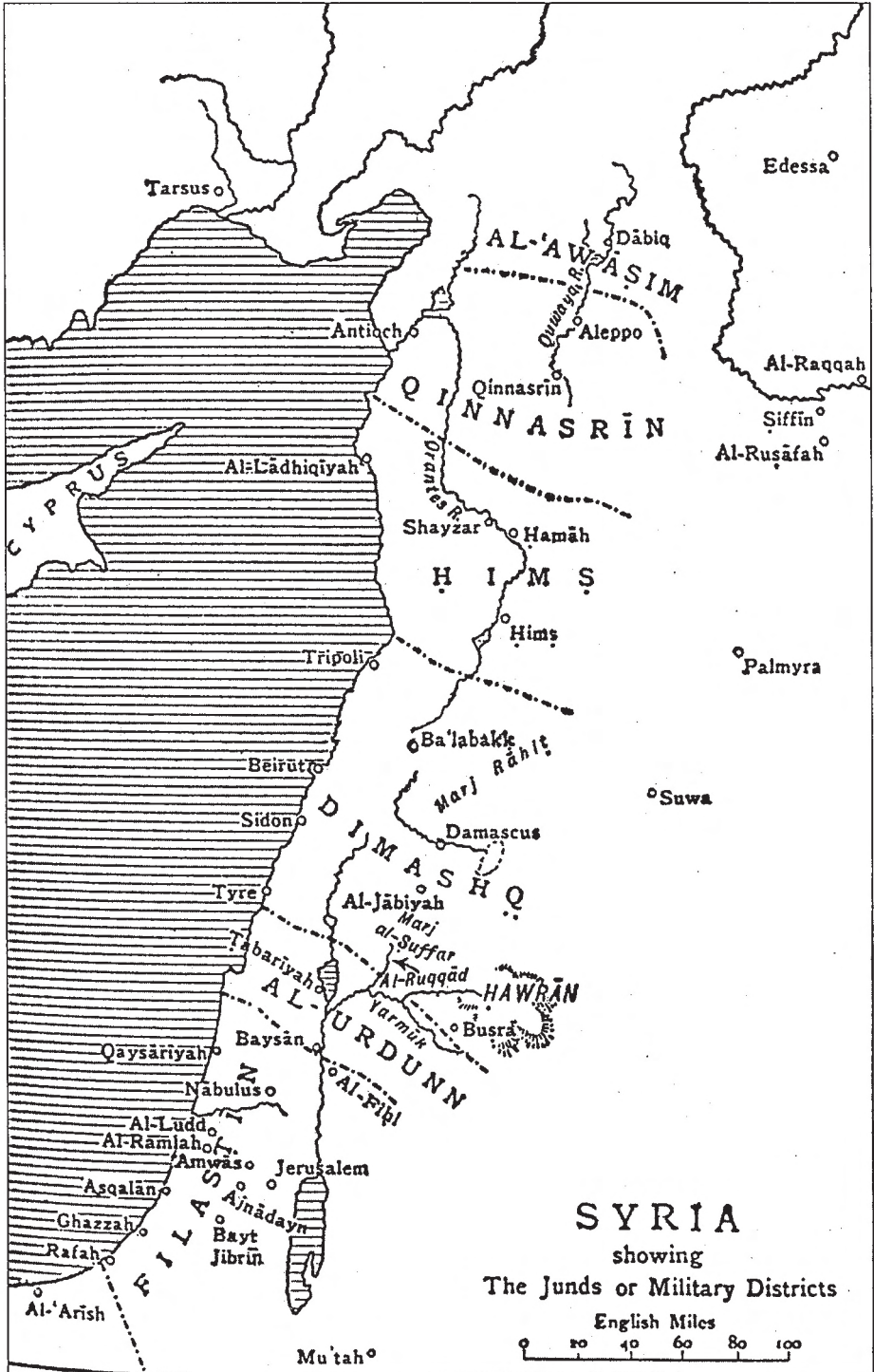


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The Conquest of Syria
according to the Swahili Epic of Herakleios



The Swahili epic of Herakleios (*Kyuo kya Herekali*: "The Book of Herakleios") relates the conquest of Byzantine Syria by the Arabs (628-636)¹ in 1150 strophes of 4 lines each². It is written according to the Arabic epic literary traditions on the Prophet Mohammed³ by a native Swahili poet, who did not belong to the Arab aristocracy of the East Coast of Africa⁴. His name was Bwana Mwengo, son of Osman, who is considered to be the father of epic Swahili literature, a great poet with a well-balanced style and a homogeneous and brilliant language, who wrote his epic on commission for the king of Yunga⁵. He was probably born around 1650⁶, and the oldest (and best) manuscript dates to 1728. It is preserved in the library of the *Seminar für afrikanische Sprachen* in Hamburg, and has been edited, commented and translated into Dutch as a Ph.D. thesis by J. Knappert⁷.

1. The sources and historic value of the Swahili epic

Since Bwana Mwengo's epic is all but a contemporary text of the Syrian conquest, one should investigate his own sources, reliability and authority.

1. For an overview of this conquest and the reign of Herakleios (610-641), see Ostrogorsky, 1968: 92-109 (reign) and 110-112 (Arab invasions). - Christophilopoulou, 1981: 13-14 (Herakleios) and 33-42 (the Muslim invasions) - Karayannopoulos, 1976: 59-74. - Vranousi, 1979. - Hitti, 1970: 139-159. - Vryonis, 1978: 246-249.

2. These strophes are stanzas with rhymes. Each line consists of 8 syllables.

3. As for the spelling of names we use the general accepted English standard form for known names, such as Mohammed, Medina, Mecca, etc. When referring to Arab names, known in the context of scholarship on the conquest of Syria, we use the spelling as accepted in the scholarly framework (e.g. Khalid ibn-al-Wahd), but we also indicate which is the spelling in the epic. Swahili terms and Arab or Muslim names that are less known are spelled as they occur in the epic.

4. See Knappert, 1979: 109-110.

5. Yunga is the name of the palace of Pate, an island nearby Mombasa in Kenya. We do not know the name of this king of Pate (strophe 1124: *fumo wa Yunga*).

6. Knappert, 1979: 110.

7. Knappert, 1958. Knappert's thesis has not been properly published. He has published some extracts of the poem in English translation: see Knappert (1979: 112-113) and especially chapter 3 in Knappert (1967). - There is an older edition by Büttner, 1911-1912: 1-36, 108-136, 194-232 and 261-296, which has only 1007 strophes. For a more recent discussion of problems surrounding these editions and the epic itself, see Papadopoulos, 1994: 223-227. - See also Hendrickx, 2000. - There are eight manuscripts of the epic, which differ from each other: see Knappert, 1979: 111 and 114.

Bwana Mwengo himself refers in strophes 7-13 to the fact that the king of Yunga wished to have a tradition on the Prophet (when the latter looked upon the battlefield from Tabuk)⁸ (strophe 7). The king instructed Bwana Mwengo "to write and to translate" (strophe 8)⁹. It was the king who "revealed the letters and communicated the words" to the poet (strophe 9), and who explained what he needed (strophe 19). Thus Bwana Mwengo started preparing for writing¹⁰ his story on the war between Arabs and Byzantines¹¹. This story he found in an Arab poem of which he copied the contents (strophe 13).

Bwana Mwengo's information gave rise to a number of speculations, and R. Paret supposed that the Swahili epic was based upon events, related in a prose work of Abul-Hasan al Bakri (period 1295-1382). But this theory has been criticized by C. H. Becker and rejected by J. Knappert, who correctly argues that Bwana Mwengo pertinently refers to a *poem*, not a prose work¹². It is certainly useful to analyze the poet's own testimony with more attention. The author refers to two sources: (i) the king of Yunga, who knew the tradition of the Prophet regarding Tabuk, and (ii) an Arabic poetic work. Probably, the king's knowledge was based – at least partially – on this poem, but he may well have been aware of other sources, unknown to us. But did Bwana Mwengo read the poem? Or was it read to him? Or did the king, or somebody of his entourage, simply inform our author of its contents? At the end of his epic Bwana Mwengo states that he wrote down the story painstakingly and with sense of duty (strophe 1117), that there must be grammatical mistakes in his work, and further more that he has not finished "school", neither read "all books" (strophe 1120). But the latter refers to the Moslem theological education and the reading of Moslem theological works, as it becomes apparent from the explanation that follows in strophes 1121-22¹³.

8. This seems to mean in the context that the king wanted to create a new, pious and popular narration on the Prophet and the "story of Tabuk" for use in his kingdom.

9. In Swahili: "... kanitami kukutubu 'Tafusiri' kinambia".

10. Knappert (1979: 110) touches on the (rather remote) possibility that the author could not write but dictated his poem to a scribe. The references in the epic itself do not support such a possibility.

11. The Byzantines are called *Wa-rumu* ("the Romans") in Swahili. The singular form is *Mu-rumu* ("a Roman").

12. R. Paret, 1926-7: 241-9 and 1928: 152-153. - Becker, 1911: 402-404. - Knappert, 1967: 144. - Papadopoulos, 1994: 223-227.

13. Cf. Knappert, 1979: 110: "Bwana Mwengo calls himself ignorant and claims not to have read the Minhâju't-Tâlibîni, a well-known Shafeitic work on Islamic law".

There is another question: why would the king of Yunga order a large poem on the conquest of Syria to be written in Swahili? Most probably not for himself, since the Muslim East African coastal kings were of Arab descent and Arab-speaking. It was intended for the "people of the coast", i.e. the indigenous racially mixed or purely "Bantu" population, who spoke the "language of the coast", i.e. Swahili¹⁴. Moreover, the poem was not intended to be read (*by* readers) – despite the fact that several manuscripts have been preserved – but to be listened at (strophes and 1130), thus to be read or recited *for* an audience, and that with an *educational* purpose (-so that the Swahili people could learn the Arabian legends: strophe 1145). The *oral* purpose of the poem was thus intended to enrich the already existing oral tradition on Mohammed and Ali among the Swahili population, whose Islamisation went back to ca 700 AD. But there is more: in the same context, Bwana Mwengo states that "he does not understand the work of translating" (strophe 1119), and in strophe 251, he makes an intriguing remark; when enumerating the tribes that were convoked to Medina, he writes: "Eleven tribes with their chiefs and commanders, I have seen in the tradition, but they are not found in the translation"¹⁵. And indeed, when we count the tribes, numbered by Bwana Mwengo until strophe 251, we obtain the number of fifteen, while in strophe 253 he refers to a total of twenty. Previously, when describing the fifth tribe, the sons of Saibani under emir Gailani (strophes 225-229), he states that the "tradition" puts their number at 1700 horsemen. To which "translation" and to which "tradition" did our author refer¹⁶? And if the translation (certainly of a text, and presumably of the Arabian poem) provided numbers, which differed from his own numbers, where did he get his complementary information? Perhaps, and most probably, from the *oral tradition*, which may be considered to be the third source for Bwana Mwengo's epic.

The Swahili oral tradition may also be responsible for the great reverence, shown to Ali, who, by divine order, is recalled to finish the war against the Byzantines, which only he could win. Indeed, the reverence to Ali by the Swahilis

14. This is stated by Bwana Mwengo in strophe 1145. - The term "Sawahili" means "coastal people" (Knappert, 1979: 7).

15. Strophe 251: "... hadiθini tafusiri niwene wasikutiwa".

16. The term "tradition" (*hadiθi*) is also used in strophes 7 and 8, where it is stated that the king of Yunga wished a "tradition" on the Prophet and that he had loved that "tradition".

seems to have an historic foundation. An exodus is believed to have taken place from Iraq to the East African Coast after 702, when Omayyad rule was restored and when the Shi'ite followers of the *Ahl al-Bayt* ("the family of the Prophet") left the country. Knappert explains the association of the name Zayd with the early Muslim settlers in East Africa, Zayd being one of the great-grandsons of Ali, whose son (Hussein)'s followers were known as the Shia, of whom some members of a branch, called *Umma Zaydi* ("the Community of Zayd"), have settled in East Africa¹⁷.

The Swahili epic of Herakleios is also known as *Utendi wa Tamkuka* ("The action at Tabuk")¹⁸. It is – according to J. Knappert – a *laudatio* of the Prophet, having Mohammed and Ali as central figures¹⁹. Herakleios, in the "title role", is a negative figure, "an *exemplum* of deception and godlessness in comparison and contrast to which the prophet's great virtues and glory could be measured"²⁰. It is not a real epic, writes Knappert, because only "half the epic is devoted to battle scenes, the rest is miracles, speeches, odes in praise of the heroes themselves, prayers and polite greetings"²¹. Once again, the analysis of the text will bring clarity to these problems. It is true that Herakleios – as well as the Christian Byzantines in general – are presented in a negative light²². It is also correct that Bwana Mwengo exalts the Prophet throughout his epic²³, while Ali in fact is – not unlike Achilles in the Iliad – the *absent* hero, who at the end as a *deus ex machina* solves the dramatic problem. But it is doubtlessly a mistake to put the epic nature of Bwana Mwengo's poetry into question. Fifty percent of his text consists indeed of descriptions of battles, but – except for the theological²⁴ and a few lyric²⁵ parts

17. Knappert, 1979: 5. – On the Zaydis, see also Hitti, 1970: 449.

18. Knappert, 1979: 112. – Papadopoulos, 1994: 213 ff. - Another title used for the epic is *Chuo cha Utendi* ("Book of Action"). – Knappert (1958: 13) compares the "battle of Tabuk" with "the battle of Roncevaux" of the *Chanson de Roland*, both being non historic, but both having acquired symbolic and ethno-religious value through epic literature.

19. Knappert, 1979: 112.

20. Hendrickx, 2000.

21. Knappert, 1979: 112.

22. Cf. Hendrickx, 2000.

23. Knappert (1958: 23-28) has listed about 40 expressions, used by Bwana Mwengo to qualify and bless the Prophet.

24. The most important – for the context of the Syrian wars - are the letter of the Prophet to Herakleios (strophes 30-71) and the discussion between the Byzantine bishop and the Muslim messenger, Khattar, (strophes 103-122) on the divinity of Christ.

– all scenes of the poem are written in function of the battles: the arrival of the Arab tribes, the nomination of commanders and the distribution of banners, the descriptions of armies and individual fighters, the correspondence between the adversaries, the dialogues between Emperor²⁶ Herakleios and his bishop and between Mohammed and the Arab chiefs, even some prayers. Consequently, the main theme of this epic is the war between Byzantines and Arabs as it is expressively stated by Bwana Mwengo in strophes 13 and 1117, which has been totally mistaken as "legend" by J. Knappert. On top of it, from a literary point of view, the *Herakali* possesses all characteristics of epic poetry at its best²⁷.

But the presentation of the Syrian war(s) in the Swahili epic is carefully set in the context of the exaltation of the Prophet, and the whole *concept* of Tabuk is used as a *metaphysical* factor. The historic expedition of the Prophet to Tabuk seldom receives attention in the western works on Byzantine history. In military terms it was "bloodless, though it netted a few Jewish and Christian oases"²⁸. But it has taken something of a symbolic or even transcendental value in Islamic historic-religious writing²⁹. In the epic itself, where Mohammed does not die in 632, but is present throughout the Syrian conquest, "the hill of Tabuk" is the central place, from where the Prophet – as from a place, outside the physical word – leads the action. Did Bwana Mwengo (and the Swahili oral tradition) really not know that the Prophet was not involved in the Syrian war(s)? Probably they *did* know. In the epic the Prophet is not *actively* and *physically* involved in the war. He is an almost distant, metaphysical figure, directing the Muslims from where he resides, i.e. Tabuk. He encourages, prays, gives advice, and intervenes through his wisdom, which he receives through the Archangel Gabriel. Therefore, his position is separated from this of the warriors and the battlefields themselves. There are

25. E.g. the song, composed and sung by the Prophet messenger, Khattar, for his she-camel (strophes 94-103). He sung the song while on mission to deliver the Prophet's letter to Herakleios. Another, almost idyllic scene is placed at the end of the epic: when the Prophet calls Ali for the final battle, the latter is busy with household duties (strophes 1016-1030).

26. The title of 'emperor' is rendered as 'sultan' in the epic: see e.g. strophe 142.

27. As for epic characteristics, cf. Hendrickx, 1993: 99-105.

28. Hitti, 1970: 147.

29. For Islamic scholarship on the Tabuk expedition, see among others: Akeram Diya al Umari, 1991: 203-216. – Lings (Abu Bakar Sirajal-Din), no date: 315-325. – Abul Hasan Ali, no date: 347-364. – Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri, 1996: 422-435. Maulana Muhammad Ali, 1983: 8, 43, 60, 130, 173.

two worlds parallel to each other in the epic: the real, terrestrial world with the war and the battles, and the extraterrestrial world, where the Prophet resides between earth and heaven, and from where he communicates with his chiefs and fighters on the one side, and with Allah and the Archangel Gabriel on the other side. In fact, the only battle which is *not* described in the epic, is the Prophet's expedition to Tabuk! When one reads the epic with this framework in mind, the apparent historic-theological riddle is solved³⁰.

Finally, the absence of dates, of names of places, and of distances in the epic seems to be problematic and indicative of weakness regarding historic information. Partly, the historic-theological concept of the epic, discussed above, can also explain this phenomenon. The nature of oral tradition is another factor. On the other hand, careful reading of the text provides some general geographic outlines and a chronological sequence. Thus, Damascus is an important object of Arab conquest, the expedition of Khālid to Iraq is mentioned, and the movements and reinforcements of Byzantine troops are indicated. When analyzing the epic's story in the following pages, we shall pay due attention to these aspects.

2. The conquest of Syria

The Swahili epic's narration of the conquest of Syria starts with the battle of Mu'tah (in 629 AD): the Byzantines defeated an Arab incursion of about 3000 soldiers under Zayd ibn-Harithah, the adopted son of Mohammed, who lost his life during the battle³¹. In the epic Zaidi (i.e. Zayd) is mentioned, but Jaafari is indicated as the son of an uncle of the Prophet (strophes 14-21)³².

Mohammed, in Medina, preparing for vengeance³³, sends a letter³⁴ to

30. See also Corbin, 1964: 13-30, where the dogmatic context and the significance of Revelation and the "real meaning" that reality has for the believers, are described. It is in the framework of these concepts that Islamic history is written.

31. See Hitti, 1970: 147.

32. The epic also mentions a third slain leader, Abdullahi (strophe 16).

33. In the epic it is the Archangel Gabriel, who – as the messenger of Allah – orders the Prophet to attack the Byzantines (strophes 22-37). Interestingly, the Prophet is instructed to inform the Byzantines of the coming attack (strophe 34).

34. The letter is dictated by Mohammed to Ali, who is described as an educated man, known as writer and pleader (strophe 40). This quality of Ali was generally recognized in the Muslim world (see e.g. Eleutheriades, 1909: 79). In the letter, Herakleios is accused of the "murder" of Jaafari, and the

Emperor Herakleios³⁵, inviting him to convert to Islam (strophes 30- 129). Herakleios's answer being negative, the Muslims prepare for war (strophes 130-202).

The relation of the conquest of Syria – in the text of the Swahili epic – can be divided in 3 parts³⁶. At least **twelve battles**, of unequal importance, are described

divinity of Christ is denied, while Herakleios is invited to accept the faith of Islam, if he wants to avoid war (strophes 44-72). In reality, the battle of Mu'tah marks indeed the beginning of the Arab conquest of Syria, ostensibly "to avenge the martyrdom of the Prophet's emissary sent to the Ghassanid prince of Bursa", the real object being "to secure the coveted Mshafiyah swords manufactured at Mu'tah" (Hitti, 1970: 147). Mohammed needed these swords for his impending attack on Mecca.

The existence of a letter of the Prophet to emperor Herakleios is a wide-spread theme in Muslim tradition, according to which Herakleios had preserved in musk the Prophet's letter bidding him to adopt Islam, while the Persian King had torn to pieces the Prophet's letter (cf. Kirk, 1966: 20). The correspondence of the Prophet with world leaders of his time is also attested in the case of the Axumite *basileus* (Hendrickx, 1999: 117. – Sergew Hable Sellassie, 1972: 13-14).

35. Bwana Mwengo describes in detail the procedure regarding the correspondence. The Arab messenger, who carried the letter, was Khattar. The Prophet's letter was brought to Tabuk, where it was read by the bishop, who wrote himself another letter and folded it around the Prophet's one. Khattar then took both letters to Herakleios. The latter read both letters and sent Khattar back to the bishop with a letter, in which he instructed the bishop to mobilize the Byzantine army and to frighten the Prophet. The text of Bwana Mwengo provides some interesting details: Herakleios wrote to the bishop that he himself does not want to be implicated, and that the bishop must solve the problem by himself (strophes 132-134). In consequence, the bishop wrote a message to the Prophet declaring him war. The epic consequently accuses the bishop of being a villain and a scoundrel (strophe 169).

36. Knappert (1979: 111-112) recognized 9 parts in the epic's structure: strophes (or stanzas) 1-13: introduction; 14-266: after having learned Jaafari's death, Mohammed prepares for war and summons all the Arab tribes; 267-400: the logistic problem of provisions being solved, the Prophet hands the banners to the commanders, and sends Ali home; 401-550: departure of the army towards Tabuk and description of the 3 first battles; death of the Byzantine general Saiar; 551-699: Herakleios sends his minister, the bishop, with new troops, who defeat the Arabs in two battles, but are finally defeated by Khalid ibn-al-Walid. General Paulos engages in a new battle, and the Prophet encourages his men in a speech; 700-807: a Byzantine spy becomes Muslim; 808-990: Herakleios levies a third army. Several battles take place, and the Arabs are tired, but not defeated. 'Umar slays Herakleios' nephew; 991-1101: Ali is called back, and the Byzantines are finally and irrevocably defeated; 1102-1150: most Greeks accept Islam. End remarks of poet.

Knappert has not recognized the historic sequence of the conquest of Syria, but he has also – it seems – misunderstood the historic contents of the epic, not being able to interpret the place that the poet, Bwana Mwengo, has given in his epic to the "battle of Tabuk" and "Tabuk" itself. Knappert (1958: 43) considers the contents of the epic to be only a legend! (He writes: "Evenwel moet ik er de nadruk op leggen dat het hier een legende betreft, die ons niets zekers leert omtrent de ware toedracht van de feiten, maar alleen omtrent de geschiedbeschouwing van schrijvers en lezers dezer legende"! (sic!)). Consequently, Knappert's proposed division has no validity for the historic context.

in the epic. The general lines of the conquest are easily recognizable from the first battle with the patrician Sergios (February 634) to the conquest of Damascus (September 635) and finally the defeat of the Byzantines at Yarmouk (August 636). Not surprisingly, it is difficult to identify the battles, since different sources and even modern scholars give different pictures about the events³⁷. Moreover the Swahili epic credits the Byzantines with a less militarily disastrous performance than the other sources. Despite the negative picture of Herakleios, the bishop and the Christians in general in the epic, the army and its generals are described as valiant soldiers and proud, but capable horsemen.

2.1. The initial phase (strophes 203-525):

The epic's story goes as follows: tribes from all over the Arabian Peninsula (see map) gather in Medina (strophes 203-262), from where they move to the neighbourhood of Tabuk (strophes 263-408), where they meet the Byzantine army under Saiar. In the ensuing battle the Byzantines are defeated (strophes 409-525).

These events deserve to be analyzed in detail. The arrival of the Arab tribes in Medina is also known from other sources. It was in reality ordered by the second Chalif, 'Umar ibn-al-Khattab, and not by Mohammed who had passed away in 632³⁸. The army was taken in review and the commanders received their banners. Bwana Mwengo presents an exhaustive list of tribes and chiefs, arriving in Medina in order to participate in the Syrian conquest. The list (strophes 203-262) deserves to be repeated here:

- the banu Hilali, under their emir, Muabali bunu Sururi, with 1.000 soldiers;

37. See Stratos (1969: 48-49) for the confusion in the sources, Hitti (1970: 148-153), Stratos (1969: 53-78) and Runciman (1971: 15-16) give different prominence to and sketch different courses of events.

38. Mohammed was succeeded by the first Chalif, Abu-Bakr, who died in 634. 'Umar was the second Chalif (634-644). The conquest of Syria took place under 'Umar, except for phase 1 (cf. Runciman, 1971: 15).

39. In this list we give the names as found in the Swahili epic. In general, Swahili puts a "i" after the names of persons; thus Hilal becomes Hilali, Muabal becomes Muabali. The Swahili expression "bunu" which corresponds to the Arabic "ibn", means "son of". Thus, Asaabu, son of Mora = Asaabui bunu Mora (Swahili) = Asaabu ibn Mora (Arabic). Another variant is: Muabali wa Sururi = Muabal, son of Surur (= Muabal ibn Surur). Except for the term "banu" (e.g. banu Hilali), Swahili also uses the term "kabila" to refer to a tribe (e.g. kabila ya Huzamu).

- emir Wahhabu and his people;
- the tribe of Sundusi lead by Asaabu bunu Mora³⁹ with 7.000 horsemen;
- bunu Kinana and his fighters;
- the tribe of the sons of Saibani, under emir Gailani bunu Hatani with 1.700 horsemen;
- emir Hilali with 1.000 horsemen;
- the banu Rabia under Masuudi with 1.400 soldiers;
- the banu Umayya under Sahari bunu Harubu with 1.000 fighters. Bwana Mwengo explains his name as referring to emir Abu Sufiani of Mecca;
- 1.000 men of the tribe of Huzamu;
- the banu Tai under Maliki bunu Amiri, who is their commander as well as their civil administrator, with 1.000 horsemen;
- the tribe of the Saksak⁴⁰ and their subjects, the inhabitants of the coast region;
- the tribe(s) of Numera, Kalbu and Murra;
- the tribe of Baigati and Kilambu together with the tribe of Huzaa;
- another tribe (*kabila*), of which the author does not remember the name⁴¹;
- the banu Hindala.

According to Bwana Mwengo there were all together 72.000 fighters (strophe 204) or 77.000 according to the counting of Sjeich Abn Hasan, mentioned in strophe 257⁴². While this final number is as exaggerated as the numbers given by the Arab historians⁴³, the relative small numbers given in the catalogue may be nearer to reality. The numbers of the Byzantine troops are still more inflated⁴⁴: perhaps to underline the value and courage of the Muslims, who were able to defeat such numbers?

40. Swahili: *Wasakesake*.

41. This remark by Bwana Mwengo is of some interest, because it refers to a source, used by the author, who, however, forgot the information.

42. At the end of phase 2 of the Syrian war(s), the number of Arab troops is still given as 76.000 in the epic (strophe 734).

43. Cf. Hitti, 1970: 152 with reference to the battle of Yarmuk.

44. The following numbers are mentioned in the epic: strophes 440-441: 58.000 men participate in the first battle; strophe 481: 5.000 Byzantines perish; strophes 556-558: 100.000 new Byzantine troops are levied; strophes 677-668: 8.000 horsemen are given to the bishop and 100.000 men to general Paulos; strophes 816 and 819: Paulos and the bishop have 100.000 troops; strophe 834: 52.000 Byzantines are killed.

From Medina the troops advance to Tabuk. The Tabuk-Ma'an route was indeed the main route to Syria⁴⁵. It is generally accepted that two sections of the Arab army, under Yazid ibn-abi-Sufyan and Shurahbil ibn- Hasanah followed this route, while 'Amr ibn-al-'As took the coast route via Aylah⁴⁶. Khalid ibn-al-Walid had originally left with a small group to Iraq, from where he started his famous march on Syria⁴⁷. Khalid's expedition to Iraq is mentioned in the Swahili epic (strophes 350-351)⁴⁸.

Bwana Mwengo indicates that the **first battle** took place, not far from Tabuk, but at least 1.000 miles from Medina⁴⁹. The historic battle took indeed place north of Tabuk at Wadi al- 'Arabah, south of the Dead See, where Yazid defeated the patrician Sergios. Neither Herakleios nor 'Umar were present at the battlefield⁵⁰, where Sergios was killed⁵¹. It is not difficult to recognize Sergios in the Saiar of the epic. The "personal duel" between Saiar and Umar is the result of the literary epic norms, demanding that heroes fight – and especially die – in duels with other heroes, and not "anonymously" in the general mêlée of the battlefield⁵². The Swahili epic informs us that Sergios's army was not completely destroyed, but, although fleeing in panic after his death, somehow regrouped and informed the Byzantine authorities of their defeat, only to be finally annihilated nearby a fortified city (strophes 521-525: **battle nr 2**). This information confirms Stratos' and Hitti's analysis according to whom this second battle took place in Dathin (nearby the city of Gaza⁵³) in February 634⁵⁴.

45. Therefore the Byzantines had paid yearly tributes to the tribes that were residing along this route in order to guarantee peace and stability.

46. Hitti, 1970: 148.

47. Hitti, 1970: 148-149.

48. Strophes 350-1: "The Prophet says: 'Khalid, listen to me, take the banu Mahazumu ... because the emperor and the Chosrow must be defeated.' ". The text refers to the Persians (Iraqi territory) as well as to the Byzantines (the emperor). Chosroes II was king of Persia from 590 to 628. The conquest of Iraq by the Arabs took place after Chosroes's death.

49. The assurance by the poet that the Arabs succeeded to ride the distance in two days is certainly a poetic exaggeration!

50. Bwana Mwengo refers to both as if present, which is incorrect.

51. There are several versions about the death of Sergios (see Stratos, 1969: 57). The Swahili's version confirms the information, derived from Theophanes, p. 336.

52. For this epic "law", cf. also Hendrickx, 1993: 99-105.

53. According to Runciman (1971: 15) the Arabs took Gaza and brutally murdered the Greek garrison, but Stratos (1969: 57) maintains that in reality the city was not taken on this occasion.

54. Stratos, 1969: 55-56. – Hitti, 1970: 148.

2.2. Second phase: the battles for Damascus and the cities of Syria (strophes 526-700)

According to the Swahili epic, a new Byzantine army of 10.000 men arrives and a battle ensues (**battle nr 3**: strophes 526-538). They are defeated and flee, pursued by the Arabs, until Damascus. At this point the meaning of Bwana Mwengo's text is rather problematic (strophes 538-550). He states that the Byzantines, who arrive at the bishop, are few in numbers, because so many of them were killed. But who arrived where and when? The text says that "they" enter the city of Damascus (strophe 541) and further on that part of the remaining Byzantines are slaughtered in front of the gates of a star-shaped fortress⁵⁵ (**battle nr 4**: strophes 543-544), and that, when the survivors take refuge in it, the citizens prepare food and offerings for the conquerors, surrender and embrace Islam (strophes 545-550).

Moreover, as for battle nr 3, an interesting detail is provided by Bwana Mwengo in strophe 528, where he does not mention "Byzantine soldiers", but a "mass of people"⁵⁶, who attack the Muslims. It thus appears that many historic elements are condensed in the 25 strophes, describing battles 3 and 4, confronting the reader with some chronological and military problems. Does the expression "a mass of people" perhaps refer to the Christian tribes of the Gassanids, who were supporting the Byzantines in the initial phase, and who were defeated on their Easter Sunday 634 at Marj Rāhit by Khalid⁵⁷? Bwana Mwengo is indeed very conscious of the "organized" Byzantine army as opposed to "unorganized" Bedouin tribesmen⁵⁸. Does strophe 541 indicate that Damascus is captured by the Arabs⁵⁹? Is the fortress, mentioned in strophe 544 Damascus, or does it refer to another city (perhaps Busra or Fihl?)⁶⁰? It is quite impossible to answer with

55. Strophe 544: star-shaped fortresses are of a later period. But Knappert (1958:255) remarks that the Swahili word *Kawkab* can also be the name of the fortress. In that case, however, the Swahili term must be a deformation of an Arab term.

56. Swahili: "Wakimaa kukasimu / siku ya mbili fahamu / wali wawene kaumu / kuya wakifuulia" - Interestingly, Theophanes uses the term of "πληθος" for the battle of Gabatha (Gabitha), which is identified by Stratos (1969: 62-63) as the battle of Adjnadayn (30 July 634). - Cf. Runciman, 1971: 16.

57. Hitti, 1970: 150,

58. See strophes 837-843.

59. "They" entered the city means - in that case - that the Arabs entered the city.

60. Cf. Hitti, 1970: 149-150.

absolute certainty these questions, but – in view of the confused Arab tradition, on which the Swahili one is based – we believe that this chronologically confused episode refers to several battles and skirmishes leading to the occupation of several cities (i.e. Damascus⁶¹ and Busra or Fihl).

After the (first)⁶² occupation of Damascus by the Arabs, emperor Herakleios, after having sent scouts to reconnoiter the situation, sends a new army of 100.000 troops under his minister, the bishop. These troops are divided into 2 divisions (strophes 551-578), one under general Paulos (strophes 572-573) and one under the bishop-minister himself (strophe 574). Both divisions meet near the hill of Tabuk (strophe 574). Their mission is clearly stated: they must preserve Palestine for the Byzantine Empire! (strophe 573). After prayers and a speech by 'Umar ibn –al-Khattāb, who underlines the importance of the coming battle ("today falls the decision": strophe 591), the Byzantines and the Arabs (under the command of Mikdaad) engage in heavy fighting (**battle nr 5**). The large Byzantine army is described as consisting of troops coming from Constantinople, Turkey⁶³, Suez⁶⁴, Damascus, Tabuk, Yarmuk, Aleppo and other cities (strophes 588-599). The dire battle ends with a Byzantine victory (strophes 602-608) and the arrogant bishop vows to drive back and destroy the Muslims in their own land. He orders his brother's son (strophe 609) to destroy the Muslims, but not to kill anyone who loves the Christian "images"⁶⁵. The Byzantine army attacks again and the Arabs flee once more (**battle nr 6**: strophes 617-624).

The Prophet is informed of the defeat and orders Khālid ibn-al-Walīd and his son, Suleiman, to counterattack (strophes 625-637). Suleiman gathers 5.000 soldiers (strophe 640) and attacks the Byzantines who are unprepared and resting on their laurels. The latter are beaten (**battle nr 7**: strophes 640-654), and the Arabs put the heads of these Byzantines who had cut the necks of Muslims, on sticks (strophe 658). The victors return with their loot to Khālid (strophes 659-663), and

61. Another event which may be reflected here is the arrival of Khalid near Damascus in the rear of the Byzantine army, after his march from Iraq in March 634 (cf. Hitti, 1970: 148-149).

62. The first occupation by Khālid took place in September 635 (Hitti, 1970: 150). Khālid relinquished the city before the battle of Yarmuk (20 August 636), where after the city returned to Arab rule.

63. The epic uses the terms "Istanbul" and "Turkey", being of course anachronisms, to indicate Constantinople and Asia Minor.

64. Probably this refers to the border region of Egypt-Syria.

65. On this subject, see Hendrickx, 2000.

then retire towards Tabuk (strophe 664).

The Byzantines inform Herakleios about their victories as well as their defeat (strophes 615-671). A Byzantine nobleman of the emperor's entourage summons the bishop and general Paulos (strophes 672-676), putting 8.000 elite troops at the disposition of the bishop. Paulos receives another 100.000 soldiers and is ordered to cut off the Muslims' heads (strophes 677-679). After some days the Byzantine army encounters a group of Muslims (strophe 680), under Mikdaad and 'Umar (strophe 683). The latter are joined by Khālid (strophe 686), and a short fight ensues (**battle nr 8**). Other chiefs re-enforce the Arab army, i.e. Sufiani, bunu Abudi Saidi (ibn Abd Saidi), bunu Walidi (ibn Alwalid), and Utuba bunu Huseni (Utuba ibn Husein) (strophes 689-691).

2.3. Third phase: final defeat of the Byzantines (strophes 808-1117)

In the final phase, both armies are described by Bwana Mwengo. A battle rages during 15 day, after which the armies pause to count their dead. New Byzantine reinforcements are brought to the frontline. A new battle follows. In the end, the Byzantines retreat and the emperor's nephew is slain by 'Umar ibn-al-Khattāb in a duel. Finally, Ali joins the battlefield, where the last Byzantines in Syria are destroyed, their leaders captured and executed.

The description of the battle of 15 days (**battle nr 9**) provides some interesting, albeit incorrect details (strophes 823-832). Bwana Mwengo places Abu Bakr⁶⁶ at the right hand of the Prophet and 'Umar ibn-al-Khattāb and ibn-al-Awan on his left hand as commanders. Mikdaad is in charge of the frontlines of Abu Bakr's wing. As for the Byzantines, emperor Herakleios has placed Konstantinos at the right and Paulos at the left wing with 1.600 soldiers; the latter has on his right side the imperial minister, the bishop. The total of the Byzantine divisions amounts to 100.000 men (strophe 819), footsoldiers and horsemen. When they move forward, they are swiftly attacked by the Arab horsemen using their spears, driven backwards and defeated, but fighting goes on. When all troops retreat after 15 days of fighting, the Muslims have lost 1.000 and the Byzantines 52.000 troops

66. Abu Bakr is called "a great man in decision and eager to fight" (strophe 809). However, Abu Bakr had already died in 334.

(strophes 832-4). This "long battle" rather reflects a continuous series of skirmishes and small encounters.

Meanwhile, Herakleios has gathered numerous reinforcements and new fighting follows (**battle nr 10**) in which several Arab heroes play a role (strophes 861-874)⁶⁷. The Muslims, harassed by the Byzantines, become increasingly discouraged: one after the other, the heroes leave the battlefield and complain to the Prophet, who follows the battle from a distance (strophes 875-917)⁶⁸. This battle, without evident victor, leads in the epic to a duel between the nephew of Herakleios and 'Umar, who slays the Byzantine. Angry and discouraged, the emperor orders a new attack, which leads to **battle nr 11** (strophes 963-990), where the Arabs once again cannot succeed to destroy the Byzantines. Two tired and thirsty Arab fighters describe the battle to Mohammed (strophes 972-990), and Abbas Abu-al-Fahdl asks the Prophet to recall Ali⁶⁹.

With Ali joining the Arab army, the Byzantine army is finally wiped out (**battle nr 12**) (strophes 1045-1081). Paulos and the bishop, refusing to become Muslims, are executed (strophes 1102-1116). The conquest of Syria is completed and the victorious Muslim troops can go home rejoicing (strophe 1116).

The historic final battle is the battle at Yarmuk (20 August 636). The circumstances, in which the Byzantines underwent their final defeat, are well known: a sandstorm blew during the terrible battle. The Byzantines, who had the advantage of a more numerous army, were outmanoeuvred by the Arabs, while the Gassanids left the Byzantines during the battle and went over to the Arabs. The two Byzantine generals, Theodoros Trithyrios and Vahan were killed and almost the entire Byzantine army perished⁷⁰.

67. At the beginning of this episode, Herakleios wonders about the defeat of the organized Byzantine army by a number of Bedouins, who fight without any strategic methods (strophes 837-843). After Mohammed's encouragement (strophes 844-850), Abu Bakr enters the battle, as well as Omari ('Umar), Mikidadi (Mikdaad), Aθumani (Osman), Halidi (Khalid), Sufiani, Abdudi Rahamani bunu Aufi, Talihi, Abbasi (son of Marudasi), Fadili bunu Abbasi and his father, emir Muabbali, Kaakaa (son of the emir of Tamimu), Saidi bunu Saadi, bunu li Awamu, bunu li Awaa, bunu li Asi (strophes 851-859).

68. Mohammed again resides in Tabuk, while the battle takes place in Syria (strophes 851-915).

69. The Prophet prays to Allah, who sends Archangel Gabriel to order him to call Ali from the "hill of Tabuk", where the Prophet always resides during the battles (see supra on the meaning of Tabuk and the Prophet's role). Ali hears the Prophet's call from a 1000 miles away and is carried to him in a mysterious way (strophes 991-1045).

70. See Runciman (1971: 16-17) and Stratos (1969: 76-78) for details and sources.

A final question: who is the arrogant Byzantine bishop, who is portrayed in the epic as an arrogant villain? Bwana Mwengo does not give a name, he only uses the term *asikafu* (i.e. the bishop). But the *asikafu* is also referred to as a patrician⁷¹ and a minister of Herakleios. In the epic's narration, he acts further more as an army chief, a councilor to the Emperor, the governor of Antioch and indeed the highest authority in Syria. No historic person had all these functions and powers united during the Syrian war. J. Knappert has vaguely suggested the name of Aretion⁷². Aretion, known as Artaboun by the Arab historiographers, was the governor (*dioiketes*) of Palestine, who, defeated by 'Amr, retreated to Jerusalem and later to Egypt⁷³, but the bishop's role in the epic does not support such an identification. Other historic persons do not qualify either: Sophronios was patriarch of Jerusalem and only active during the defense of this city in 638⁷⁴. Moreover, his character and personality do not have any similarity with the bishop's of the Swahili epic. The bishop of Antioch may – according to Balādhuri – have organized the defense of the city in 635⁷⁵, but does not play any further role. Then, there were the generals: Theodoros (brother of emperor Herakleios), Theodoros Trithyrios, the Armenian Vahan (Baanes) and the Persian Nikitas, but they were no bishops. It seems to me that Bwana Mwengo – or his Arab source(s) – has (have) built a *universal* character, uniting all the *vices*, real or imagined, of the Byzantine leaders: a corrupted and arrogant clergyman, who insults Allah and the Prophet, and who is a fanatical Christian. But through the description itself of these *vices*, one also obtains the picture of the bishop's *virtues*: he is courageous, a good and proud fighter and general, loyal to his Emperor and Church, and he dies for his Faith. Therefore, he cannot be identified with one specific leader of the Syrian war(s). He is rather a *summa* of them⁷⁶.

The names of the other generals, Paulos and Konstantinos as well as

71. The Swahili term *bitiriki* is translated as 'patrician' by Knappert (see strophes 126 and 142).

72. Knappert, 1979: 112.

73. Stratos, 1969: 87, 106, 107.

74. On Sophronios, see Hitti, 1970: 154 and Stratos, 1969: 12, 64, 87, 90-91, 152-4, 159, 226.

75. Stratos, 1969: 67.

76. One may remark, however, that the bishop of the Swahili epic has some similarity with Cyrus (Kyros), the patriarch of Alexandria, who was regarded by the Copts as the Antichrist (cf. Hitti, 1970: 161-165). Is it possible that the Swahili, and previously the Arab tradition have modeled the bishop of the epic on Cyrus (Kyros)?

Herakleios' nephew, simply add to the confusion of names given in the sources.

3. The reasons for the conquest of Syria and the Muslims' success.

Modern scholarship has defined the following reasons for the "swift" and "easy" Arab conquest of Syria:

- the high state of disorganization of the Eastern provinces, recaptured by the Byzantines from the Persians, and the financial and military exhaustion of Byzantium as a result of the Persian war⁷⁷;
- the religious opposition between Byzantine Orthodox, Nestorians and Syrian Monophysites⁷⁸;
- high taxation by Byzantium⁷⁹;
- the emergence of a local "ethnic" feeling against the Greeks⁸⁰;
- economic reasons, including the decline of trade in Byzantine Syria and the attraction for the Arabs of comforts and luxuries, to be found in the Byzantine provinces⁸¹;
- the zeal of the new converts of Islam, or – as G. Ostrogorsky put it – an expansion. "full of primitive energy and dynamic in the extreme"⁸²;

77. Ostrogorsky, 1968: 110-111.- Ostrogorsky (1968: 143) also notes that the Byzantines had neglected the frontier forts. - Hitti, 1970: 143. – Kirk, 1966: 15.

78. Ostrogorsky, 1968: 107-111. – Tate, 1978: 461. – Vryonis, 1978: 248-249. – Hitti, 1970: 143, 153. – Runciman, 1971: 6-10.

79. Hitti, 1970: 142. – Vryonis, 1978: 264. – Stratos, 1969: 74.- Runciman, 1971: 6, 21. – Kirk, 1966: 15.

80. Hitti, 1970: 143, 153. – Runciman, 1971: 6-10 (Runciman brilliantly explains how this Eastern "nationalism" found its expression in "heresies"; he also stresses the negative role of the Jews, their betrayals of Byzantine interests and their strong hatred of the Christians: pp. 8-10, 12, 17). – The Greek Byzantines in Syria were hated because of their arrogance and corruption. Moreover, the centralizing government in Constantinople left little room for local freedom and initiative. This was felt by the great cities, the traders and the patriarchs, who were hierarchically overtaken by the "new" patriarch of Constantinople.

81. Runciman, 1991: 5-6 examines the decline of trade, which alienated the Syrian traders from Constantinople. – Other scholars concentrate on the appeal which the relative Byzantine luxuries must have exercised upon the impoverished Arab riders: Hitti, 1970: 143-144, 156. – Stratos (1969: 50-53, 71) considers looting and plundering a more important cause than religious fervour. – One should, however, remark that these factors somehow contradict each other.

82. Ostrogorsky, 1968: 110. – Stratos, 1969: 51. – Kirk, 1966: 15. - Hitti (1970: 143-145) also underlines the enthusiasm, "imbued with the will to conquer", but warns against interpreting the Arab conquest as purely religious.

- the continuous fighting between the nomadic Arab tribes in the region between Syria and Mesopotamia, and the fact that the Byzantines had neglected their traditional alliance with the Christian Gassanid tribe and had stopped to pay subsidies to the latter as well as to other Arab tribes of the periphery⁸³.

While the above mentioned factors shed light on why Byzantine Syria fell in a relatively short time to the Arabs and why resistance to the Arabs by the locals was almost non-existent, Bwana Mwengo's epic has also examined the *reasons why the war started*. These are threefold, according to our author: (i) it was a personal vindication by the Prophet because of the death of his nephew at the battle of Mu'tah, although veiled with the sanction of God, since the Archangel Gabriel gave Mohammed permission for revenge (strophes 14-19 and 22-33); (ii) it was a *jihad*, a holy war against the Byzantines, because emperor Herakleios refused to adopt Islam (strophes 135-139); and (iii) the Byzantines wanted to destroy Islam and the country of the Muslims (strophes 175-177). Although the conquest of Syria took place after Mohammed's death, it is reasonable to accept that the first argument may have been used by his successors as a supplementary, "ideological" reason to excite the tribes for a campaign in Syria. The second reason complies with the argumentation of Baladuri, but the reservations against it remain the same: the later chroniclers have used a concept (*jihad*), which most probably was not yet generally established in the very early years of the Caliphate⁸⁴. Moreover, the correspondence between the Prophet and Herakleios is probably – although not necessarily – fictive⁸⁵. The third reason has no historically founded basis, but may have been used by the Muslim leaders to convince their followers.

The Swahili epic explicitly illustrates the force and dynamism of Islam,

83. Tate, 1978: 461. – Stratos, 1969: 50-51, 58. – Kirk, 1966: 15. – Hitti, 1970: 143: after the Byzantine victory of Mu'tah, Herakleios "had stopped the subsidies which the Syro-Arab tribes south of the Dead Sea and on the Madinah-Ghazzah route had regularly received." – Stratos, 1969: 48.

84. Cf. Stratos, 1969: 53.

85. Kirk, 1966: 20. – Runciman, 1971: 13. – Nevertheless, the eventuality that the Prophet has sent letters to the leaders of his time cannot be excluded *a priori*. If so, it is very improbable that they have bothered to answer.

stressing – in an aggressive way – the superiority of Islam over Byzantine Christianity. It also confirms the Arab desire of luxuries and wealth, and it acknowledges "ethnic" or "racial" differences between "Romans" and "indigenous people"⁸⁶. Throughout the epic the arrogance of the hated Greeks is opposed in a clever way to the honest simplicity of the Arabs.

4. Conclusion

It would be unfounded to conclude that the epic of Bwana Mwengo is a trustworthy source for the study of the conquest of Syria. Likewise, it would also be irresponsible to state that the Swahili epic does not provide any valuable supplementary information. Despite the serious shortcomings of the author regarding chronology and geography, he has exercised criticism toward his own sources and has given details, not available in other sources. Consequently, the epic may contribute – on the one hand – to the confusion and uncertainty of information, derived from the Greek, Syrian and Arab historians, but – on the other hand- it gives a different scenario, of which certain details may enrich our understanding of the months of continuous skirmishes that took place between the fall of Damascus and the battle of Yarmouk⁸⁷.

86. We analyze these aspects further in our forthcoming study, "The Swahili epic of Herakleios: the case of the border population of Syria". This study was presented as a communication at the 9th International Congress on Graeco-Oriental and African Studies in Neapolis of Laconia (26-30 June 2002), and will be published in the Proceedings of this Conference (*Graeco-Arabica*).

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