

BATN AL-HAJAR (*belly of stones*)

The name popularly given to an especially rocky and inhospitable area of Nubia, extending southward for about 80 miles (120 km) from the Second Cataract of the Nile. Here the Nile flows through a denuded landscape of granite outcrops and boulders, with very little floodplain on either side of the river. The river channel itself is impeded by many small cataracts, the best known of which are those of Semna and Dal. Because of these impediments, upriver and downriver navigation is possible only at the peak of the Nile flood.

The Batn al-Hajar had few inhabitants or resources, but it was strategically important because it lay on the frontier between Lower and Upper Nubia. It served for a long time as a barrier both to the southward penetration of Egyptians and to the northward movement of Nubians, and it was here that the pharaohs of the Twelfth Dynasty built an imposing chain of frontier fortifications.

During the Middle Ages, the Batn al-Hajar lay within the territory of NOBATIA. It was, however, a kind of economic frontier, for the region to the north was freely open to trade and settlement by Muslims, while to the south all trade was a royal monopoly. To enforce this policy there were two customs posts, one at Takoa at the lower end of the Batn al-Hajar and one at a place (the “upper *maqs*”) near its upper end.

After traversing the Batn al-Hajar, the tenth-century visitor IBN SALIM AL-ASWANI wrote:

These are the worst parts of [Nubia](#) which I have seen, owing to the difficulty and narrowness of the ground and the fatiguing road. The river is constantly interrupted by rapid falls and projecting mountains, so that it is precipitated down the rocks, and is in some places not above fifty cubits wide from one bank to the other. The country abounds in high mountains, narrow passes, and roads along which you cannot proceed

mounted. . . . These mountains are the strongholds of the Nubians, and among them the inhabitants of the districts bordering on the Muslim country take refuge.

This function as a refuge and sanctuary became even more significant in the disturbed political and military conditions of the later Middle Ages. There was a rapid growth of population, apparently fleeing southward from the depredations of the BANU AL-KANZ in Lower Nubia, and fortified settlements as well as miniature castles were built on many of the islands of the Batn al- Hajar. Except for the Middle Kingdom fortresses, nearly all of the known archaeological remains of the region date from the later medieval period. It was undoubtedly because of this fortress quality that the Batn al-Hajar and the adjoining part of Lower [Nubia](#) were the last outposts of Christianity in the Sudan, surviving even after the [kingdom of MAKOURIA](#) had succumbed to Arab rule.

A number of the fortress sites in the Batn al-Hajar were excavated in the period between 1960 and 1970, but the results have not yet been published in detail.

[See also: Nubian Archaeology Medieval,]

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