THE SAQALIBA SLAVES IN THE AGLABID STATE

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This paper deals with the slaves denoted in the Islamic literature by Saqaliba, a name the meaning of which is still the subject of scholarly discussion. Some specialists believe that this name denotes only Slavs, but others put forward a broader interpretation of the term, suggesting that the word Saqaliba, when applied to slaves in the medieval Islamic world, means eunuchs, European captives, etc. Some introductory notes are useful here to clarify our point of view on this matter.

1. If the idea that Saqaliba first meant Slavic servants (I am speaking now about the Saqaliba in the Islamic world only) and then eunuchs, slaves in general etc., then the sphere of use of this term expanded, and the number of references to Saqaliba can be expected to grow as well. However, quite the opposite happens: after the first third of the eleventh century, references to saqalibi slaves almost disappear from Islamic sources. By Saqaliba, therefore, were meant not slaves or eunuchs in general, but slaves belonging to a special category.

2. In the works of Islamic geographers, especially of those who had contacts with the Slavs themselves (the unknown author of the description of Northern peoples found in the treatises of Ibn Rustah, Gardisi, Marwazi and the anonymous geography Hudud al-ΆAlam, then Harun Ibn Yahya and Ibrahím Ibn Ya'qub), the name Saqaliba is applied to Slavs.

3. Islamic authors, when speaking about the origins of the saqalibi slaves, state that the Saqaliba came to the Islamic world as prisoners taken in wars which the Ifranj (Franks; the Muslims applied this name not only to Frenchmen, but to other western Christians including Germans as well) waged against the pagan Saqaliba.

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1 This paper was delivered at the 35th Congress of Asian and African Studies (ICANAS), Istanbul, July 9, 1992.
6 Hudud al-ÁAlam, Kabul: Faculty of Philology of the University of Kabul, 1963, 425-426.
7 Kizh al-ÁAlak an-Nafta auctore, 127-130.
9 Maqari, al., Nafa'it al-Tib min Ghasr al-Andalas al-Rabih, ed. I. Abdah, 8 vols., Beruit: Dar Sadir, 1968, 144-145; . Cosmographie de Chez el-Din Abou Abdallah Mohamed et-Dinmoucha, ed. A.F. Meheen, St-Petersburg, 1866, 261; and see also, Bakr, al., Kizh al-Ma'addik wa al-Manalik, 914.

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10 Lamatskii, V., O slav'yanakh v Malei Spanii, St-Petersburg, 1859.; Saatseviia, 1
11 See for example, Hrbek, I., "Die Slaw," 543-571.
By there wars is most likely meant the German advance on the Slavic lands.

4. In Early Medieval Europe it was much easier to trade in pagan slaves than in Christian ones, for the Church and the lay authorities could somehow protect the latter, but did not care about the former at all. Conditions were thus much better for trading in pagan Slavic captives than Christian. Moreover, Slavic prisoners were supplied in great numbers because of wars, whereas to acquire Christian captives, one had to think about peculiar ways of doing it (kidnapping, stealing, purchasing peasants from feudal lords, etc.).

These observations suggest that by Saqālihya, Slavs and, in the context of this paper, Slavic slaves are usually meant. However, it is impossible to claim that the use of the word Saqālihya was perfectly accurate in all cases. The possibility of error should be admitted. We abstain therefore from saying Slavic slaves, but use the term Saqālihya slaves, recognising that most of the Saqālihya whom we see in the Islamic sources were Slavs.

The history of the saqlabi slaves attracted the attention of scholars long ago. The first books dealing with this subject appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century. At present we have some works dealing with the history of the Saqālihya but it should also be said that for some regions and periods the topic remains unexplored. Speaking about the saqlabi slaves in Africa, scholars usually address Fāṭimid history and say little about the Saqālihya in other Islamic states of North Africa. In this paper, I am going to attempt to partially fill this gap by showing what is known about the saqlabi slaves in the Aghlabid state.

First of all, let us see how the saqlabī slaves were brought to North Africa. It seems that one may speak about two main routes of the slave trade. One of them went through Spain: captives, usually taken prisoner by the Franks, later on by the Germans, during their wars or incursions against Slavic peoples, were brought by slave traders through Germany and then through France (down the Rhône towards Narbonne and Marseille) to Spain (by land through the Pyrenees or by sea to the eastern coast of al-Andalus). From Spain, as Ibn Khurdadhbih states in his treatise, traders went to Tanger and thence to Kairouan. Not all the slaves were sold in al-Andalus; a number of them were carried farther to North Africa and even to the Mashriq. The second route
lay through Italy where Venice appears to have been the main center of the slave trade. The first data concerning the export of slaves from Venice to the Islamic world go back to the middle of the eighth century. Despite some hindrances the Venetian slave trade continued in the following centuries. Slavic slaves exported from Venice appear to have been partly supplied by the Slavs themselves (particularly by the Narentine pirates) and partly captured by the Venetians. There were other possibilities as well. Captives could be brought from France through the western passes of the Alps or from Austria and Bavaria through passes situated more to the east. Among the Ṣaqlābiya supplied to the Islamic world, there were thus representatives of almost all branches of Slavdom: Slaves from the Baltic region, Central Europe, the Balkans.

When did the ṣaqlābi slaves appear in the Aghlabid state? Ibn Khurḍābīyīn’s description of the Rāḥidūnites’ trade goes back to the year 846/7 when the first version of his book appeared, but the author speaks about lengthy trade routes which required years to be established. The date at which the first ṣaqlābi captives were brought to North Africa should therefore be pushed some decades back, to the beginning of the ninth century. There are two reasons to support this date. First, the earliest references to the ṣaqlābi slaves in Islamic Spain date from the beginning of the ninth century. Then, in the beginning of the ninth century, the Franks launched large-scale campaigns against the Slavs, and the wars started supplying captives.

In the sources dealing with the Aghlabid state, the first slaves appear during the rule of the first ruler of this dynasty, Ḫibāmūn b. al-Aqḥāb (800–812). In an attempt to free himself from the influence of the army (jund), he built a new palace (al-Qaṣr al-Qādīm) and started purchasing slaves, mainly for his guard. When he bought enough of them, he moved with them and other people loyal to him to the palace.15

The sources do not specify the ethnicity of these slaves. Talbi considers them to be Negroes,14 and this seems to be the most probable interpretation. However, ṣaqlābi slaves appear soon as well. In 817, when ‘Abd Allāh I (812–817) died, his place was taken by Ziyādāt Allāh I (817–838). On coming to power, the new ruler attempted to eliminate his enemies, and several army officers were persecuted. This was the cause of the revolt raised by a certain Ziyād b. Sahl, known as Ibn al-Ṣaqlābiyya, or son of a ṣaqlābi woman, in 207 A.H. (May 27, 822 - May 15, 823 A.D.). The rebels, however, were defeated by the emir’s troops, and many of them perished.


20 Nuwayri, al-, Nihayat al-Arāb Fī Fī
21 Ibn ‘Idhārī, al-Bayān al-Maghribi, 1
N.A. Dārūd, Najaf, 1972. 132.
The information we have concerning this episode is not indisputable. It is well-known that in terms of graphics the word "ṣaqlabī" is very close to "ṣiqīlī" or "ṣaqallī" (Sicilian) and can easily be confused with it. In similar cases one should always bear in mind that a scribe could have been mistaken when copying the niṣba and give an incorrect transcription. A misunderstanding occurs in Ziyād's case as well. Ibn al-ʿArīfī (all the editions which I have consulted - Bulaq, Leiden, Cairo, Beirut 1965, Beirut 1987) and Ibn ʿĪdārī (Dozy, who edited this book, states that all the manuscripts give Ibn al-Ṣaqlabīyya)13 write his kunya as Ibn al-Ṣaqlabīyya, whereas Ibn Khalīdī gives Ibn al-Siqīlīyya. For this case I prefer the reading Ibn al-Ṣaqlabīyya. This transcription is found in sources earlier than Ibn Khalīdī's book; moreover, in the Bulaq edition of Ibn Khalīdī's treatise which I consulted, all similar niṣbas are written as "ṣiqīlī", even in cases when it is known from elsewhere that the correct transcription is "ṣaqlabī".

Most of the information we have about the ʿṣaqlabī slaves in the Aḥlabī state goes back to the years of the rule of Abū ʿĪṣāq Ibn Ahmad (875-902). In 264 A.H. (August 23, 879/August 11, 880 A.D.), the freedmen of this ruler tried to revolt, and only the intervention of the population of Kairouan saved the situation. Having lost confidence in the freedmen, Ibn ʿĪdārī put them all to death and replaced them with new slaves: "He ordered new slaves to be purchased," al-Nuwaysī writes, "and numerous slaves were bought. He gave them jobs, provided them with clothes and went with them to wars, in which they showed bravery, persistence and strength." Some of the new slaves were ʿṣaqlabī. We learn about it in the following way. Some years later, Ibn ʿĪdārī, taking seriously the words of an astrologer that he would be assassinated by a palace slave, put his new servants to death. "In 278 A.H. (April 25, 890/April 14, 891 A.D.) Ibn ʿĪdārī discovered that a group of his servants and ʿṣaqlabī wanted to assassinate him and his mother, and he exterminated them all." The participation of the ʿṣaqlabī in this alleged plot is mentioned by Ibn ʿĪdārī as well; the latter, however, places these events in 279 A.H. (April 3, 892/March 22, 893 A.D.).

One should stay in the years of Abū ʿĪṣāq Ibn Ahmad's rule for a little

15 Ibn ʿĪdārī, al-Bayān al-Muṣāriyya, 123.
longer, for two interesting anecdotes involving saqubhi slaves are connected to it. The
protagonist of one of them is Abu 'Ali 'Abd Allah Ibn Muhammad Ibn al-Faraj, nicknamed
Ibn al-Banna, who had been a judge in Qastilia for a while but was then relieved
because of a conflict with the local people. The governor of Qastilia sent him to Raqqada
where he had to defend himself before the ruler. During the interview with Ibrahim,

Ibn al-Banna presented clearly his view and exposed the offence which was raised against him. Ibrahim
raised his head, turned to Bâgh al-Fadl and told him: 'Abd Allah Ibn Ahmad Ibn Tulun deserves the
cancellation of the sentence he had pronounced to Ibn 'Abd Allah, his opponent in the dispute, to be
exposed to public scrutiny.' Then he exonerated him as a scribe for his judge 'Abd Ibn Miskari.

The other story is connected to a certain Abû l-'Abbâs Ibn Talib. This man, who
was a judge of Kairouan, did not approve of abuses committed by Ibrahim and was finally
stripped of his post. The audience in the palace at which this happened is described by
Abu l-Fadl 'Iyad after the narration of Hamdi, the court astrologer. During the audience
Hamdi suddenly asked permission to speak and opposed Ibrahim, saying in particular
that God's will is above the emir's order:

At this point, Hamdi continues. Bâgh the Servant [or Emuch - khâdîj] stood up and walked towards
me in anger to deal with me, but the emir spoke to him: 'Abd Allah Ibn Miskari, and he stopped.

The information concerning Bâgh which we possess at present is not abundant.
It is difficult, for example, to specify how his name should be vocalised. Most sources
only give Bâgh, al-Azdi, in his account of Al-'Abbâs Ibn Ahmad Ibn Tulun'Ali's campaign
against the Aghlabids writes Ballagh, but Talbi, who used the Tabaqat by Abu l-'Arab
the book which I, unfortunately, have not been able to consult, and where Bâgh is
referred to, calls the servant Ballagh throughout his L'émirat aghlabide. Since I do not
know whether the vocalisation Ballagh belongs to Abu l-'Arab, or not, I cannot make
any conclusions on this subject.

The information on Bâgh which the sources provide allows us to reconstruct
the main stages of his career. Bâgh was a palace servant. Speaking about Ibrahim Ibn
Ahmad, Ibn al-'Abbâs says that Bâgh once did not let the poet Bakr Ibn Hammâd al-
Taharti enter the room where the emir was, for the emir at that time was enjoying the
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society of his harem maidens. 25 Talbi states that Bāgh's name appeared on some coins
minted under Ibrahim. 26 Besides this, we know that in 880-881, when al-'Abbās, son
of Ahmad Ibn Tulun, attacked Ifriqiya, Bāgh was sent with troops to the Aghlabid
governor of Tripoli Ibn Qurhab with the task of joining the attack against the
invaders. 27 This evidence suggests the following interpretation of Bāgh's career. At the
beginning he served at the palace. Then he became one of the emir's favorite servants,
and his name appeared on coins. As a servant who enjoyed the emir's confidence, he occa-
nionally performed missions outside the palace.

What was the language in which the emir spoke to his servant? It appears that it
was a Slavic language. The sources give bi-l-saqalibiyā, and there are enough reasons
to support this reading. A confusion may have been made in a nishā, but this case is
different. There was no Sicilian language, so only bi-l-saqalibiyā could originally be in
the text. One cannot, unfortunately, specify what language it was, for no word is quoted,
and Slavic slaves were brought to North Africa from various regions. Perhaps it was a mix-
ture of different Slavic dialects which the saqalibi servants used among themselves.

What prompted the emir to learn the language of his slaves (I say slaves, for the
emir is not likely to have studied a language because of a single slave)? Saqalibi slaves
served at the court, and some of them (this appears to have been Bāgh's case) enjoyed the
emir's particular confidence. The emir might have wished to find such a way of
speaking to them that the words would remain incomprehensible to anybody else, and
the information to be kept secret would be hidden from others. On the other hand,
given that Ibrahim was almost mutinously suspicious, one can suggest another expla-
nation: fearing a plot, the emir attempted to know about his servants as much as he
could, including their language, so as to be better prepared to resist potential danger.
A similar case happened later, when the Fatimid caliph al-Mu'taz studied a Slavic lan-
guage to understand the meaning of a remark uttered by his saqalibi slave Qaysar.

No information about Bāgh's further career has been preserved. Perhaps he was
put to death together with other slaves at Ibrahim's order. The executed servants were
replaced by newly bought black slaves. The latter were numerous although moderate
evaluations of their number given by Ibn 'Idhārī and Ibn Khaldūn, five and three thou-
sand men respectively, 28 should be preferred to al-Nuwayri's unrealistic figure of one hundred
thousand. 29 However, this did not put an end to the Saqaliba's presence in the

vol. 1. 173.
26 Talbi, M., L'émirat aghlabide, 351. 4.
Staatsmänner von Ägypten zur Zeit der Chalifen, vol. 3. 58.
Aghlabid state. We know that some Ṣaḥālaiba served emir ‘Abd Allāh II (902-903). This ruler was assassinated by his servants on Shabat 28, 290 A.H. (July, 23, 903 A.D.). These were saqlabīs, three according to Ibn al-Abdārī, Ibn al-Abdārī and Ibn al-Khaṭīb, two according to Ibn ‘Idhārī. Ziyādāt Allāh, the murdered emir’s son, to whom ‘Abd Allāh’s head was brought, displayed anger (it is not known whether he was privy to the plot or not) and put the eunuchs to death.

Ziyādāt Allāh was the last Aghlabid ruler in Africa. The movement of the Kutāna Berbers which paved the way for the establishment of the Fāṭimid state in North Africa was gaining momentum, and in 296 A.H. (September 30, 908/September 19, 909 A.D.) Ziyādāt Allāh had to leave his capital Raqqā and flee to the East. The description of his flight as presented by al-Nu‘mān shows an impressive procession: “He (Ziyādāt Allāh) selected among his slaves, saqlabīs (i.e., eunuchs), one thousand men and girdled each of them with a belt with one thousand dinars inside, fearing to unite all the money he had into one burden.”

The evaluation of the slaves’ number should not be understood literally. The study of Islamic sources reveals that the numbers which are quoted in them are usually exaggerated. Moreover, the Ṣaḥālaiba were not the only servants who accompanied Ziyādāt Allāh. One cannot, therefore, state that the Ṣaḥālaiba were exactly one thousand though the reference suggests that they were numerous. It is noteworthy, in this respect, that the Ṣaḥālaiba were selected by Ziyādāt Allāh; they were probably his most loyal servants.

Some information has reached us concerning the fate of the Slaves who went to Mashriq with Ziyādāt Allāh. When the procession stayed in Egypt, one of the ghulāms stole one hundred thousand dinars and fled. On passing through Egypt, Ziyādāt Allāh reached Ramla where he stayed for a while. There he received some proposals from local noblemen who wanted to buy his slaves. He refused, but the noblemen presented a claim against him to Baghdad, and Ziyādāt Allāh was not able to enter the capi-

tal. Moreover, at al-Raqqa he Only the intervention of the task of selling the slaves for Z traces of them have been pre

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29 Nuwayrī, al., Nihayāt al-‘Aṣbāb fī ‘Uṣūl al-‘Adab. 131-132.
Moreover, at al-Raqqa he was accused of practising immoralities with his eunuchs. Only the intervention of the local judge saved the situation. The judge assumed the task of selling the slaves for Ziyādat Allāh. They were sold at al-Raqqa, and no further traces of them have been preserved.\textsuperscript{46}

For the Aghlabid period we have some information about saqlabī slaves in the possession of private individuals. One of them is mentioned as being owned by Abū l-'Abbās ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Ahmad Ibn Yūsuf, the judge of Kairouan referred to above. The anecdote in which this saqlabī is mentioned is related by al-Mālikī and ʿIyād.\textsuperscript{47} Both authors repeatedly write saqlabī, and this is a good reason to prefer this transcription to saqīlī, which is provided by a later writer, Abū Zayd al-Dabbagh, who gives an abridged version of the story and refers to the slave just once.\textsuperscript{48} At least two saqlabī slaves are reported to have been owned by Abu ʿAbd Allāh the Shiʿite. One of them served him as a guard,\textsuperscript{49} another one travelled together with Abu ʿAbd Allāh to Sijilmassa to meet ʿUbayd Allāh al-Mahdī.\textsuperscript{50}

On presenting the information on the saqlabī slaves in the Aghlabid state, which we possess at present, one can make some final observations. The import of Saqālība slaves to North Africa appears to have continued throughout the ninth century, that is to say, during the whole period of the Aghlabid government. On reaching Africa some captives were purchased by the court, others by private individuals. The saqlabī slaves became particularly numerous at the end of the ninth century, when one can speak about a considerable number of the Saqālība at the court. However, they do not appear to have ever become influential at the Aghlabid court. There were at the court forces much more powerful than slaves - first of all, the emirs who could put the slaves to death at any moment, then members of the Aghlabid house, army officers, local noblemen etc. Therefore, although we sometimes see slaves performing important duties (Bāgh commanding troops), they never had positions in the state similar to those of the Saqālība party in al-Andalus, or of Kāfir and others on Barjawān in Egypt. Moreover, in the Aghlabid state the Saqālība appear to have been greatly outnumbered by other slaves, first of all, the black slaves who, according to Ibn al-Athīr, were


\textsuperscript{50} Ivanov, W., \textit{Islamik Traditewn concerning the Rise of the Fatimids}, London etc.: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1942. 216-217.
the support of the dynasty. The *Saqāliba* thus were mere palace servants, and their position is similar to the Andalusian *Saqāliba* of the same period, who were present at the court but still were not powerful.

Very important for us is the fact that emir Ibrāhīm spoke to his slave B.īgh in a Slavic language. Some decades earlier Ibn Khurdādhbih had written that the *ṣaqālibi* slaves were interpreters for Rūs merchants when they came to Baghdad. One can conclude that the Slavic slaves brought to the Islamic world did not lose their mother tongue. Slaves employed at the court had, of course, more possibilities to preserve their language, for they could find compatriots among many slaves serving at the court, whereas slaves owned by private individuals usually remained alone among the Muslims.

After the downfall of the Aghlabid dynasty, *ṣaqālibi* slaves did not disappear from Africa. When Abū ‘Abd Allāh the Shi‘ite entered Raqqāda, one of his first orders was to gather all the slaves. The black slaves were reportedly massacred, others were probably told to stay in Raqqāda and to wait for al-Mahdi, whom Abū ‘Abd Allāh the Shi‘ite was planning to fetch from Sijilmassa. When ‘Ubayd Allah came to Raqqāda, the *Saqāliba*, together with other slaves, were brought before him, and he gave each of them a job. The *ṣaqālibi* slaves wrote several interesting pages into the history of the Fāṭimid state, but their history is rather a separate topic.

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1 This paper was delivered in R: Ommiókómpou, 12-14, June, 1997.
2 For instance, Carla Carha: *Ab in Hungary* in At: MTÁ Filozófi

3 For example, Béla Polla: *Stre in the Zone: Szabadás* in Arsche.
4 The diary of Sándor Sebestyén, a these excavations. (Hungarian N of Szentendre, Data Archives, 66