Remarks on the Blacks in the Fatimid Army, Tenth–Twelfth Century CE

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I revisit some aspects of the organization of the Fatimid army, and more specifically to the role played by its black contingents, who are still often considered the most faithful supporters of the dynasty. Wherever they came from and regardless of their social and legal status, black soldiers, whose Egyptian-ness was indisputable, were major players in the history of the Fatimid Caliphate. Medieval authors, who sometimes conveyed negative representations linked with racial bias, and who are not necessarily accurate in dealing with other races, even acknowledged this role.

Originating in Ifrīqiyya, the Fatimids conquered Egypt at the end of the tenth century CE. They established a Shi‘i caliphate that disappeared in the last quarter of the twelfth century. The Fatimid caliphs adopted a policy of expansion. This expansion was ideological, led by the Ismaili Da‘wa, especially in Yemen and the Persian Gulf. It was also economic: the Fatimid state, which was largely based on trade, created an extensive road and maritime network for economic purposes. Finally, it was a political and military one, as the Fatimid caliphs extended their influence to southern Syria and Arabia.\(^1\)
Of course, this expansion was not endless. The Fatimid Caliphate knew decadent periods. In particular, it had to endure a great crisis in the middle of the eleventh century (ca. 457–466 AH/1065–1073 CE). Then Egypt faced a great famine, and military factions struggled for power. Less than a century later, the Caliphate was again the victim of internal strife, and felt into decay until Saladin put an end to it in 1171 CE.

In many respects, these crises were provoked by the Fatimid army, which has been the subject of several studies by Arab and Western scholars in recent decades. In this article, I would like to return to some aspects of the organization of this army, and in particular to the role played by its black contingent, which is still often considered the most faithful supporters of the dynasty, wherever they may have come from and regardless of their social and legal status. One can see in this statement the paradigmatic inclination to confine black troops in the irreducible and unchanging essential identity so often conveyed in medieval sources.

I will rely on Arabic and Latin sources, mainly chronicles, where one can find some descriptions of the composition and organization of the armies that are sometimes different from the theoretical structures described in didactic sources such as al-Qalqašandī’s (d. 1418 CE) encyclopedia, Ṣubḥ al-aʿšā fī ṣināʿat al-inšā’. However, all convey representations that reflect cultural values that can explain the inaccuracy often applied to the blacks.

Indistinctive Groups

Ethnicity of Medieval Muslim Armies: The Inaccuracy of the Sources

Let us begin with some facts about medieval Muslim armies, whose structure and composition are often difficult to reconstruct. Most of researchers’ inaccuracy comes from medieval sources. Indeed, few military administrative documents produced by medieval Islamic chancelleries have survived. Military historians of the medieval Middle East have to rely on a plethora of textual sources, especially chronicles often written after the related events, and by authors too often poorly informed on armies and warfare, or who had no pressing need to be accurate. So it is no surprise that it is often
difficult—and sometimes simply impossible—to know how soldiers were recruited in medieval armies where free men, military slaves, professional soldiers, and auxiliaries such as nomads and occasional fighters, were mixed.

Moreover, even if Muslim armies—particularly the Fatimid one—included some multiethnic elite and professionalized regiments, in general they are described in the sources as organized in an ethnic way. The problem is that when we want to recognize the ethnic groups, we face the inaccuracy of the sources. Thus, Arab authors use ethnonyms like *Arab* as well as geographical words like *Ḫurāsānī*, this latter term theoretically referring to all soldiers from Ḫurāsān. But the sense of these words is not always clear. For example, *Ḫurāsānī* often refers to everyone who lived in the not clearly defined eastern area of what is now Iran, irrespective of whether they were Turks, Kurds, Arabs, etc.

One Color, One Status, One Group: Blacks and Slaves

The inaccuracy is even more relevant for the black soldiers of the Fatimid army. Medieval authors often use the words *Sūdān* or *Sūdānī* to refer to them. As is well known, the expression *Bilād al-Sūdān* properly means “land of the blacks.” It would appear that the word *Sūdān* that comes from it and refers to black color and it ought to refer to all the parts of Africa inhabited by the blacks, even if some authors tend to restrict it to that part of sub-Saharan Africa that had relations with Islam.

Furthermore, Arabic language has a rich vocabulary for slaves often not sufficiently studied. For example, Daniel Pipes assert that the *buqʿān* (singular *abqa‘*) was the one “brought from Ethiopia.” However, this specialized word, which is mainly used in medieval Arabic sources to refer to children born from slaves of mixed race, especially ones born from white and black parents, did not find its way into the texts referring to Fatimid black military slaves.

In fact, Arab chroniclers use literary *topos* in which blacks are more or less fit for slavery, *Sūdān* (and even Nubian) being interchangeable with “slave.” For example, this is the case for Ibn Muyassar (d. 1278 CE). He
mainly used the words *al-Sūdān*, *al-ʿabīd* (the slaves) and *al-ʿabīd al-Sūdān* (black slaves) without specifying their origin but, in the latter two cases, with information on their legal status: we are informed that they were (or had been) slaves.\(^{18}\) He also refers to *ʿabīd al-širāʾ* (slaves by purchase) on one occasion, when describing a struggle (*fitna*) dated Ǧumādā II 454 AH/June 12–July 10, 1062 CE between black slaves (alternatively designated as *ʿabīd al-širāʾ*, *ʿabīd, al-Sūdān*) and Turks (*al-Aṭrāk*).\(^{19}\)

Other authors also mention this word. Two centuries before Ibn Muyassar, Nāṣir-i Ḫusraw (d. after 1070 CE), a Persian traveler who visited Cairo in the middle of the eleventh century CE, described a military review.\(^{20}\) He recognizes “a group (*firqa*) [of the army] called *ʿabīd al-šīra*, who are purchased slaves (*ʿabīd*); it is said that they were 30,000 foot soldiers.”\(^{21}\) He also mentions elsewhere in his *Safar Nāmah* a quarter called Ḥārat *ʿabīd al-širāʾ*.\(^{22}\) According to Ibn al-Qalānīsī (d. 1160 CE), a secretary of the Damascus chancellery often well-informed about Egyptian events, the *ʿabīd al-širāʾ* took a great part in the conquest of Syria at the end of the tenth century.\(^{23}\) More latter, the Egyptian encyclopedist al-Qalqašandī (d. 1418 CE) simply says that some *Sūdān* “who were slaves by purchase” were incorporated in the Fatimid army.\(^{24}\) In his chronicle entitled *Ittiʿāṭ al-Ḥunafāʿ bi-Aḫbār al-Aʿīmma al-Fāṭimiyya al-Ḫulafāʾ* as well as in his extensive study on the historical topography of Fusṭāṭ and Cairo known as *al-Ḥiṭāṭ*, the Egyptian polymath al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442 CE) is slightly more precise. He calls a group *al-Sūdān* *ʿabīd al-širāʾ*, and he distinguishes various units (*ṭawāʿif*) constituted of *ʿabīd al-širāʾ*.\(^{25}\) In the following extracts, he describes two quarters (*ḥārat*) named Ḥārat al-Faraḥiyya and Ḥārat al-Ḥusayniyya:\(^{26}\)

It was inhabited by *al-ṭāʾifa* al-Faraḥiyya. [Al-Faraḥiyya] is beside Ḥarāt al-Murtāḥiyya. Until today, there is a *zuqāq* known as Darb al-Faraḥiyya, between the Suwayqa Amīr al-Ǧuyūş and Bāb al-Qanṭara.\(^{28}\) As for al-Faraḥiyya, it was a corps/regiment composed of *ʿabīd al-širāʾ*. There were several units (*ṭawāʿif*) of *ʿabīd al-širāʾ*, *id est*: al-Fariyya, al-Ḥusayniyya, and al-Maymūniyya who were named after Maymūn, one of the eunuchs (*al-ḫuddām*).\(^{29}\) . . . Ḥārat al-Ḥusayniyya: known after a unit (*ṭāʾifa*) of *ʿabīd al-širāʾ* called al-Ḥusayniyya.\(^{30}\)
Other units of black slaves serving during the early history of the Fatimid Caliphate are sometimes mentioned by Arab authors, like al-Saʿdíyya and al-Ǧawwāla under al-Ḥākim. Ibn al-Furāt (d. 1405 CE) also outlines two latter military units called al-Rayḥāniyya and al-Ǧuyūšiyya (the latter named after the Armenian vizier Badr al-Ğamāli Amīr al-Ǧuyūs, r. 1073–1094 CE). According to him, when Saladin brought the Fatimid Caliphate to an end, it was composed of Südān. And as we will see, Südān were also mixed with other troops whether they were ‘abīd or not.

Where They Came From

Nevertheless, in most cases medieval authors refer to large groups when they discuss the Fatimid army. Black soldiers existed as a group, as did the slaves who were transported from sub-Saharan Africa. Even the Fatimid courtier and historiographer al-Musabbīḥī (d. 1029 CE), who was particularly well-informed about everyday life in Cairo, is just giving general information when describing the arrival of black slaves in Fusṭāt:

On Tuesday [20 Ǧumādā II 414/11 September 1023], eight nights staying in his month, came the gift sent from al-Muḫdaṯa, near Aswān, by Ibn Mukārim Ibn Abī Yazīd. It consisted of twenty horses, twenty-four female camels (naǧīb), many Südānī, male and female, a cheetah in his cage, Nubians sheep, birds, little monkeys (nasānis), and elephant tusks. He marched in person in the city, accompanying his gifts and escorted by his sons. He crossed the whole city up [the residence of] His Majesty and he presented what he had brought with him. At the end of this month [Rabī’ al-Awwal 415 AH/mid-June 1024 CE], a present arrived from the country of the Nubians (balad al-Nūba). In it were [male] slaves (‘abīd) and slaves female (immā’), ebony wood, elephants, giraffes, etc.

Other such examples refer in Arabic sources to the so-called baqt, a “tribute-barter treaty” between the master of Nubia and the Muslims, which has been so often studied by historians that one might say they have an obsession...
with it. Indeed, soon after they conquered Egypt, the Fatimids sent Ibn Sulaym al-Aswānī as ambassador to Nubia. According to his own account in the lost but partially preserved Kitāb Aḥbār al-Nūba wa-l-Muqurra wa ‘Alwa wa-l-Buḡa wa-l-Nīl, Ibn Sulaym would have managed to renew the baqt to be delivered by Nubia since the beginning of Islam. Nubians had to send prestige goods (e.g., ivory, ebony, exotic animals) and slaves, probably in exchange for various commodities. The sources reflect the regularity of baqt exchanges during the Fatimid Caliphate. But even for this rather well-documented period, the paucity of the evidence forces us to make assumptions for which sufficient arguments cannot be made. It has been argued that some 400 slaves per year were delivered through the baqt “from about 650 until the fourteenth century,” which should be augmented by numerous slaves imported and sold by merchants. But the surviving sources of information are too fragmented to validate such an assumption.

In my opinion, giving the inaccuracy of the sources, it is difficult to know where military slaves really came from. A great number of them were certainly sent by the Nubian king through the baqt agreement. Moreover, even if Nāṣir-i Ḫusraw refers also indirectly to the thieves’ raids on the East coast of Africa and to the role of the Buḡa tribe in the caravan trade, he states more explicitly that “in Egypt, the slaves are Nubians or Rūm.” It is clear that an unknown number of slaves were purchased in several areas, including western and eastern sub-Saharan Africa, especially the Horn of Africa. The number of African military slaves originating from the southeast Egyptian border probably increased from the eleventh century. But it is likely that slaves from further western areas continued to flow in Egypt, sometimes through the Fazzan and the Berber city of Zuwayla, which was one of the centers of the slave trade in Northern Africa. Zuwayla troops, who gave their name to a gate and a quarter of Cairo (Bāb and Ḥārat Zuwayla), seem to have mixed Arabs, Berbers, and blacks (freemen and slaves?). They served the Fatimids in Ifrīqiyya then in Egypt, but their number declined substantially from the first decade of the eleventh century, perhaps because the slave trade through the Fazzan decreased.

They were probably replaced by purchased blacks from Nubia, as well as by slaves from the Horn of Africa transported by caravan or coastal routes, and purchased in large groups in big markets, especially those of Aswān and
Ethiopian slaves, who are so difficult to identify in medieval texts, were reputed for their warlike qualities as well as their loyalty—even before the advent of Islam. Of course, it would be difficult to affirm that many Fatimid black soldiers—freeborn or slaves—came from Bilād al-Ḥabaš (in Arabic sources, the word usually applied to the land and peoples of Ethiopia and “at time to the adjoining areas”). Ancient Egyptian authors do not use the term Habaš when they write about the Fatimid army. Yet they knew the Bilād al-Ḥabaš. Some of them were aware that the master of Egypt had diplomatic relations with the king of Ethiopia, and that the Fatimid caliph allowed the patriarch of Alexandria to send a bishop who would become the head of the Ethiopian church. As for Nāṣir-i Ḫusraw, he describes a group of Fatimid soldiers that he calls the Zanǧ, a stereotypic word that refers to the blacks from East Africa in Arabic medieval texts. However, the word Zanǧ is just as vague and unclear as the ethnonym Sūdān in the sources. It was associated with Eastern Africa areas as well as other sub-Saharan regions, and referred to free men as well as slaves.

The Fatimids, the Black Soldiers and the Latin Chroniclers of the First Crusade

Are the Latin sources of the First Crusade (1095–1099 CE) more accurate about suspected Fatimid soldiers coming from the Horn of Africa? At first sight, such sources are undoubtedly interesting; they sometimes provide surprising details on the composition of enemy armies, especially those of the Fatimids.

According to some Latin chroniclers, the Fatimids and the Crusaders did not see themselves as enemies. They would have been in contact early in 1098 CE, during the siege of Antioch. The reality and frequency of those contacts are not easy to establish. However there is no doubt that the Fatimids took advantage of the arrival of the crusaders in Syria to reinforce their presence in Palestine. They conquered Jerusalem in the summer of 1098, where they “appointed as deputy . . . a man called Iftīḥār al-Dawla.” He would have
commanded a garrison of 400 cavalrymen and footmen, especially Südānī. Despite his efforts, he failed to prevent the crusaders from capturing the city on July 15, 1099 CE. Then the military vizier al-Afdal (d. 1121 CE), who was the de facto ruler of the Caliphate, left Egypt with an expeditionary force. On August 12, he was routed by the Franks at Ascalon. He fled to Cairo, but the Fatimids made further attempts against the crusaders in Palestine. For several years, they sent armies from Egypt that fought the troops of the king of Jerusalem. They were sometimes defeated, as in Ascalon, and sometimes victorious, as in Ramla in 1105 CE.

Ascalon (August 12, 1099 CE): The Azoparths Came on the Scene

Latin chroniclers provide many details about these expeditions. In general, they stress the strength of “Ethiopian” troops of the Fatimids. For instance, Baldric of Bourgueil, who wrote the Historia Ierosolimitana around 1105–1107 CE, provides a description of the battle of Ascalon. He adds some details to the anonymous Gesta Francorum upon which he based his account. In particular, he refers to Ethiopian bowmen, who stood on one knee and had been ordered to lie still for the fight, without fleeing nor moving forward. As such, they were “much down[ed] by the sword of the Christians . . . as the harvest is mowing.” Albert of Aix, who wrote the first part of his Historia in the first years of the twelfth century, also outlines the role played by Ethiopian troops in the battle of Ascalon. According to him, the Franks had been informed of the arrival of an Egyptian army; the fight was especially cruel.

Then, after five weeks had passed, Duke Godfrey, hearing therumour of an army of gentiles, garrisoned the city [of Jerusalem] and the Tower of David with a loyal guard and, taking with him certain comrades, likewise Robert of Flanders and Tancred, set out for the plains of Ascalon to hear and find out about the affairs and plans of gentiles. There by chance a messenger met him, reporting that Meraius, second to the king of Egypt, and the entire multitude of gentiles, innumerable as the sands as the sea, were already sailing to Ascalon on the king’s orders, bringing
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weapons, food, and countless herds, and plenty of all the apparatus of war, and that they had decided to besiege the city of Jerusalem and the Christian exiles. The race of Publicans, and the race with very black skin from the land of Ethiopia, commonly called Azoparth (gens nigerrime cutis de terra Ethiopie dicta vulgariter Azoparth), and all the barbarous nations which belonged to the Kingdom of Egypt had decided to hold an assembly there at the city of Ascalon. . . . In this way cruel war shook those who were standing face to face on the two sides. For the Azoparth, whose custom was to wage war in their own fashion on bended knee, were sent ahead in front of the battle and attacked the Gauls fiercely with a hail of arrows, making a thunderous noise with trumpets and drummers in order to frighten off the terrified horses and men with such a horrible din from the battle and the plains. Those same Ethiopians, dreadful and hideous men, also had iron-tipped and savage whips, which they used to penetrate hauberks and shields with a severe blow, strike horses on the face, and make a terrible noise throughout all the army of the faithful. . . . This battle was fought on a Friday in August, on the birthday of the martyr Euplius, by twenty thousand Christians against three hundred thousand gentiles, Saracens, Arabs, Publicans, and Moors from the land of Ethiopia. It was reported to us by people who were present in that same conflict that thirty thousand of the gentiles fell on the open plains, besides two thousand who were suffocated and killed in the gateway of the city, and not counting those who reckoned to escape the danger of weapons and sans in the waves of the bottomless sea and died without number.

Latin Chronicler’s Representations

Although Albert does not give in these extracts the status of Ethiopians soldiers, it is likely that for him, they were not necessarily slave soldiers. Moreover, he also relates that after the conquest of Caesarea by assault, two years later, “five hundred [soldiers] from Ethiopia (Azopart) were beheaded, who had been sent by the king of the Egyptians as mercenaries.”67 Ethiopian troops are also referred to in various contexts by Albert or other Latin authors
like Fulcher of Chartres, Guibert of Nogent or Tudebod. Fulcher, an eyewitness chronicler who also recognized the presence of “black Ethiopians” (*nigri Aethiopes*) during the battle of Ascalon, says that a few months before, during the siege of Jerusalem, there was some “black Ethiopians” among the 500 soldiers who were permitted by Count Raymond of Saint-Gilles to safely leave the city and take refuge in Ascalon.68

It appears unlikely that these troops were really Ethiopians: Latin chroniclers of the early twelfth century used the exotic and mythical words “Azopart” or “Aethiopes” to refer to an enemies’ group that is distinguished by color and race and were apparently considered Muslims.69 “Aethiopes” was used by Western clerics for a long time, whereas “Nubiani” did not appear until the twelfth century.70 Latin “chroniclers and propagandists”71 of the First Crusade, who were all cultured clerks, turned to Classic and Christian traditions to shape their characterizations of their enemies. This is not the place to elaborate further on the representation of blacks in their work. Let us simply bear in mind that like in Albert’s extracts (above), black Ethiopians were given negative connotations. As in many patristic stories,72 they appear as devils and embody monstrosity.73 Moreover, as Muslims or members of a Muslim army, they could only be pagans whose slaughter was morally right and necessary.

### Between Representation and Reality: Number and Function of the Blacks

**The Fatimid Army: A Multiethnic, Too Large, and Inefficient Instrument**

In any case, these “Ethiopians” sometimes even represent for Latin authors a “synecdoche for the whole of Egyptian troops.”74 But they focused on them although the Fatimid army included other corps. Indeed, the Fatimid army was a multiethnic one, including Berbers, blacks, Arabs, Turks, Daylamis, Kurdish, and Armenians.75 It is traditionally divided by scholars into three categories: *al-Mašāriqa*, “the Easterners”; *al-Mağāriba*, the “Westerners”; *al-Sūdān*.76 As William Hamblin demonstrated more than forty years ago, “each
of three divisions could potentially contain a number of different cultural, linguistic and religious groups," and "the actual numbers, sources and relative proportion of the soldiers in each of these groups varied greatly throughout the history of the Fatimid dynasty." For instance, the Maġāriba gradually disappeared whereas the Armenians became increasingly important among the Easterners at the end of the eleventh century.

As for the troop numbers, any estimate is in doubt because the figures given by the sources are sometimes symbolic and/or rhetoric. What is clear is that these figures are often overstated. For instance, the data provided by Nāṣir-ī Ḫusraw just for the corps stationed in Fustāṭ amounted to 215,000 men, to which must be added the other troops of the Fatimid Empire. The overstatement is obvious, especially given that it would not have been possible for the state to maintain such an army in a city.

In fact, one can only assume that in the eleventh century, the regular army may have exceeded 15,000 men. Before the great crisis (al-šidda al-ʿuzma), expeditionary forces usually amounted from 5,000 to 10,000 men, sometimes as many of 20,000 soldiers. It seems that it decreased slightly during the vizierate of Badr al-Ǧamālī (1073–1094 CE) and his son al-Afḍal (1094–1121 CE), who is said to have built a more professional force. The entire regular army should have reached up to 20,000 men; an expeditionary force probably would not have exceeded the 10,000 men gathered by Šams al-Maʿālī that was defeated by the Franks in Syria in 1105 CE. Then, the sources only allow us to assume that the recruitment pool did not decline between the death of al-Afḍal (d. 1121 CE) and the fall of the Fatimids (1171 CE).

Actually, it is likely that the number of soldiers increased during the last decades of the dynasty. According to al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil (d. 1200 CE), a knowledgeable high official in the Fatimids' and Saladin's service, “40,000 cavalrymen (fāris) and more than 30,000 black footmen (rāǧil min al-Sūdān)” were registered in the Dīwān al-Ǧayš (army bureau), during the vizierate of Ṭalāʿiʿ b. Ruzzayk (1153–1161 CE). The information available about the last years of the Caliphate varies considerably among sources and is especially difficult to interpret. Some authors assert that the Fatimids were not able to gather a strong army whereas others describe a multitude of soldiers—especially black soldiers—involved in the fights against Saladin’s troops.
As for the Sūdān, the sources are unanimous: they were almost always the most numerous group, and totaled not less than tens of thousands of men. Moreover, they also allow one to assume—especially in light of Ibn Muyassar’s chronicle—\textsuperscript{84} that if the early Fatimids of Egypt were actually engaged in recruitment, their number increased extensively later on. The period of peak recruitment would have been the eleventh century, under the Caliphs al-Ḥākim (r. 996–1021 CE) and even more al-Mustanṣir (r. 1035–1095 CE), who is sometimes nicknamed ṣāḥib al-Sūdān (the Master of the blacks).\textsuperscript{85} Their prominence would have been a direct result of the support of al-Mustanṣir’s mother, a black woman. Even if the information is less accurate for later periods, it seems that they remained numerous until the end of the Fatimid Caliphate in 1171 CE. Of course, their numbers and military and political influence were somewhat diminished whereas other ethnic groups, such as the Turks or Armenians, became more powerful. In particular, the blacks are often described as the worst culprits and the main victims of the internal factional struggles that recurrently weakened the Caliphate, especially at the end of the so-called al-šidda al-ʿuẓma in which they are said to have been largely opposed to the Turkish units of the army. However, the Fatimids could never do without the black recruitment. Badr al-Ǧamālī (d. 1094 CE), who brought an end to the great civil war, had his own black bodyguard.\textsuperscript{86} On the contrary, as a result of what was likely increasing recruitment during the first half of the twelfth century, they appear in the sources as the main opposition force to Saladin’s army after he finished off the Caliphate in 1171. Then, even if the ferocity of this attack against rebelling blacks can probably be attributed in part to racial bias, it also reflects the fact that they constituted a major military threat.\textsuperscript{87} So it is possible that they were as or more numerous when Saladin ended the Caliphate than a century before.

In fact, whatever one believes about the reliability of data mainly given by Sunni authors that intended to discredit a Shi‘i caliphate, it should be stressed that they all described a too large army and rather negatively heterogeneous, in which black troops, often just described as slaves and less prestigious infantrymen, were always the most numerous group.\textsuperscript{88} This probably reflects a linked common stereotype and negative representation and socioracial bias concerning the blacks. In short, the Fatimid army is often
represented as an overstaffed and inefficient force whose core was made up of qualitatively, socially, and probably racially inferior soldiers.

Indeed, as we have seen, black soldiers were necessary slaves for Arab authors. The following excerpt contrasts such a heterogeneous and large army with the efficient white instrument, limited in number, built by Saladin: “When their dynasty disappeared due to Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Yūsuf b. Ayyūb (Saladin), he ended an Egyptian army (ḡund Miṣr) of black slaves (ʿabīd al-sūd), Egyptian emirs, Bedouins (ʿurbān), Armenians and others. He create a new army only composed of Kurds and Turks. His troops (ʿasākir) reached in Egypt no more than twelve thousand horsemen (fāris). It were scattered after his death. Only eight thousand horsemen remained with his son al-Malik al-ʿAzīz ʿUṭmān.”

Black Military Slaves and Freeborn?

Thus for al-Maqrīzī, the Egyptian army was mainly made up of black soldiers, who were all military slaves. It is not so easy to transcend this representation. Indeed, despite the many studies on the Fatimid army that have been published over the last decades, the Sūdān often continue to be viewed as a slave group that was ethnically, socially, and politically dominated. However, nonslave Sūdān could have been enlisted as free mercenaries as well. Of course, it is not easy to assume that some of Albert’s Azoparths were really black free mercenaries. But such soldiers could have come from Nubia and from other sub-Saharan African areas. Given the scarcity of information on Zuwayla troops, it is difficult to assert that none of the blacks belonging to this group were freemen. The information is also lacking for the Maṣāmīda Berbers, who, according to Nāṣir-i Ḫusraw, were black and served as infantrymen. He also distinguished two groups of Sūdānī: the main group, known as the ʿabīd al-širā’, and the Zanğ, as if he had wished to outline that some of the black troops were slaves and others freemen. But here again, we must keep in mind that nothing can be asserted or demonstrated concerning the word Zanğ without using uncertain circumlocutions.

This is not to say that black military slaves were not the main military
force in Fatimid Egypt. There is no incompatibility between the exaggerations more or less linked with a lack of information and/or negative representation, and the assertion that the blacks, mainly viewed as slaves, were the most numerous group in the army. Moreover, we must remember that it was not new. Black soldiers had been recruited for the Egyptian army long before the Fatimid conquest of Egypt. Before them, the Abbasid governors as well as the Tulunids (868–896 CE) and the Ikhshidids (935–969 CE) used black troops. For instance, Michael the Syrian reports that the second son of al-Sarī b. al-Ḥakam (d. 820 CE), ʿUbaydallāh b. al-Sarī, who ruled Fusṭāṭ from 822 until 826 CE, owned 80,000 black military slaves.92

This latter overstatement is not surprising, because medieval authors (and especially the Egyptian ones) conveyed the same representations. Several centuries after Michael the Syrian, al-Maqrīzī put in perspective the changes that occurred in military recruitment strength and the growing role played by slave soldiers in Egyptian armies. According to him, the army was transformed into a force mainly based on slaves (al-ʿabīd) under Ahmad Ibn Ṭūlūn (r. 868–884 CE), who furthermore was known to have built separate quarters for the blacks. In a text mainly devoted to military slaves, more than the figures, which obviously are presented cautiously, the emphasis is on the dynamic of enslavement:93 “... and their number reached more than 24,000 Turkish ġulām, 40,000 blacks (Aswad), and 7,000 free pensioned [soldiers] (ḥurr murtaziq).”94

Uncontrolled and Uncontrollable

Black soldiers were not only seen as the most numerous group. They were also sometimes considered dangerous to the established order—probably because of racial bias, but also because they were military men, and therefore dangerous. According to Ibn al-Furāt, the blacks were so numerous that: “there was a black (Ṣūdān) quarter in all inhabited place in Egypt.” In addition to being so numerous, the blacks were uncontrolled and uncontrollable: “no šihna (an urban and military official) and no wāli (governor), were able to gain access” to their quarter.95 Again, an analogy can be made with a situation that would have prevailed centuries before. It is said that the inhabitants of
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Fusṭāṭ complained to Ibn Ṭūlūn that the soldiers, especially black soldiers, continuously disturbed the Friday prayer.96

Sūdān troops are also described as having more or less colonized some Egyptian regions, especially Upper Egypt (al-Ṣaʿīd)97 where, moreover, some black nomads like the Buġa tribe traveled. According to Arab chroniclers, they usually retired to al-Ṣaʿīd during the struggles in which they were involved. Despite the governors appointed by the Fatimid state, they controlled southern Egypt, and more precisely al-Ṣaʿīd al-aʿlā, “the Upper Ṣaʿīd.” This region is represented as a safe retreat for them as well as all men or groups that had rebelled against the central power.98 Indeed, such groups took refuge in Upper Egypt long before and after the Fatimids.99

A More Complex Reality: Social Status; Role on the Battlefield

Wherever they came from and whatever their legal status (slavery, manumission, or free), blacks also had key positions in the management of the army and public affairs. It may well be that some Sūdān were members of the twelfth-century elite Șibyān al-Ḥāṣṣ, even if information is too sparse to be certain.100 However, it is safer to assume that some Ustāḏs were Sūdānī. In the Egyptian and Fatimid contexts, this term was used for various high officials serving the caliph as well as for military officers and instructors. A number (or most?) of these Ustāḏs were eunuchs, but probably not all of them, as it is still often assumed.101 Some of them had long and successful careers, like al-Ḥādim al-Aswad Miʿḍad, a black emancipated eunuch who served the Fatimid princess Sitt al-Mulk (d. 1023 CE) and educated the Caliph al-Ẓāhir (r. 1021–1036 CE), who gave him major military and administrative responsibilities.102

The Sūdān were not only mingled with men of other races as court officials: some indices make also clear that the regular army contained a single Sūdānī corps with its own officers, like the Rayḥāniyya, who seem to have played a major military and political role after the death of the Caliph al-Ḥāfīẓ (r. 1130–1140),103 as well as mixed regiments.104 It was even the case for elite units like the so-called al-Ǧuyūšiyya, which may have mixed Armenians, Sūdān, and other races at one time or another—perhaps soon after Badr

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al-Ǧamālī founded it following his establishment of a military vizierate in Egypt in 1073 CE.105

This is not to say that the blacks could not form cohesive groups with a certain spirit of solidarity when it was necessary to do so, especially during times of unrest. In some cases, this solidarity was a racial one: it is difficult not to see the racial tension in which black soldiers were opposed to other races (mainly the Turks) as a reflection of reality. However, their attitude was probably also—or much more—determined by the social status of the Sūdān held in the Fatimid army and society.

Moreover, the sources mainly reflect their low status: that of lower paid and less respected infantry soldiers, and again, there is no reason to think that this does not reflect a certain reality. However, black soldiers did not form the homogeneous group whose attitude was determined by the race so often described in the sources.106 On the contrary, they belonged, like other men, to different groups, ethnically and socially heterogeneous, whose attitude and activities were guided by their status and the interrelationships that arose from various factors, including potential ancestral relationships.

Within this framework, it is worth noting that even if the blacks historically served mainly as infantrymen,107 some of them, slaves or freemen, were not reduced to infantry units. This was clearly the case at the beginning of the Caliphate. Numerous references show that there were many black horsemen in the army that conquered Egypt at the end of the tenth century. According to Arab authors, in particular Nāṣir-i Ḫusraw, al-Maqrīzī, and al-Qalqašandī, they mainly served as heavy and light infantry using various arms, especially javelins, swords, sling stones, and maces.108 Some of them are also described serving as archers, which is no surprise, because black Africans, especially Nubians and Ethiopians, had long been recognized as skilled archers.109 However, there are also indications in the sources that black soldiers may have served as horsemen. After all, Ǧibyān al-Ḫāṣṣ are often described as skilled horsemen (fursān). Moreover, the Ĝuyūšiyya corps, which mixed people from different races or countries, was made up of both cavalry and infantry. As for the powerful Miḏad (above), he was awarded in 1024 CE the laqab (honorary title) Abū al-Fawāris (Father of the Knights), a prestigious title attributed in Arab tradition to famous horsemen who were considered masters of furūšiyya, like the mythical fāris (knight) and poet ‘Antara b. Šaddād.110

In addition, Latin chroniclers of the First Crusade described a group of mounted Ṣūdān. To some extent, these authors go beyond the limits of the Arabic sources on the role of black soldiers on the battlefield. Indeed, even al-Ṭarsūsī Tabṣirat, a furūsiyya treatise written for Saladin at the beginning of the Ayyubid period but mainly reflecting the previous Fatimid tradition of war, leaves us dissatisfied.111 In particular, this treatise, which is missing a section dealing with the art of war cultivated by nations generally present in this type of text,112 does not help us to understand how black soldiers were managed on the battlefield or how they were trained. One of the main issues is if black military slaves were purchased young enough to be shaped as specialized warriors. As it is often the case in military history, they probably were trained in various ways, according to the context (e.g., how and by whom they were purchased; how the military training system was organized, what units they were to integrate). There is no reason to believe that black military slaves were always and necessarily excluded from the huğra (barracks) education and training system, which may have dated back to the late Ikhshidid period, as attested to by Arabic sources in the middle of the eleventh century, and that was renewed by al-Afḍal (d. 1121 CE) at the beginning of the twelfth century. It seems that after his defeat in Ascalon (August 12, 1099 CE), al-Afḍal introduced something new: he decided to recruit freeborn sons of Fatimid soldiers in order to stand up to the challenge posed by the crusaders.113 However, Ibn al-Ṭuwayr, who gives a detailed explanation of al-Afḍal’s decision, never referred to a particular race. He only said that seven barracks were built, and that 3,000 men who were soldiers’ sons (min awlād al-aḏnād ṭaḷāṭat ālāf rāǧil) were selected, to whom officers and horses were assigned as well as offensive and defensive arms.114

However they were trained, their effectiveness on the battlefield depended on several factors, in particular, their relationship with cavalry when they fought on foot. It is unnecessary to talk about their supposed inferiority in combat that is sometimes conveyed in the sources: the difficulties that the semi-heavy Ayyubid cavalry faced to defeat the former Fatimid forces (which included a great number of blacks) rebelling against Saladin showed their warlike qualities. Moreover, we need to recall that some chroniclers of the First Crusade described black enemies as the most efficient and dangerous Fatimid soldiers. Thus, according to Albert of Aix, they faced an attack of
the king of Jerusalem and his men, during the battle of Ramla in 1105 CE, with courage, and they put them to flight and allowed the Egyptians to be victorious.\textsuperscript{115}

The unbearable people of Ethiopia, who were stationed in the middle of the thousands of gentiles attacked the king and his men with cudgels made in the manner of hammers from iron and lead, and they hit not only the knights but also their horses hard on the forehead and their other limbs, driving them away from the battle by their severe blows.\textsuperscript{116} Others were surrounding the admirable men and ceaselessly striking them with arrows and sling stones, like a relentless hail falling from the sky, until, no longer able to bear the assault, the king and all his men were put to flight.

**Conclusion**

In Egypt, employing black troops dated back at least to Pharaonic times. Using black soldiers was an old Mediterranean practice, whether they were free mercenaries, imported through the slave trade, or incorporated in the army as enslaved prisoners of war or as part of a tribute sent by an African sovereign.\textsuperscript{117} In ancient times, Egypt was not the only Middle Eastern country that utilized such an employment. Black soldiers, especially slaves, are reported in several areas; they continued to play an important military role after the emergence of Islam, and sometimes a major role, like in early Abbasid Iraq and Fatimid Egypt. It is said that Egyptian black soldiers were slaughtered in several battles, especially during the great civil war of the mid-eleventh century and after Saladin destroyed the Shi‘i Caliphate. The latter was undoubtedly a huge blow for the blacks. Their numbers certainly declined, but they did not completely disappear from armies. Even if the tactical changes and the evolution of combat techniques gave the advantage to Easterners’ (especially Turkish) heavy or semi-heavy horsemen, black soldiers were still reported in both the Ayyubid and Mamluk armies.

However, we should avoid giving in to the temptation to look at the blacks as a uniform group. In Fatimid Egypt, black soldiers were included...
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in single-race or racially mixed units. Some of them were entrusted with functions in important strategic areas of the army and the state. This does not mean that most of them did not belong to the “dominated mass,” but it can be said without doubt that blacks were not a homogeneous group whose members shared the same attitudes and beliefs. Was there any difference with other periods and other regions? It is a difficult question to answer, but in his survey of Islamic African military slavery, Bacharach has begun to show that only a keen reading of the sources can allow scholars to transcend their scarcity, which sometimes must be linked to the racial bias of their authors.

The real problem is that the sources are often ungenerous to us. When we read them, we look like visitors trying to enter a strange house. Some doors are open but behind them we find opaque curtains through which it is not so easy to see anything. Too often, the sources do not allow us to get accurate answers to the questions we ask. Thus, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to know if a certain number of blacks serving in Fatimid armies were freemen or whether they were freeborn or emancipated slaves. Should we be satisfied with the somewhat stereotypic portrayals in the sources, where almost all blacks are included in the racial and/or social group generally designated by the term ‘ābīd (slaves)? To my mind, the answer to this question is no. It is safe to assume that manumitted slaves—eunuchs or not—were as numerous among blacks as other races.

It is also not so easy to know where black soldiers came from. A great number certainly came from Nubia. The texts are unambiguous on the continuous arrival of black slaves from Nubia, whether they were sent by Nubian kings or imported through the slave trade. The information is scarcer on other types of importation. However, one cannot shake off the impression that certain Sūdān came from western sub-Saharan Africa, even if the flow seem to have decreased starting in the eleventh century. A similar idea comes to mind regarding the Horn of Africa, including Ethiopia. As stated, however, nothing can be asserted without doubt given the inaccuracy of the sources.

At first sight, the sources also convey a rather peculiar representation of the social, political, and military roles played by blacks in Fatimid Egypt. However, wherever they came from and whatever their social status, black soldiers, whose “Egyptianness” seem indisputable, were major players in the history of the Fatimid Caliphate. Medieval authors, who sometimes wrote

negative representations of the blacks, which were certainly linked with racial bias, and who were not necessarily accurate when dealing with other races, acknowledged these roles.

NOTES


2. In medieval Arabic sources this great crisis is called ‘al-šidda al-‘uẓma.

3. These events are covered in several books. See, for example, Paula A. Sander, “The Fatimid State, 969–1171,” in Petry, The Cambridge History of Egypt, 1:151–74.


6. See, for example, Bernard Lewis, Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990): “With the fall of the Fatimids, the black troops again paid the price of their loyalty. Among the most faithful supporters of the Fatimid Caliphate, they were also among the last to resist its overthrow by Saladin, ostensibly the caliph’s vizier but in fact the new master of Egypt” (66). Note that Lewis also assigns a collective loyalty to the black troops of the Tulunids, who ruled Egypt from 868 to 905. Lewis’s statement is sometimes followed and more precisely assigned to slave black soldiers. See, for example, Murray Gordon, L’Esclavage dans le monde arabe. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987. Translated by Slavery in the Arab World (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989), 69–72. See also Salah Trabelsi, “L’esclavage dans l’Orient musulman du Ier/VIIe et IVe/Xe siècles: quelques brèves mises au point », in Les traites et les esclavages, In Perspectives historiques et contemporaines, ed. Myriam Cottias et al. (Paris: Karthala, CIRESC, 2010), 77–92.


9. This also applies to the large number of administrative documents produced in pre-Crusade Europe: Bernard S. Bachrach, “Writing Military History from Narrative Sources. Norman Battlefield Tactics, c. 1000,” in Understanding Medieval Primary Sources: Using Historical Sources to Discover, ed. Joel T.
10. Of course, this general statement must be put into perspective with respect to the periods, the countries, and the authors concerned.


13. *Sūdān* is defined by Arab lexicographers as one plural form of *aswad*, the other being *sūd* (see, for example, al-Zabīdī, *Tāǧ al-ʿArūs*, (Cairo, Egypt: Dār al-Hadāya, n.d.), 8:225). *Al-Biḍān* (properly “the Whites”) are sometimes defined as “the people who are the opposite of the *Sūdān*” (al-Rāzī, *Muḥtār al-Ṣaḥḥāh*, ed. Yūṣuf al-Šayḥ Muhammad, Beirut and Saida, Lebanon: al-Maktabat al-ʿAṣriyya and al-Dār al-Numūḏiyya, 1999), 42; al-Zabīdī, *Tāǧ al-ʿArūs*, vol. 18, 263). However, the lexicographers do not explicitly refer to the color (*lawn*) “black” when they use or define the word *Bilād al-Sūdān*.


16. The word *al-abqaʿ* (plural *buqʿān* or *biqʿān*), which would require a comprehensive study, is mainly defined in the numerous explanations of the *hadith* reported by Abū Ḥurayra: Yūṣiq an yustaʿmal ʿalaykum *buqʿān* al-Šām (the verb *yustaʿmal* is sometimes replaced by the verbs *yaʿmal* ʿalaykum or *yaʿtīq*). For example, according to Ibn al-Ǧawzī (*Ǧarīb al-Ḥadīth*, ed., ʿAbd al-Muʿṭī Amīn al-Qalʿaǧī (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār Ṣādir, 1414 AH), 8:17, who along with other authors criticizes Abū ʿUbayd
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22. Naṣir-i Khusraw, Safar Nāmah (al-Ḥaṣṣāb), 100; Naṣir-i Ḫusraw, Safar Nāmah, 145.


26. For a discussion of this term, see André Raymond, *Le Caire* (Paris: Fayard, 1993; translated by Willard Wood, *Cairo*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 159: “The residential areas were organized into quarters [harat], defined by Maqrīzī as ‘a place where the houses are close together.’” He draws up a list of 38 harat.


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units”). For a description of all regiments of the Fatimid army mentioned in the sources, see the works quoted above in note 3, especially those of Beshir, Hamblin, Lev, and Zouache.


34. These texts are used by Beshir I. Beshir, “New Lights on Nubian Fāṭimid Relations,” Arabica 22, no. 1 (1974): 15–24. Because the Bianquis and Sayyid edition was not published, he used the manuscript kept at the Escorial, Madrid, Spain, cod. 534, part 2.

35. The text edited has Al-Muḥḍaṭa bi-Aswān (“Al-Muḥḍaṭa in Aswan”). Ibn Ḥawqal (d. 977 CE), Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Arḍ, ed. Johannes H. Kramers, 2 vols, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1938–39, repr. Beirut, Lebanon: Dār Sādir) 1:45, says that this city (madīna) was located in front of Aswan and that it belonged to the Rabīʿa tribe. See also Ibn Ḥawqal, Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Arḍ, 1:133.


37. Al-Musabbiḥī, Aḥbār Miṣr, 11–12. This text is paraphrased (with some minor differences) by al-Maqrīzī, Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ, 2:134.

38. Al-Musabbiḥī, Aḥbār Miṣr, 34.


His work is especially known from excerpts quoted by the later authors such as al-Maqrızī (d. 1442), Ibn Iyās (d. 1523) and al-Manūfī (d. 1524). See Yusuf Faḍl Ḥasan, “Ibn Sulaym al-Aswānī,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1971), 3:949.

See, for example, Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw, *Safar Nāmah* (al-Ḥaššāb), 116; Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw, *Safar Nāmah* (Schefer), 175.

45. The *baqt* agreement of the year 640 stated that the Nubians were to send 360 slaves annually to the Muslim master of Egypt, to which would be added personal sends.


49. In the Fezzan, south of Tripoli.


52. Walker, Exploring an Islamic Empire, 59.


61. According to Steven Biddlecombe, the new editor of the Historia Ierosolimitana, it was completed in two-stage process, the first around 1105, and the second after 1107 CE: “The Historia Ierosolimitana of Baldric of Bourgueil. A New Edition in Latin and an Analysis” (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 2010), 20, 22–30; Steven Biddlecombe, The Historia Ierosolimitana of Baldric of Bourgueil (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2014), xxiv–xxix. Note that previous editors and historians gave a date of composition of 1108, or 1107–1108 CE. See, for example, Jean Flori, Chroniqueurs et Propagandistes. Introduction Critique aux Sources de la Première Croisade (Geneva, Switzerland: Droz, 2010), 49.

62. Baldric, who did not participate in the First Crusade, based his Historia on the anonymous Gesta Francorum et Aliorum Hierosolimitanorum. Edited and translated by Louis Bréhier (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1924; repr. 1967), which had been previously written by a participant.


64. Albert of Aix, Historia Ierosolimitana. Edited and translated by Susan Edgington (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). In the introduction (xxv–xxvi), Edgington states that the first six books of the Historia “were completed in the first years of the twelfth century,” whereas “the earlier date for the completion of books VII–XII is thus 1119.” However, the work could have been finished in the 1120s.

65. Albert of Aix, Historia Ierosolimitana, 6:455–57; 6:464–65; 6:468–69. Albert also refers to Ethiopian soldiers (called Azopart) and to the “caves of Ethiopia” between the deserts of Ascalon and Egypt (7:500–1).

66. Probably the Egyptian vizier al-Afdal.


69. Hamblin briefly discusses the word Azoparth/Azopart, which appears also in different forms (e.g., acopart, achopart, escopart, ascopart) in other chronicles and in the medieval French *Chansons de geste*. Hamblin, *Fatimid Army*, 31–32. Various explanations for it have been proposed by scholars for the last half century, but its origins remain unclear. In particular, it has been proposed that it could have been a derivation from the Syrian French word for “Ethiopian”; or a word referring to the knee movements described in Albert’s *Historia* and in some *Chansons de geste*, and linked with the old French açoper, achopper; or a derivation from the Arabic al-Ǧabart; or a corruption of a Greek word derived from the Arabic hāġib and used by the Byzantines for Saracen, black skinned and probably enslaved “chamberlains” or “bodyguards,” and which was also used for “the devil.” See especially Edward C. Armstrong, “Old-French ‘ Açopart,’ ‘Ethiopian,’” *Modern Philology* 38, no. 3 (1941): 243–50; G. Levi Della Vida, “Encore Anc. Fr. Açopart ‘Ethiopien,’” *Modern Language Notes* 57, no. 8 (1942): 690–91; Henri Grégoire, “Encore et toujours les Acoparts (ou de L’utilité du grec byzantin pour les études romanes),” *Modern Language Notes* 57, no. 8 (1942): 691–94; Svetlana Loutchiskaja, “Barbarae nationes: les peuples musulmans dans les chroniques de la première croisade,” in *Autour de la première croisade*, ed. Michel Balard (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1996), 99–107.

70. To my knowledge, “Nubia” and his derivatives (e.g., “Nubiani”) were not used by early chroniclers of the First Crusade. It is still the case for William of Tyre (*Chronicon*, ed. R. B. C. Huygens [Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1986, 2 vols.]), who wrote towards the end of the twelfth century. It is true that if the name “Nubia” was not “completely unknown during the Upper Middle Ages, it had passed almost unnoticed until the twelfth century, when the number of mentions of Nubia started to increase noticeably,” especially in nonhistorical texts. Then “the XIIth century appears as “the starting point in the medieval ‘invention’ of Nubia.” Robin Seignobos, “The Other Ethiopia: Nubia and the Crusade (12th–14th Century),” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 27, no. 1 (2012): 307. See also Camille Rouxpetel, “Indiens, Éthiopiens et Nubiens dans les récits de

71. Flori’s words: Chroniqueurs et propagandistes.


73. The image/representation persisted. See, for example (about a battle that occurred during the Third Crusade, probably at the end of March 1190 CE), Ambroise, *Estoire de la Guerre Sainte*. Edited and translated by Marianne Ailes and Malcom Barber (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2003), 2:79: “There were there in great number and full of evil intent a hideous black people, against God and against nature, with red head-dresses on their head—never did God make more ugly creatures.” As pointed out by Debra Higgs Strickland (*Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003], 87–94, esp. 89), “the black, and especially the Ethiopian, was not only viewed in Medieval Western culture as a barbarian, but also as “a marvelous exotic, an inhabitant of the mythical land of Ethiopia.”


77. Hamblin, *Fatimid Army*, 14. See also Lev’s works quoted above.

78. See Zouache, *Armées et combat*, ch. 3.

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   My conclusions differ a bit from Hamblin. Hamblin, *Fatimid Army*, 74–79.
   According to him, the regular army ranged from 20,000 to 30,000 men.
83. For a more comprehensive discussion, see Zouache, *Armées et combats*, 638–40.
92. Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*. Edited and translated by Jean-Baptiste Chabot
According to Patricia Crone, “the black slaves may well have been recruited by his father who distrusted the leaders of the jund and a number of them disposed on.” Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 255, n578.


94. This last word is somewhat obscure because the passage is mainly devoted to military slaves. It is often interpreted (and translated) as meaning *mawālī*. See, for instance, Lev, “Infantry,” 187, n8. It is evident that al-Maqrīzī wants to be precise in his meaning that these soldiers were free men, because he adds the word *hurr* (free) to the word *murtaziq*, which in Arabic medieval sources generally refers to regular soldiers, freely enlisted, who received regular pay. In Abbasid and Buyid Baghdad, as well as in the Samanid state, a *murtaziq* (pl. *murtaziq*a) was a regularly paid soldier.


99. The Fatimids considered the ʿṢaʿīd an important region, and it is specified as...
such by Ibn al-ʿAṭīr: “In Ṣafar of this year [558 AH/9 January–February 6, 1163 CE], Šāwar was appointed vizier for [the Caliph] al-ʿAdid li-Dīn Allāh al-ʿAlawī, the Master of Egypt. He began his career and [his rise] to the vizierate in the service of al-Ṣāliḥ h. Ruzzayk, from which he was very close. Al-Ṣāliḥ favored him; he appointed him governor of al-Ṣaʿīd, which was the greater office (wa huwa akbār al-aʿmāl, which can also be translated “one of the greater offices”) after the vizierate.” Ibn al-ʿAṭīr, al-Kāmil fī al-Taʾrīḫ, 9:298. On the status of Upper Egypt for the Egyptian central power, see Garcin, Qūṣ, 57, 84–89.

100. See Ibn Muyassar’s description of the Ṣibyān al-ḫāṣṣ (al-Muntaqā min Aḥbār Miṣr, 143): “Ṣibyān al-ḫāṣṣ: they were the sons of the soldiers [al-aǧnād], of the amirs [al-umarā’], and of the [black] slaves of the State [ʿabīd al-Dawla].” However, Arab authors most often used the word ǧilmān for them, which was generally used in a military context for white slaves (mamlūk), not for blacks. See in particular, Ibn al-Maʾmūn al-Baṭāʿīhī, who distinguishes al-Sūdān (“the blacks”) and the Ṣibyān al-Ḫāṣṣ. Ibn al-Maʾmūn al-Baṭāʿīhī, Aḥbār Miṣr, ed. Ayman Fuʿād Sayyid (Cairo, Egypt: IFAO, 1983), 57; Usāma b. Munqid, Kitāb al-Iʿtībār, ed. Philip Hitti (Cairo, Egypt: Maktabat al-Ṭaqāṣa al-Dīniyya, n.d.), 6, 9, 32; Ibn al-Ṭuwayr, Nuzhat al-Muqlatayn fī Aḥbār al-Dawlatayn, ed. Ayman Fuʿād Sayyid (Beirut, Lebanon: Franz Steiner, 1992), 63, 100, 174, 179; al-Maqrīzī, Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ, 3:198–99 (“the Caliph has ǧilmān of about 500 men called Ṣibyān al-Ḫāṣṣ”); al-Maqrīzī, Ḥiṭaṭ, 2:287, 296, 361, and passim; al-Nuwayri, Nihāyat al-Arab, 28:312; al-Qalqašandī, Ṣubḥ al-Aʿṣā, 3:542 (close companions/servants of the caliph). See also Hamblin, Fatimid Army, 31, 40–41.

101. In this, I agree with Hamblin. See Hamblin, Fatimid Army, 37–40. In particular, see Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw, Safār Nāmah (al-Ḥaššāb), 94 (he mentioned 30,000 Ustāḏs, who were white and black slaves). On the political and military role played by eunuchs in the Fatimid Caliphate, see Lev, State and Society, 74–77; Delia Cortese and Simonetta Calderini, Women and the Fatimids in the World of Islam (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), index, s.v. “eunuchs,” 258; Taef Kamal El-Azhari, “Gender and History,” 9–21.


103. Rayḥāniyya corps seems to have been one of the most important units in the
second half of the eleventh century.

104. See note 33. Hamblin states that “they numbered no more than 5,000 men,” but this number is uncertain. Hamblin, Fatimid Army, 51. See, for example, Ibn Muyassar, al-Muntaqā min Aḥbār Miṣr, 119.

105. See Hamblin, Fatimid Army, 52–59. Hamblin, however, is not always convincing. The al-Ǧuyūṣiyya corps does not always appear in the sources as a mixed corps. Some authors are ambiguous, like Ibn Muyassar, who reports a struggle in 54 AH between al-ṭā’ifa al-Ǧuyūṣiyya wa-l-ṭā’ifa al-Sūdānīyya al-Rayhānīyya. This may imply that there was no Sūdān in al-Ǧuyūṣiyya corps. Ibn Muyassar, al-Muntaqā min Aḥbār Miṣr, 140.

106. Bacharach argued that “race and color were not the dominant factors” in the struggles in which African military slaves were involved (in Iraq and in Egypt), whereas in Race and Color in Islam, Lewis had more or less create “a paradigm whereby race is the sole or critical factor which determined the fate of the African military slaves.” Bacharach, “African Military Slaves,” 471–72.


109. See, for example, Strickland, Saracens, Demons, and Jews, 87–89.

110. The word furūṣiyya (horse riding) also had the broader meaning of “art of war.” See Abbès Zouache, “Furūṣiyya: Birth and Spread of a Culture in the Medieval Middle East (VIII–XVIth),” forthcoming. Note that an Ismaili Dā’i named Aḥmad b. Ya’qūb (d. c. 1020 CE), active in Syria during the reign of the Caliph al-Ḥākim, is known through the same laqab. He wrote a Risāla fī al-Imāma, which has been edited and translated by Sami N. Makarem as The Political Doctrine of the Ismā’īlī (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1977).


112. See, for example, the anonymous treatise probably (at least partially) written in the tenth century and entitled al-Ḥiyal fī al-Ḥurūb wa Fatḥ al-Madā’in wa Ḥifz al-Durūb, ed. Nabil Muḥammad ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Aḥmad (Cairo, Egypt: Dār
Blacks in the Fatimid Army

al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 2000), 368–72, esp. 371 on Ethiopians (al-Ḥabaša) and Nubians (al-Nūba), whose art of war is described as being based on spears and shields.

113. Lev suggests that al-Afḍal might not have been the first to recruit and train freeborn people; according al-Maqrizī (who relied on the Shi‘i and Aleppine chronicler Ibn Abī Ṭayy’, d. 1232 CE) the Caliph al-Mu‘izz (r. 975–96) ordered provincial governors to send young boys to Cairo to be trained in ḥuǧar, but not in the military arts. Lev, “Regime, Army and Society,” 133. But the information is unclear, because al-Maqrizī described them as Awlād al-Nās (literally “the Sons of People,” i.e., “of the Mamlūks”), a Mamluk term that had no meaning for the Fatimid period.


115. Albert of Aix, Historia Ierosolimitana, 9:640–41. For a discussion of this battle, see Brett, “The Battles of Ramla (1099–1105).” Concerning the reliability or unreliability of the ‘abīd on battlefield, see Lev’s remarks in “Infantry in Muslim Armies,” 191–92.


119. In medieval North Africa, black military slavery was not the creation of the Fatimids. The Aghlabids laid the foundation of a system whose developers were probably not aware that it would be such a success. See Yaacov Lev, “David Ayalon (1914–1988) and the History of Black Military Slavery in Medieval Islam,” Der Islam 90, no. 1 (2013): 21–43.
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