for examples of such stacking see illustrations 20a, 21, 25, 27, 36, 76, 77.

75 For the origins of this practice see Marina Rustow, *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020, pp. 143, 158, 187–8, 202, 205.

76 Jan Just Witkam, 'Wood, Horses and Friendship. The Arabic Letters from Muscat to the Dutch in Kochi (1779) and Batavia (1798–1806).' In Willem Floor (ed.), *The Persian Gulf. Dutch-Omani Relations: A Commercial & Political History 1651–1806*. Washington DC: Mage Publishers, 2014, pp. 274–306

77 On these see Abū Salīm, *al-Fūr wa'l-Arḍ*, pp. 31–2 and figure 1.

Sultan Ibrāhīm al-Mu‘taṣim bi’llāh of Darfur to the Khedive of Egypt Ismā‘īl in 1873.<sup>78</sup> However, although the latter seal cannot readily be read, it is much more clearly a conventional seal than the one in the letter to Bonaparte where there is no obvious space for the names or the date. In contrast, in the letter to Selim III, a smaller, octagonal seal, resembling those found in royal documents from Bornu and Fazzan,<sup>79</sup> is stamped multiple times on the margins of the letter – twice at the top, twice at the bottom, and once on the side.

It is unlikely that these sigillographic peculiarities are accidental. The explorer Charles Cuny (d. 1858) reported that in Darfur a decree affixed with a royal seal was not to be given to Christian, or even a foreigner. While this may be an exaggeration, or least was not always observed in practice, the royal seal was sufficiently valued that it was specially commissioned from Egypt.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, it seems different secretaries had control of different seals.<sup>81</sup> Seals could serve not just to identify the sender and to authenticate the document, but also to represent his authority visually, and to indicate the relative status of sender and recipient; this is why their positioning could be highly contentious.<sup>82</sup> However, there were major regional differences in usage. In the central Islamic lands of the Ottoman empire and points eastwards, they were generally placed on the bottom left of documents, while in correspondence from the Maghreb and central Sahelian states the seal was generally located at the top of the letter, normally top left.<sup>83</sup> The positioning of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s seal on the centre top of the letter to Bonaparte instead is reminiscent of its place on the Darfur land charters, where it invariably comes above the text, marking the bestowal of royal favour upon the recipient.<sup>84</sup>

78 Reproduced in Jean Deny, *Sommaire des archives turques du Caire*. Cairo: La société royale de géographie d’Égypte, 1930, Plate LIII.

79 A.D. Bivar, ‘Arabic Documents of Northern Nigeria,’ *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 22 (1959): 324–349 p. 328 (plate 1), 329, 332 (plate 2); Bivar notes a parallel to such octagonal seals in Mahdist chancery documents; for another example from Bornu see Nachtigal, *Wadai and Darfur*, p. 394; cf. El-Ḥesnāwī, *Fazzān under the Awlād Muḥammad*, p. 167 (two of four seals of Sultan Aḥmad al-Nāṣir, r. 1710–1766; the remaining seals from eighteenth to nineteenth century Fazzan are all round).

80 O’Fahey and Abu Salim, *Land in Dār Fūr*, pp. 28–9; al-Tūnisī, *Tashḥīdh al-Adhḥān*, p. 51.

81 O’Fahey and Abu Salim, *Land in Dār Fūr*, p. 24.

82 See Annabel Teh Gallop and Venetia Porter, *Lasting Impressions: Seals from the Islamic World*. London and Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum, 2012, pp. 47–8.

83 ‘Arabic Documents of Northern Nigeria,’ p. 329; Rémi Dewière, ‘Les lettres du pouvoir au Sahel islamique: Marques, adaptations et continuités administratives au Borno (1823–1918),’ *Cahiers d’Études africaines* 59/236 (2019): 1047–1090, esp. p. 1058.

84 O’Fahey and Abu Salim, *Land in Dār Fūr*, p. 28.

It seems likely that a larger seal, different from other known designs, was deliberately chosen for the letter to Bonaparte, perhaps to avoid affixing the sultan's personal seal on a document destined for a non-Muslim while at the same time suggesting 'Abd al-Rahmān's superiority. On the other hand, the use of the smaller rectangular seal was deemed more appropriate for a relationship with the Ottoman sultan. It is more difficult to say why the seal was impressed no fewer than five times on the letter to Selim. Although on occasion documents from the Funj sultanate do have multiple seal impressions on them (but rarely more than two), this practice is otherwise unknown in Darfur.<sup>85</sup> Elsewhere in the Islamic world, the use of multiple seal impressions is unusual too. In Southeast Asia, it seems from the few extant examples that it was intended as a sign of respect to the recipient.<sup>86</sup> However, multiple seals are also known from Mongol letters of the 13th-14th centuries, with no fewer than five on the letter from the Ilkhan Öljeitü to King Philip le Bel of France in 1305. In all these letters, the Mongol ruler emphasises his status as a universal ruler, demanding submission from the addressee.<sup>87</sup> It seems more likely that in this context the use of multiple seal impressions was intended as mark of superiority. The exact significance of the use of five seal impressions in the 1791 Darfur letter is unclear. It may, in fact, have resulted from an awareness of different practices in different parts of the *dār al-Islām*, with the tendency to place the seal at the top of the letter in the central and western Sahel and the Maghreb, and at the bottom elsewhere. Possibly the multiple impressions were a deliberate attempt by the Darfur chancery to hedge their bets, aware that the positioning of the seal might be susceptible to different interpretations and expectations in different areas, an attempt to avoid offence by placing the seal regularly in every possible position. How, exactly, this would have been understood by its recipient is open to question, as Ottoman royal letters were generally validated by a *tuğra*<sup>88</sup> rather than a seal.

85 Abū Salīm, *al-Fūr wa'l-Arḍ*, p. 25; Spaulding and Abū Salīm, *Public Documents from Sinnār*, p. 11.

86 Annabel Teh Gallop, 'One Seal Good, Two Seals Better, Three Seals Best? Multiple Impressions of Malay Seals,' *Indonesia and the Malay World* 34/100 (2006): 406–426.

87 The corpus of Mongol letters to Europe is summarised and discussed in Denise Aigle, 'De la "non négociation" à l'alliance inaboutie: Réflexions sur la diplomatie entre les Mongols et l'Occident latin.' *Oriente Moderno* 88 (1998): 395–434, with further references; for an edition and discussion of the 1305 letter see A. Mostaert and F. Cleaves, *Les Lettres de 1289 et 1305 des ilkhan Arḡun et Öljeitü à Philippe le Bel*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962. Multiple seals are also found on documents issued by the Golden Horde chancery, drawing on earlier Mongol practice, see facsimiles in A. Melek Öztegin and İlyas Kemalöğlü, *Altun Ordu Hanlığına Ait Resmî Yazışmalar*. Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2017.

88 A stylised sultanlic signature, originally emulating the form of bow and arrows.

The titulature used in letters to Selim and Bonaparte is also quite different. The rulers of Darfur and surrounding sultanates such as Wadai arrogated to themselves the Caliphal titles of the great empires of the central Islamic lands, and some even claimed 'Abbasid descent.<sup>89</sup> The use of such titles was a long-standing tradition in the Sahel, and can be traced even in the 1391 letter from Bornu to the Mamluk sultan, in which the ruler of Bornu was styled, among other things, by the 'Abbasid-sounding *laqabs* al-Mutawakkil 'alā Allah and al-Mustanşir bi'llāh and as *al-ḥājj amīr al-mu'minīn*.<sup>90</sup> In his letter to Bonaparte, 'Abd al-Raḥmān describes himself as 'the sultan of the Muslims, the Caliph of God's Prophet' (*sultān al-Muslimīn wa-khalīfat rasūl rabb al-'ālamīn*), and a string of epithets follows emphasising his belief in the one God. Napoleon on the other hand is referred to briefly as simply '*sultān Faransīs*', 'Sultan of France' without any further epithets, a rather curt and dismissive formula that perhaps, in combination with the positioning of the seal, suggests a somewhat dismissive attitude towards the letter's recipient. The land charters also attest the Darfur sultan's use of the title of *khalīfa*, along with the similarly aggrandizing *amīr al-mu'minīn* or 'Commander of the Faithful'.<sup>91</sup> *Amīr al-mu'minīn* also appeared on the seals of some Darfur sultans,<sup>92</sup> and at least in the nineteenth century, sultans sometimes adopted 'Abbasid-sounding *laqabs* such as the above-mentioned al-Mu'taşim. 'Abd al-Raḥmān himself is said by al-Tūnisī to have used the title *sultān al-barrayn wa'l-baḥrayn* 'sultan of the two lands and two seas', an Ottoman title of Seljuk pedigree that originally referred to mastery of both the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, as well as *khādīm al-ḥaramayn al-sharīfayn*, 'servant of the Two Holy Shrines' (Mecca and Medina).<sup>93</sup> These also are attested on the charters issued by 'Abd al-Raḥmān.<sup>94</sup>

The frequent appearance of these Ottoman-sounding titles on documents from Darfur suggests the existence of a body of scribes who were informed about Ottoman practice, which they sought to appropriate. This chancery was also sufficiently self-aware and professional to abandon entirely the Darfur sultan's Ottoman-sounding titles when actually addressing the Ottoman sultan, and moderates the claims made by 'Abd al-Raḥmān accordingly. 'Abd

89 On claims to 'Abbasid descent in Wadai, see Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Tūnisī, *Riḥla ilā Wadāy*, ed. 'Abd al-Bāqī Muḥammad Kabīr, n.p. (Khartoum?): Sharikat al-Manākib lil-Nashr, n.d., p. 130.

90 Dewièrè, "Peace Be Upon Those Who Follow the Right Way," p. 669.

91 O'Fahey and Abu Salim, *Land in Dār Fūr*, pp. 31–2, 36, 40, 47, etc; Abū Salīm, *al-Fūr wa'l-Arḍ*, pp. 94, 96, 98, 99; Kapteijns and Spaulding, *After the Millennium*, p. 10.

92 Abū Salīm, *al-Fūr wa'l-Arḍ*, p. 28.

93 al-Tūnisī, *Tashḥīdh al-Adhhān*, p. 68.

94 O'Fahey and Abu Salim, *Land in Dār Fūr*, p. 31.



al-Raḥmān's letter to the Ottoman sultan correctly allocates the titles *malik al-barrayn wa'l-baḥrayn* and *khādīm al-ḥaramayn al-sharīfayn* to Selim, while 'Abd al-Raḥmān's own titulature avoids the claim to be Caliph that we see in the letter to Bonaparte and instead emphasises his upholding of the Sunna and the Qur'an. This latter formula also has parallels in the charters, appearing in almost identical form in the intitutatio of a grant issued by 'Abd al-Raḥmān in 1214/1799–1800.<sup>95</sup> However, the use of the formula *sultān b. sultān*, 'sultan son of the sultan', which we find in the 1791 letter, is also reminiscent of Ottoman practice, although does not obviously usurp the privileges of the Ottoman sultan.<sup>96</sup> Further, the emphasis in the letter on friendship and 'love' (*maḥabba*) between the two sides emulates the rhetorical formulations of the Ottoman chancery.<sup>97</sup>

Rather than *faqīhs* drawing up documents ad hoc, it seems clear that scribes possessing certain knowledge of both indigenous and foreign diplomatic conventions were required, and it seems reasonable to characterise the body of men so charged as a chancery. The identity of these scribes must remain uncertain, although it is very likely they were *faqīhs*, or possibly other specialists in the written word such as copyists of books, judges, imams or possibly even merchants. Elsewhere in the central Sahel such specialists in the written word were often immigrant hajjis, which might explain awareness of diplomatic practices of the central Islamic lands.<sup>98</sup> However, the presence of certain words and spellings characteristic of Sudanic Arabic such as *'ayla* and *wadīfa* suggests the scribe of the 1791 letter was a native of the region, who, whilst educated, did not have a sufficient mastery of classical Arabic to avoid these solecisms. Nonetheless, there are attempts at stylistic elegance through the use of rhyme, as conventional in chancery documents of the central Islamic lands (e.g. line 10 *maḥabbatanā fikum zā'ida wa'l-murāsala baynanā wa-baynakum hiya al-fā'ida*).

Given that the chancery officials of Darfur were evidently acquainted with Ottoman diplomatic convention, it may seem surprising that both sender and recipient are named in the letter to Selim. Conventionally, diplomatic correspondence in the central Islamic lands in this period omitted reference to or attributes of the sender. Indeed, on the rare occasions when the sender's name is included, it is usually a deliberate insult, or an indication of inferiority of the

95 O'Fahey and Abu Salim, *Land in Dār Fūr*, p. 77, and vi.

96 O'Fahey and Abu Salim, *Land in Dār Fūr*, p. 31.

97 Işıksel, 'Hierarchy and Friendship'.

98 Cf. Dewière, 'Les lettres du pouvoir au Sahel islamique,' pp. 1071–2; also Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 224–5.



recipient, as in Ottoman letters to Christian rulers.<sup>99</sup> It does not seem, however, this is the intention with ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s letter to Selim, in which both sender and recipient are named and given attributes, as it is friendly in tone. In fact, it is in line with the practices we see in the surviving correspondence from the central Sahel dating to the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, as well as nineteenth century correspondence from Bornu.<sup>100</sup> In a letter from Sultan Dūd Murra of Wadai to Sultan ‘Alī Dīnār of Darfur in 1911 not only are both sender and recipient described as *al-mu‘azzam* (the great) and *al-muḥtaram* (the respected), but both are given the title *amīr al-mu‘minīn*.<sup>101</sup> It seems the omission of sender convention was not adhered to in the central and western Sahel, although it certainly was in other parts of Africa in the period.<sup>102</sup>

The question thus arises of both what was intended by the letter’s scribe and how the letter was understood. On one level, it might be argued that the scribe simply adhered to local Sahelian practice; on the other hand, given the evident knowledge of Ottoman conventions we see in other aspects of the letter, its formal features seem unlikely to be accidental. It is possible that the naming of both sender and recipient was intended to assert equality between Selim and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān as two sultans, an idea which is also reflected in the contents of the letter, in which ‘Abd al-Raḥmān implicitly compares his own battles against the infidel *‘ayla* with Selim’s battles against the infidel in Europe. If, indeed, it was understood as such in Istanbul – which it may well have been even if this was not the intent – this would also go some way to explaining the apparently frosty reception of the embassy, suggested by the silence of the contemporary Ottoman sources. Ottoman diplomacy asserted the superiority of the Ottoman sultan to other contemporary rulers,<sup>103</sup> and

99 V. Menage, ‘On the Constituent Elements of Certain Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Documents,’ *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48 (1985): 283–304 at pp. 289–90; see also Annabel Teh Gallop, ‘Gold, Silver and Lapis Lazuli: Royal Letters from Aceh in the Seventeenth Century.’ In Michael Feener, Patrick Daly and Anthony Reid (eds), *Mapping the Acehnese Past*. Leiden: KITLV, 2011, pp. 105–139, at pp. 132–3.

100 For this see Bivar, ‘Arabic Documents’; also Dewière, ‘Les lettres du pouvoir au Sahel islamique’.

101 Kapteijns and Spaulding, *After the Millennium*, pp. 188–9.

102 See, for example, the Arabic correspondence in Sven Rubenson et al, *Correspondence and Treaties, 1800–1854*. Evanston, Ill: Addis Ababa: Northwestern University Press; Addis Ababa University Press, 1987.

103 Işıkşel, ‘Hierarchy and Friendship,’ pp. 293–4; see also Dimitri Kastritsis, ‘Feridūn Beg’s *Münşe‘ātü ’s-Selāṭīn* (“Correspondence of Sultans”) and Late Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Views of the Political World.’ In Dimitri Angelov, Yota Batsaki and Sahar Bazzaz (eds), *Imperial Geographies in Byzantine and Ottoman Space*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies, 2013, pp. 91–110.

officials in the Sublime Porte are unlikely to have taken kindly to the suggestion of equality. The letter from Darfur would have compared rather poorly in this respect to correspondence from other distant Muslim rulers. For example, letters from Tīpū Sulṭān of Mysore to Abdülhamid I and Selim III in the 1780s and 1790s were noticeably humble in tone, explicitly recognising the Ottoman as both the greatest sultan and the Caliph – and these did elicit responses.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, even a rival of the Ottomans such as the Iranian Nādir Shāh (r. 1736–1747) took care to address them in similarly humble terms in his correspondence.<sup>105</sup> It is probable, then, that the Darfuri letter constituted something of a faux-pas, its formal characteristics undermining its message of friendship. This impression is supported by the contemporary Turkish translation (see figure 4), which entirely omits ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s titulature, starting only from line 11 of the original text. The wholesale omission of the protocol in translation was certainly not conventional. In the contemporary Turkish translations of Tīpū Sulṭān’s letters, prepared by the Ottoman chancery, the protocol (which of course mentioned only recipient, not sender) was invariably translated in full, for all its verbosity and rhetorical redundancy.<sup>106</sup> The choice of the Ottoman chancery not to translate the protocol of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s letter supports the impression given by the silence of other Ottoman sources that the embassy was not a success.

While there is room to debate the intentions of the scribe of the 1791 letter, it is clear that it is the product of a sophisticated chancery with established conventions. A completely different impression is given by the letter to Bonaparte. Not only does the layout violate all established epistolographic norms, as noted above, but the Arabic is extremely colloquial, with (for example) numerous spoken forms such as *-tū* in places of the classical second person plural ending *-tum*. There are numerous spelling errors such as the regular omission of the final *alif* of the first person plural ending *-nā*, and there is no attempt at stylistic elegance at all. Given that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s chancery evidently regularly drew up Arabic documents such as land charters which are of far greater lucidity and elegance both of language and form, quite apart from the letter to Selim III with its clear knowledge of Ottoman epistolographic conventions, it is hard to know what exactly to make of this.

104 Hikmet Bayur, ‘Maysor Sultanı Tipu ile Osmanlı Padişahlarından I. Abdülhamid ve III. Selim Arasındaki Mektuplaşma.’ *Belleten* 12/47 (1943): 617–654.

105 See *I. Mahmud-Nadir Şah Mektuplaşmaları: 3 Numaralı Nâme-i Hümayûn Defteri*. Istanbul: T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 2014, e.g. no. 1, no. 30.

106 See the texts given in Bayur, ‘Maysor Sultanı Tipu ile Osmanlı Padişahlarından I. Abdülhamid ve III. Selim Arasındaki Mektuplaşma.’

Was it just that no competent scribe could be found to write the letter? This seems unlikely given the evidence al-Tūnisī presents for the presence of educated *faqīhs* and the reading of Arabic texts at ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s court.<sup>107</sup> Or was it that a letter to a non-Muslim ruler was not seen as something worthy of the attention of the chancery, in keeping with the convention alluded to by Cluny that the sultan’s seal should not be attached to such a document? Although it might be argued on the basis of later examples that professional letters impressed with the royal seal were sent to non-Muslims,<sup>108</sup> it should be remembered that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s reign represents a turning point in the Islamisation of Darfur. As ‘Abd al-Raḥmān had spent much of his life as a *faqīh* himself, and according to al-Tūnisī was profoundly personally pious, it is entirely possible that the sultan had a rather different attitude than his successors. Browne repeatedly and bitterly complained about the intense prejudice against non-Muslims in Darfur that he experienced during his visit at this time.<sup>109</sup>

Yet in terms of contents, the Bonaparte letter is friendly in tone, although lacking the rhetorical emphasis on mutual affection found in the 1791 letter. Indeed, it was delivered by an embassy that comprised a *faqīh*, and was accompanied by gifts – again, local products, slaves and civets. The numerous faults of presentation suggest that it was not properly speaking a product of the Darfur chancery. We know on some other occasions that diplomatic letters were composed by ambassadors en route,<sup>110</sup> although even that hypothesis would not fully explain its peculiarities, as there must have been no shortage of qualified scribes in Egypt who could have assisted in producing a more professional-looking document, should, say, the original have been lost through

107 al-Tūnisī, *Tashḥīdh al-Adhḥān*, p. 117, who notes that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ordered a *faqīh* to write a commentary on Mughulṭāy’s *al-Khaṣā’iṣ* and other books of *fiqh*, as well as on the celebrated manual of Arabic grammar, *al-Ājurrumīyya*, and *al-Sulam al-Murawnaq* by al-Akhḍarī, a famous introductory logic work. Elsewhere, al-Tūnisī indicates that al-Qurṭubī’s *al-Tadhkira*, a work on the afterlife, was read aloud at court during Ramadan by a *faqīh*. See al-Tūnisī, *Tashḥīdh al-Adhḥān*, p. 126.

108 See for example the letter dated 1864 from Sultan Muḥammad Ḥusayn to the British consul reproduced as the frontispiece of Mr and Mrs Petherick, *Travels in Central Africa*, 11, London: Tinsley Brothers, 1859.

109 Browne, *Travels in Asia, Africa and Syria*, esp. pp. 192–212.

110 For two examples from the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Giancarlo Casale, “His Majesty’s Servant Lufti”: The Career of a Previously Unknown Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Envoy to Sumatra.’ *Turcica* 37 (2005): 41–81; İsmail Hakkı Kadi, A.C.S. Peacock and Annabel Teh Gallop, ‘Writing History: the Acehese Embassy to Istanbul, 1849–1852.’ In R. Michael Feener, Patrick Daly and Anthony Reid (eds), *Mapping the Acehese Past*. Leiden: KITLV, 2001, pp. 163–181, 259–278, esp. pp. 173–4.

some accident. Nonetheless, its author was not wholly unfamiliar with diplomatic convention, as the correct rendering of 'Abd al-Raḥmān's titles suggests, and the omission of the *invocatio* is clearly deliberate. Although no one explanation for the form of this letter is wholly satisfying, it seems reasonable to assume its inelegant appearance is not accidental, and may reflect Darfuri attitudes towards the recipient.

### Conclusion

The substantial differences of form and language between 'Abd al-Raḥmān's letter of 1791 to Selim and 1800 to Bonaparte underline the difficulties of generalising about chancery practice on the basis of a very limited corpus of materials. While the letter of 1800 superficially suggests a profoundly provincial and remote court that had no idea how to prepare a letter according to the conventions of Islamic diplomatics, the letter of 1791 strongly suggests that there was a Darfuri chancery that was aware of the correct protocols for dealing with other Muslim rulers, even if on occasion it still adhered to Sahelian practice such as the inclusion of the name of the sender. I suggest that these differences are deliberate. Despite the gifts that accompanied both missions, a very different attitude towards each recipient was reflected in the formal aspects of each letter, with the curt language and lack of formalities in the letter to Napoleon suggesting a somewhat contemptuous attitude towards the infidel, even while requesting he do the sultan a favour.

In contrast, 'Abd al-Raḥmān's letter to Selim was addressed to a fellow sultan, an equal, a point which is emphasised by both the letter's form and its content, with its references to the Ottomans' and Darfuris' shared experience of jihad. This may have seemed less preposterous from the Darfuri perspective than it may at first appear, given the repeated claims of the Darfuri sultans to be *amir al-mu'minīn* and *khalīfa*, claims which are diplomatically passed over in this missive. The mission was far from being the sort of vanity project that Browne portrayed. It was intended to gain not just luxury goods and weapons for import, but possibly more importantly, to secure Darfur's crucial trade route through Egypt by soliciting Ottoman assistance against the Mamluk regime in Egypt, whose fall is celebrated in the letter to Bonaparte. It seems likely that reports of Cezayirli Gazi Hasan Pasha's abortive expedition to Egypt just a few years before would have encouraged the Darfuris to believe Ottoman intervention was possible, although both the letter itself and the ambassador's oral testimony suggest they were also aware of Selim's protracted battles with his European enemies. In practice, however the embassy reached Istanbul at

the worst time possible, in the wake of disastrous Ottoman defeats, meaning it seemingly met with little response from the Ottomans. The formal attributes of the letter itself may have further contributed to the embassy's apparent lack of success. The diplomatic features of both letters, however, are clear testimony to the use of writing as an expression of power in Islamic Africa, with its distinctive articulations in both the central Sahel and the central Islamic lands, elements from both of which were reflected in Darfuri practices.

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## Appendix

'Abd al-Raḥmān's letter to Napoleon Bonaparte, c. 1800

[seal: illegible]

- 1 من حضرة سلطان المسلمين و خليفة رسول رب العالمين
- 2 الواثق بعناية الواحد الاحد مولان السلطان عبد الرحمن
- 3 ابن السلطان احمد بكر نصره الله امين بجا القرآن
- 4 العظيم الى حضرة سلطان فرنسيس وصلين الى عندك
- 5 تابعين الحاج بلال والفقه احمد وزايد بلغن خبر على انكم
- 6 ملكتمو مدينة وارسلنا لكم تابعين طلبنا منكم الوجوب القدير
- 7 سابق القز بظلموا الجلاب والآن بلغن خبركم على انكم نهيتوا
- 8 الظلم وارسلنا اليكم هذا عبيده افهموه وخطبوني بجواب خل
- 9 الجلاب تنزل عندكم تتاجر وترجع وانا طلبت منكم الوجوب
- 10 القدير راس الرقيق محبوبين والجمال محبوب والقز بظلمو
- 11 الجلاب حتي ماله بوجوبه هذا ماه زين بين السلاطين وا
- 12 كتبوله لي الجواب يجيب مع مراسيله في السرعة والجلاب تنزل
- 13 عندكم ثلثة خبره منهم الخير فرج الله تابعنا والخير اسحاق
- 14 تابعنا والخير منور وصلين لكم ثلثة روس رقيق وزبادتين
- 15 الي سبيل المحب وهديتك تحيك مع الخير فرج الله و بلغ
- 16 سلامي علي جميع عسكر فرنساوية والسلام عليك



## Translation

From his majesty the sultan of the Muslims, the Caliph of God's Prophet, who trusts in the assistance of the One God, our lord Sultan 'Abd al-Raḥmān son of sultan Aḥmad Bukr, may God render him victorious amen by the great Qur'an, to the Sultan of France. There are arriving to you our subjects al-Ḥājj Bilāl, the faqih Aḥmad and Zāyid. We have heard that you have occupied Medina,<sup>111</sup> and we sent you our subjects asking you for the ancient dues from before the Ghuzz's<sup>112</sup> oppression of the *gallāba*. We have heard the news that you have forbidden oppression. We have sent you this slave, explain to him and address me [through him]. Let the *gallāba* trade in your lands and return [to us]. I ask from you the ancient dues, two sequins<sup>113</sup> for a slave, one sequin for a camel. The Ghuzz oppressed the *gallāba*, even their possessions. This is not nice between sultans. Write for him [the slave] an answer to me for him to bring in haste with the goods dispatched. Among the *gallāba* coming to you are three *khabīrs*, among whom is the *khabīr* Faraj Allaj, our subject, the *khabīr* Ishaq our subject and the *khabīr* Munawwar. They bring you three slaves and two civets<sup>114</sup> by way of affection. The present is coming to you with the *khabīr* Faraj Allah. Communicate my greeting to all the French army and greetings to you.

111 Thus the accompanying French translation; perhaps the city (*madīna*) of Cairo is meant.

112 Al-Ghuzz was the term commonly used for Mamluks.

113 Text *maḥbūb*. The coin referred to is the Ottoman gold zer maḥbub, see J. Allan, "Zer Maḥbūb", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, First Edition (1913–1936)*, Edited by M. Th. Houtsma, T.W. Arnold, R. Basset, R. Hartmann. Consulted online on 20 January 2021 <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-871X\\_ei\\_SIM\\_6095](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-871X_ei_SIM_6095)>

114 Valued for their perfume; however they are only briefly mentioned as a trade item by Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and the Bilād as-Sūdān*, p. 224. Browne notes that civet-cats originated in the south of Darfur, but were often kept in cages in the houses of the rich. Browne, *Travels in Asia, Africa and Syria*, p. 261.