

*In memory of my father,  
Toma Lj. Popović  
(1889–1953)*

# THE REVOLT OF AFRICAN SLAVES IN IRAQ

*in the 3rd/9th Century*

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*With a new introduction by  
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## Origins of the Revolt

The Abbasid Empire was founded in 750, by Abû al-'Abbâs al-Saffâh (descendant of 'Abbâs, uncle of the Prophet Muhammad) who, with the aid of Persian troops, seized power and put an end to the Umayyad dynasty (661–750). Baghdad, founded in 762, became their residence. The caliphs, thirty-seven in number, reigned until 1258, when Hûlâgû, a grandson of Genghis Khân, brought their empire to an end. Their chief interest was in the Asian part of the empire, for, as soon as they arrived to power, first Spain had slipped from their grasp and then North Africa, where only the the Ifriqiyya (Tunisia and the eastern part of Algeria) remained nominally submitted to them. In the time of Hârûn al-Rashîd, the Abbasid Empire was one of the principal centers of world civilization, and Baghdad dazzled the world with its splendor and prosperity. Nevertheless, following troubles brought on by Turkish mercenaries, the seat of the caliphate was moved, in 836, to Sâmarrâ which remained the capital until the year 892. At the beginning of the tenth century, continuing domestic troubles and growing decadence obliged the caliph to yield temporal power to a sort of "palace mayor," while the governors became practically independent of the central power . . . Temporal power then passed into the hands of the Seljuk sultans (Turks) until February 10, 1258, the day Hûlâgû's Mongols seized and devastated Baghdad, putting an end to the Abbasid dynasty, whose last caliph was strangled to death.

However, at the time of the revolt of the Zanj (869–883), the Abbasid Empire was still a great world power which reigned *de facto* or *de jure* (mostly through semi-independent governors) over vast territories from

Tunisia to Central Asia and from the Caspian Sea to Yemen, but actually over hardly more than Iraq, Mesopotamia, and western Persia.

## I. GEOGRAPHY

Two provinces of the Abbasid Empire were affected by the Zanj revolt: Iraq and Ahwâz (the Khuzistân).<sup>1</sup> Hostilities, which did not extend beyond Jarjarâyâ and Râmhurmuz, raged mostly in southern Iraq and western Ahwâz. Tremendous rivers crossed the provinces, facilitating navigation and transport and, along with caravan routes, the hundreds of canals that linked up the waterways favored intense movement of people and goods. Of special interest to us are two regions that contributed greatly to the insurrection because of the nature of their soil. They are al-Batîha and Maysân, Lower Iraq's canal region.

*Al-Batîha.*—The "Marshes" is the name for a basin with prairies that are almost constantly filled with mud due to regular flooding, more or less. In the Middle Ages Arab authors employed the term al-Batîha and its plural al-Batâ'ih specifically to designate Lower Iraq's swamp region, located roughly between Kûfa and Wâsit in the north and Basra in the south. These swamps were the result of annual flooding and had existed from earliest antiquity because the waters of the Tigris and the Euphrates frequently overran the extremely flat terrain and often changed course. Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Sassanids, and Arabs had built dams, dikes, and canals in the region, but "a stable hydrographic network was impossible in the extensive flatlands of southern Mesopotamia where there were no elevations to offset the malleability of alluvion-formed soil, all the more so since the system of irrigation canals was subject to economic and political fluctuations."

Enormous growths of reeds and rushes, often several meters tall, cov-

ered the vast surface across which ran a great many more or less wide but often very shallow canals. Most of the time, they could be navigated only by small, flat boats, and this made access to al-Batîha very difficult. As a result, the region was always a perfect location for brigands, rebels, or malcontents who needed observation posts from which they could keep an eye on trade and other activities. But it could be a dangerous area. Ibn Battûta, the famous fourteenth-century Arab traveler, notes:

. . . And, in a region known as Idhâr, we went along the Euphrates. It is a forest of reeds surrounded by water, and inhabited by Arabs, known for their excesses. They are bandits of the sect of 'Alî [that is to say Shiites]. They attacked a troop of *fakirs* (poor people) who had fallen behind our caravan and stripped them of even their sandals and goblets. They fortify themselves in these swamps and defend themselves against pursuers. There are many ferocious beasts in that place.

Al-Batîha's ordinary inhabitants engaged in tilling plots of land, and their chief crops were rice, barley, yellow corn, sorghum, millet, lentils, melons, watermelons, and onions. The reeds and rushes growing wild in the region were also gathered and put to many uses.

Fish of various kinds were plentiful and there were other fauna such as buffalo, sheep, and cows, without mentioning various types of waterfowl: gulls, wild duck, geese, swans, etc. Lions, leopards, jackals, wolves, lynx, and wildcats were also found. "Herds of wild boar still wallow in the swamp. The countless swarms of mosquitoes and gnats are a terrible scourge and the source of endemic diseases such as malaria, which must have been one of the principal causes of the region's decline."<sup>2</sup>

Inaccessibility, a readily available food supply, and climate which Abbasid troops found difficult and unhealthy are features which made this an ideal location for the insurgents.

*The Canal Region of Lower Iraq.*—We know from Arab authors of the time that the Basra region's canal system was highly developed. Among

the canals particularly mentioned, on the west bank of Dijlat al-‘awrâ’ (the present Shatt al-‘arab), are the Nahr Ma‘qil, the Nahr al-Ubulla, and, about 25 km. south of Basra, the Nahr Abî l-Khasîb. There were also numerous interlinking irrigation canals in a region covered with palm trees and scattered villages. It should also be pointed out that seaworthy vessels were able to navigate the Tigris as far as Wâsit and even beyond.

Over the centuries there were many changes in the canal system until eventually a great part of it was destroyed by the Mongols. Although there were constant changes in the canals and their flow, they made it possible to irrigate land said to support populations three times larger than today.

Some of these numerous canals are known, but it is impossible to pinpoint their locations today.<sup>3</sup> They were Nahr al-Marâ’, Nahr al-Dayr, Nahr Bithq Shîrîn, Nahr Ma‘qil, Nahr al-Ubulla, Nahr al-Yahûdî, Nahr Abî l-Khasîb, Nahr al-Amîr, and Nahr al-Qindal to the west. To the east were Nahr al-Rayân and Nahr al-Bayân.<sup>4</sup>

This canal region and especially the Nahr Abî l-Khasîb, where the insurgent’s capital, al-Mukhtâra, was located, was the heart of the Zanj state. It was the base from which the rebels launched their raids and to which they returned for safety. As emphasized by everyone who has studied the Zanj revolt, the nature of the soil lent itself very well to guerilla activity and made it easy for the insurgents to carry out their operations.

*Land Renewal.*—Arabs, above all, Bedouins or merchants, showed little interest in the land before the occupation of Iraq. The development of Lower Mesopotamia was only undertaken through the impetus given by al-Hajjâj (renowned Umayyad governor in the seventh and eighth centuries) and his successors.

Later the situation changed. The Abbasid Caliphs began to take an interest in the land and revived vast areas, long abandoned as a result of the rural population’s exodus to the cities. These lands, which their own-

ers had often received as rewards for services, were cultivated by servile labor, under the direction of overseers (*wakîl*) and freemen (*mawlâ*). “In these vast agricultural establishments where the subordinates who ran them were much harsher than the absentee owners . . .” there is no question that conditions became intolerable for the slaves.

Four points deserve special attention: the existence of “dead lands” in the Basra area; the possibility of acquiring these lands; the presence in Basra of people with substantial capital; the availability, thanks to slavery, of labor in great numbers to exploit the lands.

Two reasons seem to explain the “dead lands” phenomenon: the exodus from the country to the city on the one hand and the the peculiar nature of the natron-covered soil on the other.<sup>5</sup>

There were various ways to obtain lands of this type. If we disregard the many kinds of donation, known by the name *iqtâ’*, the problem of which has been definitely settled by Claude Cahen,<sup>6</sup> we must emphasize above all the special statute concerning these dead lands. I am referring to the famous hadith (tradition reporting the Prophet Muhammad’s words or deeds, or his approval of words or deeds performed in his presence) “he who rejuvenates a dead land becomes it proprietor.” Thus all that one had to do to own some of this land was to make it suitable for farming by removing its layer of natron.

There is no need to dwell on the existence of the substantial capital in the hands of different people in Basra. A century before the Zanj revolt, the city was at its height and a center of commercial, financial, industrial, agricultural, intellectual, and religious life, all at the same time. There is no need either to emphasize the availability for purchase of large numbers of slaves in Basra, which was the chief port of transit for slaves from East African markets.

## II. THE POPULATION (THE ZUTT, THE ZANJ)

Among the population of very diverse origins inhabiting these regions in the ninth century, two ethnic groups attract our particular attention: the Zutt and the Zanj.

*The Zutt.*—The Zutt lived in the swamps and engaged in violent robbery and even open revolt. They fought government troops on several occasions during the reign of al-Ma'mûn (Abbasid caliph, 813–833), disrupting communications between Baghdad and Basra. Al-Mu'tasim (Abbasid caliph, 833–842) managed to subdue them, but not without difficulty. He resettled them on the northern border of Syria, but we do not know much more about the Zutt or these events.

*The Zanj.*—"Jâhiz (a very important Arab prose-writer) distinguishes four categories of Zanj. Qunbula, Lanjawiyya, Naml, and Kilâb [*Bayân*, III, 36, we were not able to identify these names] were Negroes from the east coast of Africa who had been imported as slaves, at an indeterminate date."

*Origins of the Name "Zanj."*—This name is not Arabic, even though the Arabs have treated it as a word of their language. Its composition in three letters, Z, n, j, made it easy for the Arabs to adapt. They use it as a collective word with the value of a plural, which they can also denote by the form *zonoûdj*, just as from *hind*, the singular collective denoting Hindus, they form the plural *Honoûd*.

Since the word Zanj is not of Arabic origin, there are several explanatory hypotheses for it, and opinions are very divided. L. M. Devic thinks it is a borrowed Ethiopian word. "It is obviously a foreign word. The Ethiopian language, sister of Arabic, has a verb *zanega*, meaning to prattle, to stammer, to barbarize with the noun *Zengua*, confused, absurd speech, and these words are probably etymologically related to the name

of the Zendj people; but we can presume that the latter produced the Ethiopian verb and noun."

Others, such as G. Ferrand, A. Werner, and Philip K. Hitti believe in a Persian origin, but G. F. Hourani questions it. As for M. Dunlop, he writes: "The name itself has been explained as having come from the Persian *Zang*, *Zangî* (Pahlawi Zoroastrian *zangîk* "Negro"), but it is perhaps of local origin." This is close to the view held by W. Fitzgerald who, speaking of Zanzibar, writes: "The name is derived from two terms, one Persian, the other Indian, viz. *Zanz-bar*, which means 'Country of the Black Man'."

Some authors, among whom are A. Müller and the same G. F. Hourani, believe that the name is related to the Greek "Zingis"; but they remain extremely guarded, as for example, C. H. Becker: "The name Zandj goes back to early antiquity, Ptolemy, the famous Greek astronomer, mathematician and geographer of the second century, knew *Zingis akra* and Kosmas Indicopleustes (merchant and traveler of the sixth century) spoke of *tò Zingion*. The name itself is unexplained."

Opinions are also divided as far as interpretation of the word is concerned. L. M. Devic hesitates between Zinj, Zanj, or Zenj, therefore between *fatha* and *kasra*. F. al-Sâmir believes that three readings are possible: Zanj, Zinj, and Zunj; therefore *fatha*, *kasra*, and *damma*. Ibn Manzûr (author of a famous Arab dictionary, who lived in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) indicates only two: Zanj and Zinj, therefore, *fatha* and *kasra*. And we find the same thing in E. W. Lane's work. On the other hand, Ibn Durayd (Arab philologist, 837–933), who lived at the time of the revolt, is of a different opinion altogether and says clearly: "The Zanj are a well-known people; as for the pronunciation Zinj, it is incorrect."

D'Herbelot was the first to point out that "Rîh" instead of "Zanj" is sometimes found in texts.

*The Land of the Zanj, the Sea of the Zanj.*—Though all Arab geographers speak of the land and the sea of the Zanj, our information is poor and imprecise. L. M. Devic collected all the relevant pages from Arab authors. After comparing them,<sup>8</sup> he writes:

... the geographers are misinformed. If they pass names on to us in a rather precise order, their information regarding distances are often only rough estimates or even completely contrary to the truth; they are only based on the duration of the crossings, which were undoubtedly passed on from memory to the authors by merchants more concerned with calculating their profits than counting miles and parasangs ...<sup>9</sup>

To attempt to speak of the "Land of the Zanj" (which supposedly comprised territory south of Abyssinia with a part of the coast) seems all the more difficult since the term "Zanj" certainly included blacks from numerous peoples bought or seized as in ports of call all along the coast.

*Their Characteristics and Way of Life.*—We have said that many Arab geographers and travelers left notes on the "Bilâd al-Zanj" and the "Bahr al-Zanj." Now let us hasten to add that many more left descriptions of the Zanj themselves. Unfortunately, their information is rather anecdotal.

Here are a few examples:

Galen, (the famous Greek doctor of the first and second centuries) says Kazouini, the Arab cosmographer and geographer of the thirteenth century, (see *Âthâr al-bilâd*, p.14) attributes ten special characteristics to the Zanj: black complexion, kinky hair, flat nose, thick lips, slender hands and feet, fetid odor, limited intelligence, extreme exuberance, cannibalistic customs. The Arab cosmographer explains the characteristic that we translate as exuberance by adding that one never sees a worried Zanj. Incapable of sorrow, they all abandon themselves to gaiety. Doctors say this is because of the equilibrium of the blood from the heart or, according to others, because the star Soheil (Canope) rises over their head every night and this star has the power to give rise to gaiety ..."

Two centuries before Kazouini, Masoudi also mentions the attributes of blacks according to Galen's ten characteristics. His list differs on a few points from the one we have just read. Here it is grouping the characteristics in the same order, so that the difference between the two listings can be seen immediately: black complexion, kinky hair, flat nose, thick lips, thin hands and feet, smelly skin, excessive petulance, sparse eyebrows, highly developed sexual organs (*Prairies d'or*, ch. VII, t. I, p. 163-64).

Finally in keeping with De Guignes's analysis, Bakoui who, in his description of the Bilâd ez-Zendj, confines himself to the role of Kazouini's plagiarist, notes the ten characteristics of Negroes in these terms: They differ from other men by their black color, their flat nose, the thickness of their lips, the thickness of their hands, by their odor, by their quickness to anger, their lack of intellect, their habit of eating one another and their enemies.<sup>10</sup>

Would you like a prince of Arab philosophy's explanation for these characteristics of the Negro? Here is how al-Kendi, undoubtedly inspired by some Greek, puts it: God has established a chain of causes in all parts of creation; the cause exercises on the creature subject to it an influence which in turn becomes cause; but this purely subjective creature cannot react on its cause or its agent. Therefore, the soul being the cause and not the effect of the sphere, the sphere cannot react on the soul. But it is the soul's nature to follow the body's temperament as long as it meets no obstacle, and that is what takes place in the case of the Zendj. Since their country is very hot, the heavenly bodies exert their influence and draw the humors to the upper part of the body. Hence the eyes of these peoples, their hanging lips, their large flattened nose and the development of the head following the upward movement of the humors. The brain loses its balance, and the soul can no longer exert its complete action on it; the swell of perceptions and the absence of any act of intelligence are the result (*Prairies d'or*, ch. VII, t. I, p. 164).

This argument does not satisfy the grave Ibn Khaldoun, who was too far removed from the times of the great Arab philosophers. Here is how the author of the *Histoire des Berbères* perceives the passages just cited:

Arabs are incapable of philosophy bc we are like them. They are not.

المسعودي

Masoudi had undertaken research into the cause of this light-mindedness, this carelessness and extreme inclination to cheerfulness, but the only solution he found was to mention the remark by Galen and al-Kendi, according to which this character is due to a weakness of the brain from whence would come a weakness of intelligence. This explanation is worthless and proves nothing . . . (*Prolegomenes*, p.176-77).

There are a number of pages of this type in the work of Devic, that is to say, among Arab authors of the Middle Ages, and even among those who came later. They contain explanations for these characteristics, for the planets that govern the destinies of the blacks, as well as all sorts of essays and proverbs.

Here is a summary of these pages. Among other things, the Zanj are: evil, "they surpass brute animals in their unfitness and their perverse natures"; cannibals, "there are among them tribes of men with sharp teeth who eat one another"; ugly, ". . . and they are so hideous and so ugly that they appear to be the most horrible thing in the world to see. The women of this island are the ugliest in the world"; idolaters, evil and cruel; they have soothsayers remarkable for their accuracy in predicting the future; most of the time they go naked; they are great fighters, "Without the deserts and the branch of the Nile that flows into the sea, which is a natural protection for the Abyssinian frontier, the Habacha, would not have been able to remain in their country because of the numerous and violent troops of these Negroes"; they go into combat mounted on oxen; they have themselves tattooed; they have their nose pierced for the very uncommon needs due to their manner of waging war among themselves; they venerate the Arabs; they eat various kinds of millet, maize, bananas, meat, honey; they adore dates, etc.

Their political organization is simple. They have a king, who is the chief of one or several tribes, and they wage war on another.

On the other hand we can find:

The Zanj are very eloquent, and have orators who address the people in their language. Often one of the country's religious men stands in the middle of a large crowd and urges them to make themselves pleasing to God and follow his commandments, pointing out to them the punishments to which their disobedience exposes them and, reminding them of the example of their ancestors and former kings. The Zanj have no religious code; their kings confine themselves to a few traditions which lay down certain obligations of the people towards their ruler, and a few rules that the prince must observe in regard to his subjects.<sup>11</sup>

In studying the objects of creative activity of the language, that-is-to-say the literary monuments, al-Jâhiz remains faithful to his comparative method which he considers indispensable in other cases (*Bayân*, II, 56). He knows the literature of other peoples, not only that of the Greeks and Persians, but also that of the Hindus and the Zanj.<sup>12</sup>

These passages must have referred above all to the Zanj in their country of origin because, as Devic emphasizes: "Besides the reason we have given for explaining the diversity of judgments concerning the Zanj, we must consider that some of the peoples of this name had undergone the civilizing influence of the Muslims settled on their coasts, while others continued to live in a savage state."

*The Zanj in Arab Countries.*—We know that blacks were much appreciated as slaves in Muslim countries. From time immemorial, they constituted a large part of the population and were to be found at every level of Islamic society. The Zanj were imported as slaves at an indeterminate date, and it is not at all easy to understand this importation phenomenon in a real-life situation without being faced with the disadvantage of the "particular case." F. al-Sâmir emphasizes that the slave trade was not of Arab origin and that it was well-known at the time of the pharaohs. He insists on having it conceded that the Arabs themselves did not capture the Zanj, but acquired them from tribal chiefs. There is no doubt that the

same  
origin  
as Trans-Atlantic  
slave  
trade.



slaves were acquired in different ways and that it is impossible to generalize as to just how they were obtained. That is why we prefer the opinion of Bernard Lewis, who flatly states, "... they were largely Negroes from East Africa, where they had been captured, bought or obtained from subject states as tribute."

As for just when the Zanj were introduced into Iraq, it is practically impossible to give anything close to an exact date. Devic believes that the Arabs had visited Zanguebar since the new era, and in any case, from the beginning of Islam. F. al-Sâmir suggests 720 as the date for the Muslim trading posts in East Africa, and the first century of the Hegira (622–722) for date of Arab arrival in Iraq. As we have seen, Charles Pellat more cautiously prefers "an indeterminate date." That seems to us the only plausible solution. If Arab historians report Zanj revolts in 70/689–90 and 75/694–5, which proves that the Zanj had arrived at an even earlier date, there is no doubt that the boats and caravans transporting them were still arriving in the period that interests us.<sup>13</sup>

*Arab Opinions of the Zanj.*—In a preceding section (characteristics and way of life), we dealt with the Zanj in their land of origin. Now we turn to the opinions of medieval Arab authors on the Zanj in "Islamic country."

Before citing any author at all, we wish to direct attention to a certain number of points. First of all, we should eliminate the revolt and its consequences (all later judgments are known in advance); we must not forget that there are Zanj and Zanj, that some had been settled (and Islamized ?) for a century or more, and some had just arrived; we should never lose sight of their condition of absolute physical and moral destitution; we must reflect on their transplantation from an archaic culture to civilization, and on the language barrier; finally, we must not forget that, if there are no Zanj who are not black, there are many blacks who are not Zanj.

We have already said that the Zanj were highly valued as rural labor; on the other hand, they were considered to have many flaws.<sup>14</sup> According to a common proverb: "The hungry Zanj steals; the sated Zanj rapes"; the

Zanj was, as we would say today, stereotyped: he is stupid; he is cheerful for no apparent reason; he is a thief; he does not speak Arabic<sup>15</sup>; he has no memory; he is the cheapest slave in the market, etc. . . .<sup>16</sup>

Two passages from al-Jâhiz summarize the general opinion, which emerges from the texts:

We know that the Zanj are the least intelligent of men, the least discerning, and the least concerned with the future. If their generosity came only from their lack of intellect and intelligence, and knowledge, it would be agreed that the Persians were greedier than the Byzantines . . .

. . . He was in the habit of saying, 'I have never eaten dates with pleasure, except in the company of the Zanj and the people of Esfahan. The Negro does not choose, while I choose; as for the inhabitant of Esfahan, he takes a handful and finishes it before touching any other dates.

Few texts are favorable to them. Ahmad Amîn's attempt to group together complimentary descriptions of them concerns only a few actual or presumed individual Zanj. As for the famous treatise by al-Jâhiz,<sup>17</sup> Charles Pellat is definite: "Al-Jâhiz mentions them often but certainly did not have them in mind when he was writing his letter on the merits of the blacks."<sup>18</sup>

It must be pointed out that "racism," as the term is understood today, was never an important factor in the Muslim world of the Middle Ages. From time to time, there might be violent eruptions against unassimilable groups, such as the despised and mistreated Zutt and Zanj, but if for no reason other than the occurrence of significant intermixing among the populations, we can say that racial separation, in the strict sense, did not exist.

Some Arabs displayed loathing for the Zanj. Taous al-Yemani, who was a lieutenant of Abdallah, son of Abbâs, refused to eat the meat of any animal killed by a Zanj, in his words, a hideous slave; and the Caliph Rhadi Billah (d. 940), son of al-Moktadir, shared this



aversion to such an extent that he would accept nothing from a black man's hand. Nevertheless, there were undoubtedly special reasons for these feelings since, in general, the Arabs harbor no sentiments of repugnance for Negroes.<sup>19</sup>

Be that as it may, the conditions of Zanj slaves in Iraq were wretched, and there were two uprisings before the great revolt.

*The Insurrection of 70/689–90.*—A first uprising occurred under the government of Halid Mus'ab b. al-Zubayr (governor of Iraq for the Umayyads). For the most part, it involved small gangs engaged in pillage and is of little importance. The government's army broke them up easily, beheading the prisoners taken and hanging their corpses on the gibbet. F. al-Sâmir, in speaking of this revolt, points out that in this early period the Zanj were already living under appalling social conditions.

*The Insurrection of 75/694.*—The second revolt seems to have been more important and, above all, better prepared. The Zanj had a leader, the Lion of the Zanj, and the authorities were obliged to undertake two operations to crush them. This revolt was more complicated than the first, but we have very little information about it:

... A few years later, in 75/694–5, thanks to a revolt led by 'Abd Allâh ibn al-Jârûd, against al-Hajjâj (celebrated Umayyad governor), a large number of Zanj chose a certain Rabâh (Riyâh?), known as Shîr Zanjî (Lion of the Zanj) to be their leader and revolted. They even defeated a troop that was sent against them, and it was not until Ibn al-Jârûd's rebellion was suppressed that al-Hajjâj succeeded in reestablishing order ... The true nature of this movement cannot be determined from the information we have; it would seem that it did not break out spontaneously and that the Zanj had been stirred up by propaganda, but the movement was short-lived because almost two centuries passed before the Zanj were heard from again.<sup>20</sup> Not without interest on this subject, [adds the author in a note] are the lines

of a maulâ (client or freed slave) of the qurayshite tribe of the Banû Sâma ibn Lu'ayy, named Sulaih ibn Riyâh in which he praises the Negroes and mentions a certain number of sons of Negro women such as Ziyâd ibn 'Amr al-'Atakî and 'Abd Allâh ibn Khâzim as-Sulamî. These lines would have been composed after the first revolt ...

*Other References to the Zanj in Muslim History before the Great Revolt of 255/869.*—Apart from the two early insurrections and without mentioning texts concerning true or false Zanj personalities, historical sources record only an incident in 132/749–50. Under 'Abû l-'Abbâs al-Saffâh's caliphate, a government force of four-thousand men strong was sent to put down an uprising of the inhabitants of al-Mawsil (present-day Mosul, Iraqi city in northern Mesopotamia). It distinguished itself by its fierceness and massacred, it was said, more than ten-thousand people, men, women, and children. *Source?*

*The Huge Spawning Grounds of the Revolt.*—Our information about the sites on which the Zanj worked is very limited. Everything that has been written on the subject is based on a few bits of information found in the work of al-Tabarî (a great Arab historian, 838–923, who lived at the time of the revolt) and on a passage from *Kitâb al-'Uyûn*. (By al-Qayrawânî, Arab author of the eleventh and twelfth centuries).

According to Tabarî, our principal source, the rebels were employed as laborers (*kassâhîn*) to prepare land of Lower-Mesopotamia, removing the *sebâkh* and piling it in mounds, so that the nitrous lands of the Shatt al-'Arab could be cultivated.<sup>21</sup>

... They were recruited from among imported Negro slaves and local peasants, and grouped in camps of 500 to 5,000 workers, packed in without family or hope, given a few handfuls of flour, semolina and dates as their only food. From contact with the Islam of their masters, these wretches learned through the phenomenon of spiritual induction that they had a right to existence and minimum

769/83  
By Revolt

Source  
Review not  
Arabic

justice; the influence of Muslim religious from the neighboring hermitages of 'Abbâdân (city southwest of Basra, not far from the sea) perhaps had something to do with it.<sup>22</sup>

These work camps were reportedly located at Furât al-Basra and on the other side of the Dujayl. It is generally believed that they were east of Basra and part of a small section of Khûzistân. Given the number of slaves employed on them, they must have been very large, and only rich persons or wealthy merchants are thought to have owned such camps.<sup>23</sup> The number of slaves they employed was certainly very large; al-Tabarî's figure of fifteen thousand has been repeated by other historians, but it is obvious that no figures can be verified. As already mentioned the labor in these camps was composed of Zanj and other blacks, of different names, from other regions,<sup>24</sup> including probably a certain number of peasants. The task was to remove the crust of natron from the surface of the land, take it away on mules, and pile it in heaps "as large as mountains." It was hard work, and overseers appointed from among emancipated slaves, eager to justify their promotion, made it even more grueling.<sup>25</sup>

The situation is all the more striking since slavery in Islamic countries in the Middle Ages (contrary to slavery in Rome at the time of Spartacus) was essentially domestic servitude and not much employed for large rural projects. The conditions under which the Zanj slaves lived were unquestionably unusual for medieval Muslim society.

Basra's growth was a brief, intense crisis in the rise of Arabism, as studied by Ibn Khaldûn. Basra was destined to furnish the first example of the destructive social crisis of the city in Islam, when social restraints were broken, when usury, indirect taxes, government borrowing were rampant, and the opposition was exasperated by the luxury of the wealthy; slaves for luxury and luxuriousness, expensive clothes and jewelry, African ivory, pearls from the Gulf, precious wood from India made a mockery of the working proletariat's misery on the plantations (canonically, the lands of Basra were 'amwât' ('dead lands'), under their original crust of unproduc-

tive natron or *sebâkh*), 'revived' by the coolie labor of Zanj, kassâhîn, shûrjîyîn, who were refused their claim to freedom following their conversion. In the third century of the hegira, while in other Muslim cities, the social crisis was only among large bourgeois corporations and the small craftsmen of the guilds, between 'hostile gangs' of financiers carving up the latifundia, and serfs of the land ambitious to become landowners, in Basra it ended in a fight to the death between the privileged elite of the City that wanted everything for itself, and the starved proletariat of the plantations and sand-filled oases who pounced on the City to destroy it. Babel, which was alive as long as it was a place where the exogamous exchange of values and language was carried on, became Sodom, and burned.<sup>26</sup>

### III. THE PERIOD

There will be no attempt to present here a complete picture of the Abbasid Caliphate's situation in the middle of the ninth century. Nevertheless it is imperative that we say a few words about this period which has been referred to as "the beginning of the Caliphate's dislocation" and which gradually facilitated the growth and duration of "the Negro State." In no way is this meant to detract from 'Alî b. Muhammad's qualities as a revolutionary or from the fighting spirit of his troops.

For some time the Caliphs' authority had been steadily declining to the advantage of local governors, who were often only theoretically under their control. In several cases these governors broke away completely from the central power, creating new states and dynasties. Financial disorder, already present, grew worse. New military leaders (who, like their troops, were of Turkish origin), became more and more powerful. They controlled the ruler's court and the city, appointing and deposing caliphs at will. In the nine years following al-Mutawakkil's murder (247/861), four caliphs succeeded one another, and all were powerless in the hands

of their Turkish guards. Things did not change until the succession of al-Mu'tamid, whose brother al-Muwaffaq, the real master of the empire, restored the central government's authority somewhat. Thus, during the period that interests us, the caliphate found itself grappling with problems both in its own capital and in its provinces.

*Caution*  
Discontent in the Capital.—Malaise in the capital was brought about by the court and its spending, despite the financial chaos and, above all, the internecine struggle between three groups at the head of the empire: (1) "the mostly Arab dogmatic, juridical and legislative element of the ulemâs and qâdis," (2) the mostly Persian administrative element of civil servants of the dawâwîn (ministerial offices) and the mostly Turkish military element of the leaders of the jond (the army)." (3)

As for the civil servants:

*How?*  
 In the hands of clever leaders, the Shi'ism of the Imâmiyah (the majority of the Shiites, who recognize the twelve legitimate imams) had become a first-rate trump card, which they used against the government. If they were threatened with disgrace, to the advantage of Arab or Turkish officials, they cited the divine right of the 'Alids (descendants of 'Alî, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad). And as soon as the leader of a party, above all an 'Alid, undertook to change the social order to ensure that justice would be more prevalent, they sided with the government against him (cf. their historians' bias against the leader of the revolt of the Zinj . . . ).

Other problems were presented by the army which found it difficult to recruit and, above all, keep troops because the caliphs were hard pressed to pay them. Then there was the almost unlimited power of the Turkish generals over recruits who, having no other attachment, obeyed and supported their respective chiefs in their intrigues and conflicts, sometimes to such degree that the activities of war were rendered ineffective.

*3*  
The Provinces.—In the provinces controlled by governors who were nearly or completely independent, it was clearly the economic situation that prepared the ground for disturbances and upheaval. Determining just what the economic situation was like at any given moment, in any precise region, during the Muslim Middle Ages, is extremely difficult. However, for the period and region that interest us, we can indicate specifically rural impoverishment and peasant suffering. Moreover, for the nomads (Bedouins), banditry became a "complementary industry," and there were people in the cities who had everything to gain and little to lose in the turmoil. It is not difficult to imagine here the sort of solidarity that occurs between various movements when they emerge and continues to unite them as long as they are likely to be successful. This has led certain authors to speak of a class-struggle of the modern type, which is, to say the least, unwise. *Why unwise?*

Since a bad economic situation was made worse by anarchy and the disorder it caused and since the central government was powerless under the supervision of Turkish officers, a bad situation was made worse.

It is interesting to note how an Armenian historian would see this period three centuries later:

*9-14th c.*  
 Now I want to point out the signs of the race of Ismaelites' decline. At the time of their accession to the monarchy, the Bagritides (Armenian dynasty from the ninth to the eleventh centuries) ruled with their permission but occupied, nevertheless, a great part of the universe, not, however, under the single monarchy of the emir-chief, as from Mahomet to Djafar and to his sons, but by handing authority over to certain persons, according to their whims; which is a sign of the weakness and decline of power, with unity being replaced by the distribution [of power] among several [persons]. So far was the master of Khorasan; Alavic Abû-Thorab, of the city of Basra; Isé, son of Sheikh, of Palestine; the sons of Abel Touth of Dilem (Daylam, region in western Iran, near the Caspian Sea) and others, of other places. There were wars, constant attempts

by one to dominate the other by force, hence the disorder which prevents the accurate reporting of these ungodly tyrants' names.<sup>27</sup>

Naturally, this period of anarchy, which saw the break-up of the Caliphate confirmed, gave rise to all sorts of revolts. While Ya'qûb b. al-Layth the Saffârid (founder of the Saffârid dynasty, 863–902, that reigned over part of present-day Iran and Iraq) was overthrowing the Tahirid dynasty (Iranian dynasty reigning over Khurâsân, as vassals of the Caliphate of Baghdad, 820–873), while the Samanids (Iranian dynasty that reigned in Persia and Transoxiana, 874–999) were appearing in Transoxiana (region in Central Asia, to the west of the Oxus, that is to say of the Amu Darya river), and the Tulunids were detaching Egypt from the Abbasid Caliphate, the Kharijites (followers of 'Alî, the Prophet's son-in-law, who broke away from 'Alî and formed a puritanical sect) and the 'Alids were rising up in several places, and the Qarmates (members of a branch of the Ismaelian sect founded by Hamdân Qarmat in Iraq) were emerging.

The Saffarids, the Samanids, and the Tulunids on the one hand, the Kharijites and the various Alid pretenders on the other, continuous war against Byzantium and the emergence of the Qarmat movement, were all indirectly linked to the revolt of the Zanj.

Three of these many groups were of major importance to 'Alî b. Muhammad and his supporters. They were the Saffarid, the Tulunid, and the Qarmat movements.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of Ya'qûb b. Layth's rejection of 'Alî b. Muhammad's proposal for an alliance,<sup>29</sup> there is no question about the Saffarid contribution to the Zanj cause. Without speaking of the tacit and less important agreements between detachments of the two armies in Khûzistân,<sup>30</sup> we must remember that the central government's struggle against the Saffarids had constant repercussions on the war against the Zanj.<sup>31</sup> It was only when the Saffarid question was settled that al-Muwaffaq was able to undertake the large-scale operations that would eventually crush the revolt.

The advent of the Tulunids also contributed to the expansion of the Zanj rebellion. The contribution was indirect, but it created a situation beneficial to both parties. The Zanj profited from the fact that the central government was deprived of taxes from Egypt and Syria, which would have allowed it to assemble the troops necessary to combat them, and also from the fact that the central government was obliged to detach some of its troops to fight in Syria and even put them under the command of one of its best generals, Mûsâ b. Bugâ, who until then had been fighting the Zanj.<sup>32</sup> As for Ibn Tûlûn, he owed part of his success to the Zanj revolt.

Although the great Qarmat period did not begin until long after the Zanj had been crushed, these two movements were also of mutual benefit to one another.<sup>33</sup>

Slave masses living under inhuman conditions and ready to rise up, a terrain favorable to guerrilla warfare, a country shaken by anarchy in its central region and by serious problems in its distant provinces: all that was lacking was a leader capable of stirring up the Zanj and lighting the fire.

## NOTES

1. Without mentioning a detachment in Mecca that was brought to our attention.
2. On several occasions Tabarî emphasizes that diseases were rampant in the Abbasid army.
3. Medieval Arab geographers often give the fantastic number of 120,000 (!) canals, just for the Basra region.
4. Let us also add Nahr Sayhan, Nahr al-Banat, and Nahr al-Murgab in the West; Nahr al-Mubarak in the East.
5. Natron or natrum, natural crystallized sodium carbonate.
6. "There has been a great deal of discussion about the origin of the *iqta'* and more generally of various categories of land in Muslim countries. The discussions are shaky because we are forced to rely on texts from later jurists who were trying to fit institutions that began in obscurity into precise schema."

7. Charles Pellat (*Le milieu basrien*): "... as for d'Herbelot, he writes, 'most of its sectarians were Zenges, in other words, people who had been picked up and whom we call Bohemians'; and also: 'In Arabic this word stands for the country that today we call Zanguebar or, oppositely, the coast of Cafrerie. The people who live there are also called Zengi in Arabic and Zenghi in Persian, from which is derived the word Zenghibar, which means the country of the Zenghis, who are exactly those whom the Italians call Zinghari and the rest of us Egyptians and Bohemians.'"
8. As far as the works that were not known in his time are concerned, they hardly improve matters for us: "Their territory, which is bordered on the east by the western regions of India and on the west by the sea, is spongy terrain which turns to dust. It produces nothing [agriculturally] and trees cannot grow there; the region imports food and clothing and exports gold, slaves, coconuts." (Maqdisi, *Le livre de la création*).
9. L. M. Devic to whom I refer for the country's products, its climate, and its flora and fauna.
10. L. M. Devic's note. This list should be completed by Maqdisi, which was not available to Devic: "The Zandjes have black skin, flat nose, kinky hair; they are not very intelligent and are slow-witted."
11. E. Quatremère.
12. I. Kratchkovsky.
13. Heinz Halm makes good arguments for situating the beginnings of this importation in the Sassanid epoch.
14. A witness to the raids (in 334/945) on the eastern coasts of Africa, reports the perpetrators' answer to the question, 'Why did you come here to find slaves?' "They replied that it was because this land contained merchandise that would be useful in their country and in China, such as ivory, tortoise shells, panther skins and amber, and because they wanted to get Zandjs, who were strong men suitable for hard labor." (G. Ferrand).
15. "As if one spoke Arabic to a Zendj" (Beidhaoui, Arab author of the thirteenth century, cited by Devic).
16. Let us mention how the Zanj appear in popular tales: in the Arabian Nights, they are cannibals (night 301) or servants of terrifying personages (night 765).
17. *Kitâb fakhr al-sûdân*.
18. Charles Pellat.
19. Louis Marcel Devic.
20. Charles Pellat.
21. Loius Massignon.
22. Loius Massignon. The possibility that the cenobites of 'Abbâdân had an influence on the Zanj is a subtle question for which there is apparently no answer.
23. Nevertheless collective Soviet works emphasize "state lands," which our sources do

- not indicate at all, quite the contrary. When Claude Cahen writes: "In Iraq the Abbasids and the great merchants of Baghdad and of Basra owned huge estates . . .," he is obviously thinking of members of the ruling family and of the regime's high officials who were in a position to obtain these vast domains or receive them as gifts, and exploit them to their own advantage.
24. Muwaffaq was wounded in 269/882 by a Byzantine slave named Qirtâs.
  25. At the beginning the revolt was turned against them and their masters, who were violently reproached by 'Alî b. Muhammad.
  26. Louis Massignon.
  27. Samouel d'Ani.
  28. It might also be added that, if we follow closely the incessant wars with Byzantium, we will realize that the troops of Basil I won important victories in Cappadocia (central region of Asia Minor, i.e., of Anatolia) and around Melitene (an ancient city that was on the upper Euphrates) at the exact moment of the Zanj revolt. We can assume that this was an added concern for the central power.
  29. We will return to this putative correspondence on several occasions.
  30. See the chapters that follow which retrace the events in chronological order.
  31. With mutual benefit to the two rebel parties.
  32. Without mentioning Caliph al-Mu'tamid's famous attempt to escape which we will also mention again.
  33. In the chapters that follow, we will return to this and particularly to the famous proposal for an alliance that Hamdân Qarmat is supposed to have made to 'Alî b. Muhammad.

*Arabian  
Nights  
and Persian  
Nights*