

BEJA TRIBES

The nomadic and warlike Beja tribes have occupied the [Red Sea](#) hills of Egypt and Sudan since very early times. In pharaonic days, the tribes were known as the Medjay and were already regarded as a menace by the settled populations in the Nile Valley. One of the Egyptian frontier fortresses built in Nubia during the Twelfth Dynasty bore the name “Repelling the Medjay.” Because of their fighting prowess, the nomads were sometimes recruited to serve as mercenaries in the pharaoh’s palace guard. Later, under the name Blemmye, they are mentioned repeatedly in classical texts as the principal threat to Ptolemaic and Roman authority in NUBIA, as well as to the empire of KUSH, which lay to the south.

Medieval Arabic texts always give the name Beja rather than Blemmye. The earliest of these date from the eighth century, and there are a great many references to the Beja in documents from later centuries. Firsthand descriptions of them and of their country were written by IBN HAWQAL and by IBN SALIM AL-ASWANI. At one time there was some uncertainty as to whether the Beja of medieval and modern times could be positively identified with the [Blemmye](#) of classical texts, but this has been resolved by documents recently found at QASR IBRIM, in which the name is given as Blemmye in Coptic and as Beja in Arabic.

Both in late classical and in early medieval texts there are a number of references to Christianity among the [Blemmye](#)/Beja. Apparently their conversion was undertaken at the same time as was that of the Nubians (see NUBIA, EVANGELIZATION OF) in the middle of the sixth century. When the missionary [LONGINUS](#) was on his way to convert the Nubian kingdom of ‘ALWA, he is reported to have traveled through the [Blemmye](#) country under the protection of the “king of the Blemmyes” himself. However, the transplant of Christianity evidently did not flourish among the nomads, who had no settled communities or permanent buildings. In the tenth century they were described by Ibn Salim as having no religion,

while others described them as worshippers of idols or of the stars.

Beginning in the ninth century the Beja were increasingly interpenetrated by Arab migrants from the Hijaz, who established a kind of feudal aristocracy among them. Through this agency the Beja were converted to Islam, and as soldiers of the new faith they became once again a menace to the settled populations of [Christian](#) Nubia, as well as to Upper Egypt. Beja attacks played a part in the weakening and final dissolution of the medieval kingdom of MAKOURIA.

There are four main Beja tribes today: the Bisharin, Amarrar, Hadendowa, and Bani 'Amir. The first three speak languages of the Kushitic or Hamitic family, related to Galla and Somali, while the Bani 'Amir have adopted the Semitic Tigre language of Eritrea. The 'Ababdah, a fifth group, have lost their indigenous language and speak only Arabic, but still retain a sense of Beja identity and history.

[*See also*: Banual-Kanz.]

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