



Black Soldiers in Early Muslim Armies

Author(s): Daniel Pipes

Source: *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1980), pp. 87-94

Published by: Boston University African Studies Center

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/218374>

Accessed: 22-04-2017 04:36 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Boston University African Studies Center is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

BLACK SOLDIERS IN EARLY MUSLIM ARMIES

Daniel Pipes

The following pages present references to soldiers from sub-Saharan Africa fighting with the Muslims in the two centuries A.D. 624–825. I offer this account with almost no commentary, for while I believe that this is useful information, I am unprepared to use it myself. It provides insight into the purpose of the African slave trade, the military skills of Africans, and the role of blacks in Islamic civilization.

This article deals only with the early period of Islam, its first two centuries; it was then that most characteristic Muslim patterns and institutions developed. Therefore, the fact that numerous blacks fought for the early Muslims should be remembered when assessing the general status of blacks in Muslim societies.

The following references are *all* I located; none found have been omitted. Also, while the notes refer only to twenty-five Arabic sources, this information has been culled from a literature five times as large.

Terminology presents some problems, for terms of color applied to persons in the early period of Islam are unclear in the Arabic sources.¹ Specifically, the adjective “black” (*aswad*) applies both to Africans and to swarthy Caucasians.² This means that a “black” individual need not be of African descent; however, I shall assume that any body of “blacks” refers to Africans, since it is unlikely that a group of swarthy Caucasians would band together. Thus, while ‘Ubaba b. as-Samit is quite clearly an Arabian, the thousand blacks he commands must be African.³ This article maintains the terminology of the Arabic sources, referring either to blacks (*aswad*, pl.

¹B. Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam* (New York, 1971), 7–10, discusses this for the earliest period.

²al-Jahiz, *Fakhr as-Sudan*, in A. S. M. Harun, ed., *Rasa'il al-Jahiz* (Cairo, 1964), I, 216, lists all the many black peoples.

³Lewis, *Race*, 9–10, and Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam, *Futuh Misr*, ed. C. C. Torrey (New Haven, 1922), 66; It should also be noted that an Arabian might have a black parent and thus have

sudan), Ethiopians (*Habashi*, pl. *Ahbash*), or Africans (*Zanj*, pl. *Zunuj*).

As with so many aspects of early Islamic history, the study of Africans in Muslim armies divides naturally into four eras: pre-Islamic antecedents, Muhammad's lifetime and the Ridda Wars (until A.H. 13/634 A.D.), the Arabian period (A.H. 13–132/634–750 A.D.), and the first Abbasid era (A.H. 132–227/750–842 A.D.).⁴

Meccan Antecedents

African troops did fight for Mecca even in pre-Islamic times, though the critical role once assigned to them has been shown mistaken. Lammens's notion that the Meccan traders relied primarily on an Ethiopian slave corps for military manpower has been discredited. Despite his impressive statement of this idea, Lammens's argument has been shown to rest on faulty philology and unsubstantiated speculation.⁵

In an ancient poem, Quraysh, the preeminent tribe of Mecca, is scorned for fielding African soldiers:

Your cowardly retreat has dishonored Quraysh,
As has your recruiting Blacks with massive shoulders.⁶

The legend of 'Antara b. Shaddad reveals something about the status of blacks in pre-Islamic armies. Born to an Arabian father and a black slave mother, he began his life as a slave shepherd. When his tribe became involved in warfare, he repeatedly proved

Negroid features. The renowned general 'Amr b. al-'As was the son of a woman referred to both as an Ethiopian (Ibn Habib, *Kitab al-Muhabbar*, ed. E. Lichtenstädter [Hyderabad, 1361/1942], 306) and a slave (Ibn al-Athir, *Usd al-Ghaba* [Cairo, 1280], IV, 115–116). For the problems faced by such a child, note the saga of 'Antara, summarized below; see also az-Zubayr b. Bakkar, *Akhbar al-Muwaffaqiyat*, ed. S. M. al-'Ani (Baghdad, 1972), 364.

⁴I have sketched my reasons for dividing early Muslim military history in this manner in "From Mawla to Mamluk: the Origins of Islamic Military Slavery" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1978), 167–188.

⁵H. Lammens proposed this idea in "Les 'Ahabis' et l'organisation militaire de la Mecque au siècle de l'hégire," *L'Arabie occidentale avant l'hégire* (Beirut, 1928), 237–291.

Aḥābiṣh derives not from the Arabic for Ethiopian (*Ḥabashī*), as Lammens thought, but from the word "ally" (*uḥbūsh*). The most complete discussion of this is found in M. Hamidullah, "Les 'Ahabish' de la Mecque," *Studi orientalistici in onore di Giorgio Levi della Vida* (Rome, 1956), I, 434–437. The *Ahabish* were, in fact, Arabians, although they may have had African parents. Some whole tribes may even have been black (al-Jahiz, *Fakhr*, I, 219).

⁶Abul-Faraj al-Isfahani, *Kitab al-Aghani* (Bulaq, 1285/1868–1869), I, 20; quoted in Lammens, "Les 'Ahabis,'" 252.

his military skills. His valiance overcame the prejudice felt against him as a black slave. Eventually he received his freedom and went on to yet greater exploits as a warrior and a lover.

Several Africans fought for Mecca in its war with the Muslims (A.H. 2–8/624–630 A.D.). On the way to the Battle of Badr (A.H. 2/624 A.D.), “the Ethiopians went off, throwing their lances.”⁷ At Uhud a year later, an Ethiopian, Su’ab, carried the Qurashi banner until his death. This too provoked derision:

You boasted of your flag;
The worst (ground for) boasting
Is a flag handed over to Su’ab.
You have made a slave your boast,
The most miserable creature that
walks the earth.⁸

Wahshi, an Ethiopian slave who accomplished major military successes for both pre-Islamic Mecca and for the Muslims, most clearly exemplified the transition blacks made from one side to the other. At Uhud he fought for Quraysh and killed the Prophet’s uncle, Hamza.⁹ (One source, incidentally, notes that Su’ab and Wahshi were the only two slaves fighting for Mecca at Uhud¹⁰—and both were Africans.) Several years later, at the Battle of Khandaq, Wahshi fought again for Quraysh and killed another Muslim.¹¹ After the Muslims took Mecca, Wahshi joined them; two years later he fought with them in the Ridda Wars and killed their greatest enemy, the “false prophet,” Musaylama.¹² Late in life, Wahshi summarized his battle record: “I killed the best of men after the Prophet and then later the worst of them.”¹³

Muhammad’s Lifetime

Besides Wahshi, a number of other African slaves fought for the Muslims against Quraysh. According to al-Jahiz, a black was the

⁷al-Waqidi, *Kitab al-Maghazi*, ed. M. Jones (London, 1966), 39 fn. 2; this is the first reading in the edition by A. von Kremer (Calcutta, 1855), 32.

⁸Ibn Hisham, *as-Sira an-Nabawiya* (Cairo, 1375/1955), II, 78. This translation is slightly adapted from A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (Lahore, 1967), 379.

⁹Ibn Hisham, *as-Sira an-Nabawiya*, II, 69–73, 122, 156; al-Waqidi, *Kitab al-Maghazi*, 286, 300.

¹⁰al-Waqidi, *Kitab al-Maghazi*, 230.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 332.

¹²at-Tabari, *Ta’rikh ar-Rusul wa’l-Muluk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1879–1901), I, 1940, 1943, 1948–1949.

¹³Ibn Hisham, *as-Sira an-Nabawiya*, II, 73.

first Muslim killed in battle (most sources, however, call him a Yemeni);¹⁴ he makes the same claim for the first Muslim cavalryman killed.¹⁵ The renowned *muezzin*, Bilal b. Rabah, fought in all the Muslim engagements from Badr on, as did Safina, either a black or a Persian, who was manumitted on condition of serving Muhammad.¹⁶ Shaqran, who may also have been either Ethiopian or Persian, fought at Badr while still a slave (*mamluk*) and Yasar ar-Ra'i was a Nubian who fought with Muhammad.¹⁷ On one raid, a black named Julaybib killed seven enemies before meeting his own death.¹⁸ A black slave belonging to a Jewish master converted to Islam, fought at the Battle of Khaybar (7/629), and died following 'Ali b. Abi Talib into war there.¹⁹

Arabian Period

Although mentioned only sporadically, African soldiers had a role of some importance before A.H. 132/750 A.D., and only sometimes as slaves. Abu Bakra, a black slave, fought in 'Umar I's caliphate (A.H. 13–23/634–644 A.D.).²⁰ A black leader, 'Ubada b. as-Samit commanded one thousand black troops during the conquest of Egypt, a fact which did not go unnoticed by the Byzantine enemy:

When 'Ubada b. as-Samit got on the ship to speak with the Muqawqas²¹ and approached him, the Muqawqas felt dread of his blackness.

¹⁴al-Jahiz, *Fakhr*, I, 180. Ibn al-Athir (*Usd al-Ghaba*, IV, 424) calls the same man a Yemeni.

¹⁵al-Jahiz, *Fakhr*, I, 180. It appears that al-Jahiz has confused matters here, for Ibn al-Athir notes that this man, al-Miqdad, "was known as al-Miqdad b. al-Aswad" [al-Miqdad, son of al-Aswad] (*Usd al-Ghaba*, IV, 409). Since *aswad* means "black" the problem is apparent.

¹⁶Ibn al-Athir, I, 206, on Bilal; al-Tabari I, 1780, on Safina.

¹⁷Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab at-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, ed. E. Sachau et al. (Leiden, 1905–1940), III, 1,34 On Shaqran; al-Baladhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, ed. M. Hamidullah (Cairo, 1959), I, 479, on Yasar.

¹⁸al-Jahiz, *Fakhr*, I, 181. Again, Ibn al-Athir (*Usd al-Ghaba* I, 292–293) says nothing of his being black.

¹⁹al-Waqidi, *Kitab al-Maghazi*, 649, 700; Ibn al-Athir, *Usd al-Ghaba*, V, 123–124, 125–126.

²⁰al-Baladhuri (*Ansab al-Ashraf*, I, 489) indicates that he was black; Ibn Sa'd (*Kitab at-Tabaqat*, VII, 1, 94) indicates that he fought.

²¹On this mysterious Egyptian personage see A. J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt* (Oxford, 1902), Appendix C, 508–526; A. Grohmann, "al-Mukawkas" in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*; and P. Labib, "al-Muqawqas Usiris," *Dirasat 'an Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam* (Cairo, 1975), 75–83.

“Remove this black from my presence and bring someone else to speak with me.”

[The Muslims] answered together, “He is the best of us, the most learned, and the wisest. He is our leader (*sayyid*), he is the most virtuous, and the most admired. We all pay attention to what he says and to his views. The amir ordered that we obey him and he ordered that we not contradict his views or his speech.”

[The Muqawqas] asked, “How do you feel about this black being the best among you when he should be the most debased?”

They answered: “By no means! Even if he is black (as you see he is), he is the best of us in rank, in precedence, in intelligence, and in wisdom. Blackness is not something we reject.”

The Muqawqas said to ‘Ubada, “Advance, black man, and speak gently to me, for I am in dread of your blackness; if you speak severely, it will increase my dread.”

‘Ubada advanced toward him and said, “I have heard your speech. Among those I command are a thousand men, all of them black, every one of them blacker than I and yet more hideous to look at. If you saw them, you would dread them excessively.”²²

This interesting passage suggests that the mere presence of African soldiers intimidated some enemies; and while the Muslims defend ‘Ubada, they show awareness of the reasons why the Muqawqas reacted as he did. Perhaps the fact that ‘Ubada was not a full African but had an Arabian father may have made a difference.²³

At the Battle of Siffin in A.H. 37/657 A.D., a black *ghulam* (slave) held his master’s bow.²⁴ During the Second Civil War (A.H. 64–74/684–693 A.D.), black soldiers fought on all sides and appear even to have assumed an independent role. Al-Baladhuri reports that an Ethiopian adventurer named al-Ghudaf seized the strategic city of al-Anbar in Iraq;²⁵ his troops may also have been Ethiopian since there were many present at this time in the area. Al-Ghudaf was so courageous that he supposedly could raid a caravan single-handed.²⁶ Ibn az-Zubayr had Ethiopian allies who formed a javelin corps.²⁷ In A.H. 64/684 A.D., the Umayyads sent slaves against the rebel al-Mukhtar and he personally killed two of them, one a Rumi (a Greek), the other a black.²⁸ In turn, Ibn

²²Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam, *Futuh Misr*, 66.

²³Ibn Sa’d, *Kitab at-Tabaqat*, III, 2, 93.

²⁴Ibn Qutayba, *Uyun al-Akhbar*, ed. A. Z. al-‘Adawi (Cairo, 1925–1930), I, 180.

²⁵al-Baladhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, ed. S. D. Goitein (Jerusalem, 1936), V, 298.

²⁶al-Jahiz, *Fakhr*, I, 193.

²⁷al-Baladhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, V, 300–301.

²⁸at-Tabari, *Ta’rikh*, II, 530.

az-Zubayr killed a black or Ethiopian *ghulam* fighting for the Umayyads in A.H. 73/692 A.D.²⁹ Al-Hajjaj's force included numerous Ethiopians.³⁰ When al-Mukhtar needed a cavalryman for a crucial mission, he sent a black.³¹ A few years after the civil war, when Ibn al-Ash'ath revolted (A.H. 79–82/699–702 A.D.), blacks aided him too.³²

Besides these major military involvements, Africans participated here and there, as the occasion arose. For example, one of Caliph 'Uthman's black slaves, a *ghulam*, went on an important mission to Egypt;³³ another killed an attacker at the scene of 'Uthman's death in A.H. 35/656 A.D.³⁴ Two years later, at the Battle of Siffin, when a Syrian soldier lost a duel, his armament got stripped away and revealed not an Arabian but a black slave. The reaction of his opponent on discovering this fact might be anticipated: "Oh my God, I risked my life against a black slave!"³⁵ From Khurasan, we hear of a black who is said to have undertaken solo raids for twenty years.³⁶ In Spain a black slave helped the Muslims conquer Cordova.³⁷

First Abbasid Era

Immediately after the Abbasid accession, the sources reported an astonishing four thousand African (*Zanj*) troops in Mosul.³⁸ How they got there and what they did is both obscure and tantalizing. In A.H. 145/762 A.D., when the Abbasids fought the 'Alid rebel Ibrahim b. 'Abdallah, blacks were present in their military camp, though it is not certain that they fought.³⁹

In the same year, A.H. 145/763 A.D., blacks played a curious role

²⁹*Ibid.* II, 851; al-Baladhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, V, 364.

³⁰al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makka*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Leipzig, 1858), 194. Al-Jahiz, *Fakhr*, I, 201, quotes poetry about the *Zanj* pillaging Mecca; this may refer to the Ethiopians in al-Hajjaj's army.

³¹Ibn A'tham, *Kitab al-Futuh*, ed. M. 'Abd al-Mu'id Khan *et al.* (Hyderabad, 1388/1968–), VI, 155.

³²Mutahhar al-Maqdisi, *al-Bad' wa't-Ta'rikh*, ed. C. Huart (Paris, 1899–1919), VI, 36.

³³Ibn Qutayba [pseud.] *al-Imama wa's-Siyasa* (Cairo, 1355–1356/1937), I, 36–37.

³⁴*Ibid.* I, 44; al-Baladhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, V, 98.

³⁵Ibn Muzahim, *Waq'at Siffin*, ed. A. S. M. Harun (Cairo, 1382), 276; at-Tabari, I, 3307.

³⁶al-Jahiz, *Fakhr*, I, 193.

³⁷al-Maqqari, *Nafh at-Tib*, ed. R. Dozy *et al.* (Leiden, 1855–1861), I, 165.

³⁸al-Azdi, *Ta'rikh al-Mawsil*, ed. A. Habiba (Cairo, 1387/1967), 149; al-Maqrizi, *an-Niza' wa't-Takhasum*, ed. G. Vos (Leiden, 1888), 55.

³⁹at-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, III, 305.

in Medina, revolting on their master's behalf against Abbasid occupation forces. The Medinans had aided an unsuccessful 'Alid rebel and subsequently found Abbasid troops stationed in the city. One day, when an Abbasid soldier refused to pay for some meat at a butcher's shop, the butchers called on the "blacks of the army" who could kill with their staves. When the trumpet of the black soldiers sounded, they left whatever they were doing and attacked the Abbasid soldiers. They forced the Abbasid governor to leave Medina for a nearby town, Nakhil; then they attacked Nakhil and forced him to retreat further. Even after this, armed with only their staves, they kept on killing Abbasid soldiers, amazing the populace.

Although they had their own leaders, the blacks brought an 'Alid sympathizer, Ibn Abi Sabra, out of jail and made him their leader. Ibn Abi Sabra anticipated a terrible Abbasid reaction to the blacks' revolt, so he conferred with the Medinan notables; these expressed their pride in what the slaves and *mawlas* (freedmen) had achieved, but wanted to restrain them. The blacks responded by barricading themselves in the market. When Ibn Abi Sabra called for a meeting, the blacks sent representatives along with all the tribes. Ibn Abi Sabra succeeded in convincing the assembly to end the rebellion and let the Abbasid governor return. When Abbasid authority was reestablished, the four leaders of the blacks alone were punished and the revolt came to a quiet end.⁴⁰ Although it is the best-documented military action of blacks in early Islamic history, this revolt appears to stand on its own, with little relation to other events.

The sources do not mention black soldiers for several subsequent decades, except for forty black slaves who formed a bodyguard in Harun ar-Rashid's time (A.H. 170–193/786–809 A.D.).⁴¹ In A.H. 198/814 A.D. Caliph al-Amin founded the Ghurabiya which was staffed by Ethiopians, apparently eunuchs.⁴² Ghurabiya might be loosely translated as "Raven Corps." Shortly after, in A.H. 200/816 A.D., the rebel Abu's-Saraya appointed a deputy in Mecca and the local blacks aided him;⁴³ when al-Ma'mun arranged to have his *vezir* al-Fadl b. Sahl assassinated in A.H. 202/818 A.D., one of the four men hired for the job, Ghalib al-Mas'udi al-Aswad, had a name which indicated blackness;⁴⁴ and when Ibrahim b. al-Mahdi

⁴⁰*Ibid.* III, 265–271.

⁴¹Diyab al-Iklidi, *A'lam an-Nas* (Cairo, 1280), 179.

⁴²at-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, III, 950.

⁴³*Ibid* III, 992.

⁴⁴*Ibid.* III, 1027.

attempted to flee Baghdad in A.H. 210/825 A.D., a black guard (*haras*) apprehended him.⁴⁵

Black troops almost certainly disappeared from Abbasid armies after A.H. 210/825 A.D. as the caliphs lost control of the area which produced African soldiers. The Aghlabids in Tunisia, who became independent in A.H. 184/800 A.D., had a particularly good opportunity to intercept the passage of Africans to the east; indeed, they made major use of Africans in their armies. In A.H. 187/803 A.D. Ibrahim b. al-Aghlab built a new city, al-‘Abbasiya, and staffed it with five thousand slaves,⁴⁶ many of which must have been blacks. At the major Battle of Sbiba in A.H. 210/824 A.D., the Aghlabids sent one thousand blacks and *mawlas* to war but lost disastrously.⁴⁷

In conclusion, only two peoples from outside the Islamic domains fought for the Muslims in significant numbers during the first two centuries of Islam: black Africans and Turks.⁴⁸ The African role can best be understood in contrast to the Turks. Africans fought on a fairly consistent level throughout this period, while Turkish soldiers grew steadily more numerous and important. Blacks fought for the Muslims at their first battle and Turks did not fight until some sixty years later. Yet, in the third/ninth century blacks remained a small part of the Muslim forces and the Turks came to dominate the Abbasid army and government. African soldiers did have a role in early Muslim armies, but it remained secondary.

⁴⁵ *al-‘Uyun wa’l-Hada’iq*, III, 365, and Miskawayh, *Tajarib al-Umam*, 456, both in *Fragmenta Historicorum Arabicorum*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1871).

⁴⁶ al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1886), 234.

⁴⁷ Ibn ‘Idhari, *al-Bayan al-Mughrib*, ed. R. Dozy *et al.* (Leiden, 1948), I, 101. On this, see M. Talbi, *L’émirat aghlabide 184–296/800–909* (Paris, 1966), 136 ff.

⁴⁸ On the Turks, see Daniel Pipes, “Turks in Early Muslim Service,” *Journal of Turkish Studies*, 2 (1978).