

# Black Eunuchs, Slave Soldiers and Concubines in Fātimid Egypt

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## Abstract

Despite slavery being commonplace in medieval Muslim societies, this subject has not received the research attention it deserves. It is only recently that scholars have begun to focus on the subject of slavery in the Muslim world and began producing new academic monographs about it. In line with this trend, this paper attempts to elucidate on the perception and practice of slavery Fātimid Egypt. In particular, I argue that the position of black African slaves in the Fātimid Empire goes beyond the simple dichotomy of free and slave, and also that of black servants and white masters. I also argue that despite the subordination experienced by black African slaves and the hardships they had to endure in the Fātimid Empire, they were able to establish new opportunities for themselves and advance into the highest positions of the Fātimid state structure. Black African slaves (eunuchs, commanders, and concubines) were not a marginal group, but rather a dominant force that played important roles in the political sphere throughout the history of the Fātimid state.

**Keywords:** The Middle Ages, Slavery, Muslim societies, the Fātimid Empire, Egypt

Mısır Fātımî Devletinde Siyahi Hadımlar, Köle Askerler ve Cariyeler

## Öz

Kölelik Ortaçağ Müslüman toplumlarında yaygın bir uygulama olmasına rağmen, İslam dünyasındaki kölelik konusu uzun zamandır çalışılmamıştır. Fakat son zamanlarda, bu alanda yeni akademik çalışmalar ortaya konmaya başlanmıştır. Bu tarz çalışmaların bir parçası olarak, aşağıdaki makalede Mısır Fātımî İmparatorluğunda köleliğe nasıl bakıldığı ve köleliğin nasıl uygulandığı gibi konulara odaklanılacaktır. Yine, Afrikalı siyahi kölelerin Fātımîlerdeki konularından yola çıkılarak, Ortaçağ İslam Dünyasındaki kölelik uygulamasının özgür ile özgür olmayan veya siyahi köleler ile beyaz efendiler gibi iki karşıt gruba indirgenerek değerlendirilmesinin doğru bir yaklaşım tarzı olup olmadığı tartışılacaktır. Yanı sıra, Fātımîlerdeki siyahi kölelerin özgürlüklerini kaybetmiş olmalarına ve zor hayat şartlarına maruz kalmalarına rağmen kendilerine nasıl

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DOI: 10.26570/isad.1284776 • Gelis/Received 17.04.2023 • Kabul/Accepted 09.05.2023

Atıf/Citation Sen, Muhammed Seyyid, "Black Eunuchs, Slave Soldiers and Concubines in Fatimid Egypt", *İslam Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 50 (2023): 75-91.

yeni fırsatlar yarattıklarının ve Fâtîmî devlet yapısında en yüksek mevkilere kadar nasıl yükseldiklerinin değerlendirilmesi yapılacaktır. Ayrıca, Fâtîmîlerdeki Afrikalı siyahi kölelerin (hadımlar, komutanlar ve cariyeler olarak) marjinal bir grup olmaktan ziyade, tarih boyunca Fâtîmî siyasi hayatını derinden etkileyen bir gruba nasıl dönüştüklerine işaret edilecektir. Böylelikle, Fâtîmîlerdeki siyahi kölelerin konumlarından hareketle Ortaçağ İslam Dünyasındaki kölelik uygulamasına ışık tutulmaya çalışılacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ortaçağ, Kölelik, Müslüman Topluluklar, Fâtîmîler, Mısır

## Introduction

As Mary Ann Fay and Y. Hakan Erdem have indicated, the subject of slavery in the Muslim world has been essentially overlooked and understudied.<sup>1</sup> This oversight has been recently addressed, as scholars have begun to engage different aspects of this issue.<sup>2</sup> In concert with this recent trend, I will contextualize the practice of slavery in the Fâtîmid Empire in this paper. I will argue that the Fâtîmid practice of slavery does not fit into the simple categories of free and slave or black servants and white masters, as has been suggested by Murray Gordon and Bernard Lewis.<sup>3</sup> First, I will

- 1 Mary Ann Fay, "Introduction: What Is Islamic About Slavery in the Islamic World?", *Slavery in the Islamic World: Its Characteristics and Commonality*, ed. Mary Ann Fay (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1; Y. Hakan Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800–1909* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 1996), xvii.
- 2 See Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); C. Gratien, "Race, Slavery and Islamic Law in the Early Modern Atlantic: Ahmad Baba al-Tinbukti's Treatise on Enslavement", *Journal of North African Studies*, 18 (2013): 454-468. Simon Webb, *The Forgotten Slave Trade the White European Slaves of Islam* (Havertown: Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2021); Hannah Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise the Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves 1260-1500* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019). See also Ehud R. Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent / Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Baki Tezcan, "Dispelling the Darkness: The Politics of 'Race' in the Early Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Empire in the Light of the Life and Work of Mullah Ali", *Identity and Identity Formation in the Ottoman World: A Volume of Essays in Honor of Norman Itzkowitz*, ed. Baki Tezcan, Karl K. Barbir and Norman Itzkowitz (Madison, Wisconsin: Center for Turkish Studies at the University of Wisconsin, 2007), 73-95; Baki Tezcan, "Dispelling the Darkness of the Halberdier's Treatise: A Comparative Look at Black Africans in Ottoman Letters in the Early Modern Period", *Disliking Others: Loathing, Hostility and Distrust in Premodern Ottoman Lands*, ed. Hakan T. Karateke, H. Erdem Çıpa and Helga Anetshofer (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), 43-74; Madeline C. Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Leslie Peirce, *A Spectrum of Unfreedom: Captives and Slaves in the Ottoman Empire* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2021).
- 3 Murray Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989), 16-17; Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 99.

expound on the political context of the Fātimid Dynasty. Then, I will analyze the kinds of roles held by black people in the Fātimid Empire. Finally, I will describe the insights provided by the experiences of black slaves in Fātimid society, in the context of understanding the subject of slavery in the Islamic world.

### **Political Context of the Fātimid Empire**

The Fātimids first appeared in Mahdia in the Maghreb, before taking control of North Africa at the beginning of the tenth century. During the reign of al-Mu'izz li-Dīn Allāh (d. 975), the Fātimids successfully entered Egypt, established the city of Cairo, and designated it as the new capital of the nascent Shi'ī empire in 969. In time, the Fātimid Dynasty expanded its territory into Syria and the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>4</sup>

The Fātimids maintained a stable and well-functioning empire until al-Hākim (d. 1021) came to power in 996. He had a volatile and unpredictable personality which was reflected by his reign. He enacted contradictory political and social decrees that came as a surprise to both state officials and the general public. Thus, the reign of al-Hākim devolved into an unruly and tumultuous affair. Likewise, his reign came to a shocking and chaotic conclusion. He was in the habit of going out of Cairo and wandering around the wilderness by himself. After one of these idiosyncratic excursions in 1021, he never returned. There was some speculation about who was behind his disappearance and potential death. According to one of the suspicions, Sitt al-Mulk (d.1023), al-Hākim's sister, was responsible for her brother's murder because she would have been able to stabilize the state and bring law and order to Egypt again with his elimination.<sup>5</sup> Sitt al-Mulk instead diverted the blame to Ibn Dawwās, a Berber commander, persecuting him for murder.<sup>6</sup> After al-Hākim's disappearance in 1021, his son, al-Zāhir li-I'zāz li-Dīnillāh (d. 1036), acceded to the Fātimid throne. As he was not old enough to govern the Fātimid State effectively, Sitt al-Mulk served as a regent for his nephew. Contrary to the reign of al-Hākim, Sitt al-Mulk restored the country and brought stability and peace to Egypt.<sup>7</sup> After she died in 1023, al-Zāhir left the state affairs to powerful viziers such as Ali b.

4 M. Canard, "Fātimides", in *Encyclopedia of Islam (Fr.)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., II, 870-882.

5 Paul E. Walker, "The Fātimid Caliph al-'Aziz and His Daughter Sitt al-Mulk: A Case of Delayed but Eventual Succession to Rule by a Woman", *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 4 (2011): 37.

6 Michael Brett, *The Fātimid Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 157.

7 Walker, "The Fātimid Caliph al-'Aziz and His Daughter Sitt al-Mulk", 38-40.

al-Jarjarāi and Badr al-Jamālī. The Fātimid viziers kept their authority and power during the long reign of al-Mustansir Billah (al-Zahir's son). The viziers' rule, however, was disrupted after the death of al-Mustansir Billah in 1094, because the caliph's sons, Nizār (d. 1095) and al-Musta'li (d. 1101), indulged in a bitter struggle, which returned the Fātimid Empire to a period of chaos and instability. The Fātimids were unable to fully recover from the civil war, leaving weak and ineffective rulers to come to power. This enabled Salāh al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī (d. 1193) to demolish the Fātimid Empire in 1171 without difficulty.<sup>8</sup> To sum up, the Fātimids emerged as a local dynasty in North Africa at the beginning of the tenth century, before transforming into a powerful Shi'i empire in the latter-half of the century. Its authority and power gradually waned, eventually disappearing in the second-half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Black Eunuchs in the Fātimid Empire**

Black eunuchs were one of the important social groups employed in the Fātimid Empire.<sup>9</sup> There is little information about how black eunuchs were selected, educated, and treated by the Fātimids. That said, we know that they played important roles over the course of Fātimid history. Acquiring close relationships with the Fātimid caliphs, they became influential figures in Fātimid political life.<sup>10</sup> Historical sources discuss a great number of black eunuchs who worked in the Fātimid court. For example, al-Qalqashandī (d.1418), an Egyptian polymath and historian in the Mamluk era, notes that the Fātimid court accommodated 1,000 eunuchs.<sup>11</sup> The Fātimids established different occupational branches for eunuchs as their numbers increased. For instance, Nāsir Khusraw (d. 1088), a famous Persian Ismaili scholar and traveler, points out that the Fātimids developed a particular group of eunuchs named *ustādhs* for court services.<sup>12</sup> *Ustādhs* worked as instructors in the Fātimid court

8 Brett, *The Fātimid Empire*, 262-295.

9 There were both white and black eunuchs in the Fātimid courts. However, this paper only focuses on black eunuchs.

10 Taef El-Azhari, *Queens, Eunuchs and Concubines in Islamic History, 661–1257* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 254.

11 al-Qalqashandī, *Selections from Şubḥ al-A'shā by al-Qalqashandī, Clerk of the Mamluk Court: Egypt: "Seats of Government" and "Regulations of the Kingdom," from Early Islam to the Mamluks*, ed. Heba El-Toudy and Tarek Galal Abdelhamid (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 144, 445.

12 Nāsir Khusraw, *Safar-Nāmah-i Nāsir Khusraw Alavī* (Tahran: Intishārāt-i Kitābfurūshī-i Mahmūdī, 1923), 66. See also Jere L. Bacharach, "African Military Slaves in the Medieval Middle East: The Cases of Iraq (869-955) and Egypt (868-1171)", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 13/4 (1981): 483.

and taught young slave-boys skills such as how to write and how to use a bow.<sup>13</sup>

Parallel to their employment in various positions in the Fātimid court, the black eunuchs began to play essential roles in state affairs.<sup>14</sup> One such black eunuch was Ghayn. While we do not possess adequate knowledge about his upbringing and entrance into the Fātimid court, we find him employed as the chief of the police department and market inspection during the reign of al-Hākim in 1011.<sup>15</sup> Al-Antākī (d. 1066) mentions that al-Hākim promoted Ghayn (*al-khādīm al-asvad*) to the positions of commander-in-chief (*qāid al-quwwād*) and the master of the court (*ustādh al-ustādhīn*).<sup>16</sup> We have evidence that al-Hākim respected him a great deal, such as one time that Ghayn felt sick and the Fātimid caliph visited him and rewarded him with precious gifts.<sup>17</sup> During his political career, Ghayn accumulated a great deal of wealth, with which he constructed a congregational mosque on Jazira Island. This building represented considerable prestige and honor for him.<sup>18</sup>

Another remarkable example of the black eunuchs who were promoted to significant positions and played crucial roles in the Fātimid Empire was Mi'dād. Our sources are silent about Mi'dād's background and his early adulthood. Thus, we do not have knowledge about his upbringing, how he was castrated, nor how he entered the Fātimid court. However, we know that Mi'dād managed to acquire the patronage of Sitt al-Mulk so that he was employed as the tutor of the caliph al-Zāhir.<sup>19</sup> He then kept a close relationship with al-Zāhir during his reign. For instance, he would regularly meet with the caliph whenever either of them deemed it necessary.<sup>20</sup> Mi'dād was trusted by al-Zāhir to the extent that he was called *al-Qā'id Izz al-Dawla* and promoted to the position of commander-in-chief by the caliph. Mi'dād was also nicknamed *Ab al-Fawāris* (the father of cavalries).<sup>21</sup> Such titles signify that Mi'dād controlled a significant number

13 Yaacov Lev, *War and Society in the Eastern Mediterranean: 7th - 15th Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 143.

14 Yaacov Lev, *State and Society in Fātimid Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 74-78.

15 al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz al-Hunafā bi-Akhhār al-A'immah al-Fātimīyyīn al-Khulafā*, ed. Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-Arabī, 1996), II, 89.

16 Yahyā b. Sa'īd al-Antāqī, *Tārīkh al-Antāqī*, ed. Omar Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Tripoli: Lebanon: Jurus Press, 1990), 309.

17 al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz al-Hunafā*, II, 91.

18 Yaacov Lev, *Saladin in Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), footnote 37, 120-121.

19 al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz al-Hunafā*, II, 127.

20 Ibid., 147.

21 Ibid., 139-140.

of military men in the Fātimid Army. Historical sources explain that he was extremely at his job. For example, al-Maqrizī, provides an anecdote that there was a drought and price inflation in Egypt during the reign of al-Zāhir. During this period, some people turned to banditry and began to pillage Egyptian cities. With his forces, which included Slavic slave soldiers (*al-saqāliba*), Mi'dād set up a military operation and successfully ended the revolt.<sup>22</sup> These examples reveal how close of a relationship Mi'dād had with the caliph, as well as the extent to which he accumulated power and prestige in the Fātimid court.

While Mi'dād was in office, other black eunuchs were also employed in important positions in the Fātimid Empire. Mi'dād was instrumental in employing more black eunuchs in the Fātimid bureaucracy. For example, Mi'dād employed a black eunuch, Mawsūf, as the governor of Aleppo in 1023. He also charged a black eunuch, Nāfidh, with the office of *shurta* (police) in 1024. After a while, he appointed another black eunuch, Bāqī, into Nāfidh's position. Mi'dād also granted the *hisba* office to black eunuchs, who became responsible for inspecting the social and economic life of the Fātimids.<sup>23</sup>

Another black eunuch in Mi'dād's circle was Idd al-Dawla Rifq. Rifq probably entered the Fātimid court during the reign of al-Zāhir and served the dynasty for a long time.<sup>24</sup> Even though Rifq and Mi'dād had a solid relationship at the beginning, their relations deteriorated after a while. After Rifq challenged Mi'dād's authority during a military operation in the Delta region,<sup>25</sup> Mi'dād ousted Rifq from his regiment.<sup>26</sup> However, Rifq later came to be a commander-in-chief and marched to the Syrian region with a well-prepared army to suppress the local rebels. In 1049, Rifq was further appointed as the governor of Damascus.<sup>27</sup> He then moved to northern Syria and fought against rebels in Aleppo in 1050. However, he lost the battle and was taken captive. Three days later, he died in the castle of Aleppo.<sup>28</sup>

Through all of these examples, we could conclude that the Fātimids were comfortable with employing black eunuchs in the state structure to the extent that they became an important part of Fātimid bureaucracy. Regardless of their racial background, black eunuchs served not only in the

22 Ibid., 179-180.

23 El-Azhari, *Queens, Eunuchs and Concubines in Islamic History*, 270, 272.

24 al-Maqrizī, *Itti'āz al-Hunafā*, II, 133, 139.

25 Ibid., 158.

26 Brett, *The Fātimid Empire*, 161.

27 El-Azhari, *Queens, Eunuchs and Concubines in Islamic History*, 272.

28 al-Maqrizī, *Itti'āz al-Hunafā*, II, 202, 209.

inner court of the Fātimid harem, but were also charged with crucial positions such as administrative, military, and financial offices.

### Black Slave Soldiers in the Fātimid Army

The employment of slave soldiers, both white and black, for military services, was a common practice in the medieval Muslim dynasties. For example, the Tūlūnids and Ikhshidids in Medieval Egypt accommodated many slaves in their army.<sup>29</sup> Following its predecessors, the Fātimids attained a great number of military slaves which included both blacks and whites. These slaves loyally served the dynasty for a long time. Providing important historical details about military factions in the Fātimid Army, Nāsir Khusraw explains that black slave soldiers were an important part of the Fātimid Army. He highlights that there was a black army group called *masāmida* which had 20,000 soldiers. He also referred to 30,000 *abid al-shirā*<sup>30</sup> (purchased slaves). Other than these groups, he mentioned 30,000 *zunūj* (black soldiers) who were swordsmen.<sup>31</sup> From his notes, we could assume that black slave soldiers constituted a crucial component of the Fātimid forces.

29 For the practices of slavery related to black military men within the Tūlūnids and Ikhshidids, see Murray Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World*, 68-70.

30 Some scholars explain that Muslims began to use different technical terms for slaves in this period. For example, David Ayalon argues that the term “*mamlūk*” refers to white slaves, whereas the term “*abd*” refers to black slaves. See David Ayalon, *Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Kingdom: A Challenge to a Medieval Society* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1956), 66-71. Agreeing with Ayalon, Bernard Lewis also argues that the term “*abd*” only refers to a black person, regardless of free or slave. See Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, 55, 125-126 note 10. Michael Brett, however, contends that the term *abid* in the 11<sup>th</sup> century was used as a technical military concept without a color differentiation. For instance, in his famous geographical book, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik*, Abū Ubayd Allāh al-Bakrī (d. 1094), an Iberian Muslim scholar, uses the term “*abid*” for white slaves (*abiduhum al-saqāliba*) as well as black slaves. See Michael Brett, “Ifriqiya as a Market for Saharan Trade from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century A.D.”, *The Journal of African History*, 10/3 (1969): 354. See also Abū Ubayd Allāh al-Bakrī, *Description de l’Afrique Septentrionale*, ed. William Mac Guckin Slane (Alger: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1857), 93. Furthermore, Daniel Pipe contends that Muslim scholars used both terms interchangeably during Fātimid times, but began to describe slaves with different technical terms in later periods, such as in the Mamluk era. See Daniel Pipes, *Slave Soldiers and Islam: The Genesis of a Military System* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 195-196.

31 Nāsir Khusraw, *Safar-Nāmah-i Nāsir Khusraw Alavī*, 66. Yaacov Lev, however, remarks that *masāmida* were not black soldiers but Berbers from the Western Maghrib region. Yaacov Lev, “Army, Regime, and Society in Fātimid Egypt, 358-487/968-1094”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19/3 (1987): 342.

There is no detailed information about how the Fâtimids recruited the black slaves nor about how they employed them in the military. However, there are some historical references to particular ways they went about it. One method of acquiring slaves appears to have been from gift exchanges between the Fâtimids and the Christian kingdom of East Africa that took place every year. The Nubian Kingdom from the Aswan region, for example, sent precious gifts, including exotic animals and several black male and female slaves, to the Fâtimid Caliph al-Zâhir in 1023. The same kingdom provided similar gifts again in 1024.<sup>32</sup> M. Suhayl Taqqûsh argues that according to the *Baqt* Treaty signed between the Muslim state and the Christian Nubian Kingdom during the early Islamic period, the Nubian king provided these black slaves for a long time. Yet, there were other black military slaves (*abîd al-shirâ*) in the army that were bought from slave markets by the Fâtimids.<sup>33</sup>

During the Middle Ages, the black slave market was well-established within North African trade. Medieval Muslim geographers and travel writers provide information about the inner-workings of the slave trade in Africa. For example, in 1050, while traveling to the holy sites of Islam from Egypt, Nâsir Khusraw passed through Aydhab, a port city on the Red Sea where Beja people (*bajâhân*) lived. There, he observed that Muslims (and others) kidnapped black children from Beja society and sold them into slavery in Muslim cities.<sup>34</sup> Benjamin of Tudela (d. 1173) also explains that some Arabs from Aswan travelled to the Sudanese region, provided food to the local people (such as wheat, raisins, and figs), then seized the gullible individuals and sold them into slavery in Egypt and the neighboring countries.<sup>35</sup> These accounts indicate that there was a well-structured black slave market during medieval times, from Nubia and

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32 Craig Perry, "The Daily Life of Slaves and the Global Reach of Slavery in Medieval Egypt, 969–1250 CE" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2014), 30-32.

33 M. Suhayl Taqqûsh, *Târîkh al-Fâtimiyyîn fi Shimâli Ifriqiyya wa Misr wa Bilâd al-Shâm* (Beirut: Dâr al-Nafâis, 2007), 334. Bashîr Ibrâhîm Bashîr argues that there was a transformation in the *Baqt* Treaty over time. The Nubians provided slaves only during earlier periods. However, slaves decreased to a secondary position while new items, like exotic animals, took priority during later periods because the Nubian king could not manage to send a high number of slaves. Bashîr Ibrâhîm Bashîr, "New Light on Nubian-Fâtimid Relations", *Arabica* XXII (1975): 21. See also Jay Spaulding, "Medieval Christian Nubia and the Islamic World: A Reconsideration of the *Baqt* Treaty", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 28/3 (1995): 577-594.

34 Nâsir Khusraw, *Safar-Nâmâh-i Nâsir Khusraw Alavî*, 93-94.

35 Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela*, trans. and ed. A. Asher (New York: Hakesheth Publishing Corporation, 1925), I, 145-146. See also John Wright, *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (London: Routledge, 2010), 20.

Sudan to Egypt. The Fâtimids benefitted from these North African slave markets and employed many black slaves in the army.

Apart from the black slave military regiment, The Fâtimids recruited other slave soldiers from different ethnic groups, such as Turks and Daylamites, for military service. As the number of slave soldiers increased, the Fâtimids designed the army in such a way that there was a specific military faction for each ethnic group. Even though the Fâtimids initially planned to maintain a balance and harmony between these ethnic groups, they began to favor the black faction in later times, which caused tensions and struggles between the black regiment and other groups. For example, al-Hâkim acquired a vast number of black military slaves, which he favored personally. The caliph invested in the black military regiment because, during his reign, the Turkish faction of the army became so uncontrollable and unruly that they caused instability and chaos in the Fâtimid capital. The Turks even targeted the Fâtimid *da'is* (preachers) who frequently visited Cairo, which profoundly disturbed al-Hâkim. To control the Turkish regiment, al-Hâkim appointed black officials (*muqaddim al-sūdân*) and their infantrymen (*al-rajjāla*) to command over the Turkish forces. Resenting al-Hâkim's appointments, the Turks rioted and clashed with the Fâtimid forces in Fustat in 1020.<sup>36</sup> Thanks to the black slave regiment, the caliph was able to crush the rebellion and disperse the rebels.<sup>37</sup>

The struggle between the black military regiment and other army factions intensified in later periods as the Fâtimids' authority and power gradually diminished. After Salâh al-Dîn al-Ayyûbî (d. 1193) became a vizier in the Fâtimid Empire in 1169, he attempted to reshape the Fâtimid administration and military. As part of his project, he established an army called *al-Salâhiyya*, which included the Turks, Kurds, and Arabs, who came from tribes in the Syrian region.<sup>38</sup> Disturbed by his growing authority, the last Fâtimid Caliph, al-Âdid (d. 1171), attempted to establish an alternative locus of power to counter-balance the authority of Salâh al-Dîn. Accordingly, al-Âdid ordered his black Eunuch servant, al-Mu'tamin, to send a letter to the Crusaders, encouraging them to stage a military expedition against Salâh al-Dîn. Discovering this, Salâh al-Dîn devised a

<sup>36</sup> Lev, "Army, Regime, and Society in Fâtimid Egypt", 340-341.

<sup>37</sup> al-Antâqî states that in 1020, al-Hâkim forced Egyptian society to accept his unorthodox *da'wâ* program, particularly his divinity, or otherwise face severe punishment. The Muslim population rebelled against the Fâtimid caliph and cursed him in public. In return, al-Hâkim charged black slave soldiers (*al-abîd al-sūdân min al-askariyyah*) to end the rebellion. The black regiment crushed the riot and pillaged the city entirely. al-Antâqî, *Târîkh al-Antâqî*, 345-348.

<sup>38</sup> Lev, *Saladin in Egypt*, 82.

plan and killed al-Mu'tamin while he on a journey out of Cairo to visit his residence. The murder of al-Mu'tamin sparked a deep wave of anger and resentment among the black regiment, so much that they decided to revolt against Salāh al-Dīn. The Armenian troops cooperated with the black regiment in this revolt. The joint forces of black and Armenian rebels first aimed to attack Salāh al-Dīn's palace. The battle between the two factions continued for two days in a locale which lie between Salāh al-Dīn's palace and the Fātimid caliph's court. Tūrān Shah (d. 1180), Salāh al-Dīn's brother who was leading Salāh al-Dīn's Army, eventually won the battle. Afterward, he ordered his soldiers to burn the military barracks of the black and Armenian regiments in al-Mansūriyya and expel them from Cairo to upper-Egypt. With their disbandment, the Turkish regiment took over in their living quarters and replaced them in the Fātimid court.<sup>39</sup>

However, these expelled slave soldiers created a Fātimid diaspora in the Aswan region in upper-Egypt. Desiring to regain their positions, they revolted against the Ayyūbids again in 1174. Their army included not only black slaves, but also others who were ousted from the Fātimid bureaucracy and army. However, the revolt became a disaster for them and they were handily defeated by the Ayyūbid Army led by Sayf al-Dīn (al-Ādil) (d. 1218), another brother of Salāh al-Dīn.<sup>40</sup> The black regiment dissolved entirely after this event.<sup>41</sup>

In summary, we can say that as a professional military group, the black regiment loyally served the Fātimid Dynasty throughout its history. As a main pillar of the Fātimid army, the regiment helped the Fātimid caliphs maintain their authority and power. During the last period of the Fātimids, the black regiment further supported the Fātimid caliph in his power struggle against Salāh al-Dīn. After the Fātimids lost their struggle against the Ayyūbids, the black regiment also disbanded and disappeared from medieval Egyptian history.

### **Black Concubines in the Fātimid State**

In addition to the black eunuchs and slave soldiers who were instrumental in the forming of Fātimid imperial politics, black concubines played

39 al-Maqrizī, *Itti'āz al-Hunafā*, III, 311-314.

40 Stanley Lane-Poole, *Saladin and the Fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1898), 101-103; Amar Salem Baadj, *Saladin, the Almohads and the Banu Ghaniya: The Contest for North Africa (12th and 13th Centuries)* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 106-107.

41 For a general survey of black slave soldiers in the medieval Muslim dynasties, see Jere L. Bacharach, "African Military Slaves in the Medieval Middle East," 471-495.

important roles in shaping the Fātimid imperial culture. One of the significant examples of those black concubines was Sayyida Rasad, the Fātimid queen mother. There is some information about how she entered the Fātimid harem and then how she attained a prestigious position in the Fātimid court. According to al-Maqrīzī's account, a Jewish merchant, Abū Said Sahl b. Hārūn al-Tustarī, had good relationships with the Fātimid Caliph, al-Zāhir, and served him for a long time. He bought a black slave girl (Sayyida Rasad) and presented her to the caliph. After joining his harem,<sup>42</sup> Sayyida Rasad attracted al-Zāhir's attention and became his favorite. Later, she gave birth to al-Mustansir (the next caliph). After al-Zāhir died at an early age in 1036, Sayyida Rasad came to be a regent for her seven-year-old son. There were different factions in the Fātimid court manipulating the state affairs and contending with each other for more wealth and power. To stay atop all the power struggles, Sayyida Rasad needed allies in the court to consolidate her position. Thus, she appointed her previous owner, Abū Sa'īd al-Tustarī, as her advisor and steward of her dealings.<sup>43</sup>

Eventually, al-Tustarī accumulated so much power and authority that it even overshadowed the vizier's stature, which highly disturbed the Fātimid bureaucrats. After Sadaqa b. Yūsuf al-Fallāhī, who was a Jewish convert to Islam, came to the vizierate in 1045, a major rivalry ensued between him and al-Tustarī. The contention between these figures caused tensions in the Fātimid army, since al-Tustarī cooperated with al-Maghārība (an Eastern faction which mostly included Turks), whereas al-Fallāhī collaborated with al-Mashāriqa (a North African faction which mostly included Berbers). During this struggle, the Turkish regiment assassinated al-Tustarī in 1047. Even though the queen mother encouraged al-Mustansir to punish al-Tustarī's murderer, the caliph could not dare to encounter the Turkish military faction. However, he imprisoned and then killed the Vizier al-Fallāhī in 1048.<sup>44</sup> To compensate his mother's loss of al-Tustarī, al-Mustansir further appointed al-Tustarī's brother, Abū Nasr, as the keeper

42 For the nature of the slave trade in Medieval Egypt, see S. D. Goitein, "Slaves and Slave Girls", *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 1967–93), I, 130–47; S. D. Goitein, "Slaves and Slave Girls in the Cairo Geniza Records", *Arabica* 9 (1962): 1–20. For the role of Jewish merchants in the slave trade, see Miriam Frenkel, "The Slave Trade in Geniza Society", *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1000–1500 CE)*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Christoph Cluse (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 143–61.

43 al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz al-Hunafā*, II, 190–191.

44 *Ibid.*, 195–196.

of the private treasure while employing his son in one of the state divans.<sup>45</sup> However, al-Maqrizî explains that even though Sayyida Rasad asked Abū Nasr to take his brother's position, he refused the offer for fear of the Turks and the Fātimid vizier, after which she employed al-Yāzūrî as the new vizier and charged him with the keeping of her private estate.<sup>46</sup>

In 1050, al-Yāzūrî began his position, working in harmony with the queen mother. During his vizierate, Sayyida Rasad attended the divan meetings, sitting behind a curtain and sending a eunuch to give messages to the vizier. Moreover, Sayyida Rasad appointed al-Yāzūrî as the chief judge, which increased his authority. In return, al-Yāzūrî served with loyalty and great respect, to the extent that he would kiss the ground before Sayyida Rasad.<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, along with the vizierate of al-Yāzūrî, Sayyida Rasad began to control the state entirely and reached the pinnacle of power in the Fātimid Empire.

However, in 1058, al-Yāzūrî was dismissed from the vizierate and killed by al-Mustansir because of his alleged alliance with the Seljuks (nascent Sunni rival of the Fātimids in the eastern frontier).<sup>48</sup> The death of al-Yāzūrî placed the position of the queen mother at risk because there were rival factions in the Fātimid court which were challenging her rule. To keep her authority and power, Sayyida Rasad established a substantial black army regiment which she financially supported.<sup>49</sup> The black regiment's hegemony in the Fātimid Army, however, caused disturbances and frustrations in the other military factions, especially in the Turkish regiment. Everyone could see an imminent outbreak of a physical struggle between these competing factions. It began in 1062, when al-Mustansir had a summer celebration with his family and entourage in Jubb al-Umayra, which was close to the region of Ain Shams in modern Cairo. After a drunk Turkish soldier drew his sword toward the black regiment (*abîd al-shirā*) during the festival, he was killed by them. The Turkish regiment revolted, seeking revenge against the black regiment because the caliph had not done anything about this murder. The struggle between the Turkish and black forces took place in the village of Kawm Shariq located near the Nile in the Buhayra region. The blacks were

45 Ibn Muyassar, *al-Muntaqā min Akhbār Misr*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid (Cairo: al-Ma'had al-Ilmî al-Faransî li al-Āthār al-Sharqiyya, 1981), 4.

46 al-Yāzūrî was a judge from the Yāzūr region in Palestine. Seeking his future in the Fātimid capital, al-Yāzūrî visited Cairo. He then became acquainted with Rifq and obtained his favor and patronage. al-Maqrizî, *Itti'āz al-Hunafā*, II, 199-200; Ibn Mu-yassar, *al-Muntaqā min Akhbār Misr*, 16-17.

47 El-Azhari, *Queens, Eunuchs and Concubines in Islamic History*, 208.

48 Ibn al-Sirafî, *al-Ishāra ilā man Nāla al-Wizāra*, ed. Abd Allāh Mukhlis, *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'archéologie Orientale du Caire*, XXV (1924): 68-73.

49 al-Maqrizî, *Itti'āz al-Hunafā*, II, 267.

defeated, with many of them killed during the battle. Eventually, there was a reconciliation between these two groups. According to the deal made, the Turkish forces would remain in Cairo while the black forces had to settle down in Damanhur of the Buhayra region in the north.<sup>50</sup>

After their triumph against the black regiment, the Turkish forces attempted to exploit the Fātimid caliphate, demanding higher salaries. To eliminate their authority, Sayyida Rasad encouraged the black troops to once again take up arms against the Turks and expel them from Egypt. Following her command, the black forces gathered and marched toward Giza. Hearing of the activity of the black troops, the Turkish forces prepared for the fight. The Turkish forces had a decisive victory and exiled the black forces up the river to the south. As a result, the Turks returned to Cairo victorious, while the black troops had to settle in the Sa'īd region in the south.<sup>51</sup>

Afterward, Nāsir al-Dawla, a Turkish commander who became a prominent leading figure among the soldiers during the previous battle, began to manipulate the Fātimid caliph in the interests of the Turkish military faction. The queen mother once more encouraged the black faction to take revenge against the Turks and get rid of them. Obeying the queen mother's command, the black forces clandestinely moved to Cairo, set up a sudden attack, and killed some Turkish soldiers. Alarmed by the sudden attack, Nāsir al-Dawla was forced to flee from Cairo. After fully preparing the Turkish army, he initiated a counterattack against them. Two factions fought for several days in the capital. Yet again, the Turkish force was victorious. Many of the black regiment were killed, with the survivors dispersing around Egypt and some moving to regions around Sa'īd and Alexandria. Nāsir al-Dawla then sieged the remnant of the black soldiers in Alexandria and took them captive.<sup>52</sup> The ongoing civil war between the two factions from 1064 to 1071 was disastrous for the black military regiment, since they lost their hegemony and prestige within the Fātimid army.

Later, Nāsir al-Dawla again demanded a higher salary from the Fātimids. When the caliph refused it, he attacked and pillaged the Fātimid palace. In the meantime, some Turkish soldiers detained Sayyida Rasad and appropriated her entire treasury in 1071. The chaotic struggle between the Turkish army faction and the Fātimid Caliphate continued until Badr al-Jamālī (d. 1094) came to power as an authoritative Fātimid vizier and restored order in 1074.

50 al-Maqrizī, *Itti'āz al-Hunafā*, II, 265-266; Ibn Muyassar, *al-Muntaqā min Akhbār Misr*, 24-25.

51 al-Maqrizī, *Itti'āz al-Hunafā*, II, 273; Ibn Muyassar, *al-Muntaqā min Akhbār Misr*, 31.

52 al-Maqrizī, *Itti'āz al-Hunafā*, II, 273-274; Ibn Muyassar, *al-Muntaqā min Akhbār Misr*, 31-32.

In parallel with the decline of the supremacy of the black regiment against the Turkish counterpart, Sayyida Rasad lost her powerful grasp on state affairs.<sup>53</sup> However, she maintained her authority as a queen mother concerning certain political activities. For example, Sayyida Rasad had diplomatic missions with Arwa (d. 1138), a queen consort of the Sulayhid Dynasty of Yemen (a vassal state of the Fâtimids). When she sent a letter to the Fâtimids explaining the situation in Yemen, Sayyida Rasad responded to her on behalf of the Fâtimids. In her letter, Sayyida Rasad described herself as a lady, the queen, and the mother of Imam al-Mustansir.<sup>54</sup> This point would suggest that even though Sayyida Rasad did not have the same authority and power in the Fâtimid Empire as before, she remained influential to a certain extent as queen mother.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

The Fâtimids' practice of slavery implies that even though many black Africans were subjugated and enslaved by the Fâtimids, they managed to open new spaces for themselves and advance into higher positions within the Fâtimid imperial system. As masters, viziers, and military commanders, the black Africans worked in various important positions, and they played very crucial roles in the Fâtimid political life. We could also note the black concubines who served the Fâtimid Dynasty and shaped Fâtimid political affairs. Accordingly, their successful careers lead us to reconsider the application of the simple dichotomies "free" and "slave" or "black servants" and "white masters" in the medieval Muslim world. Despite their disadvantages and marginalized positions, the black Africans accumulated so much power and authority that they played significant roles in shaping the Fâtimid Empire throughout its history.

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53 Delia Cortese and Simonetta Calderini, *Women and the Fâtimids in the World of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 112-113. See also Simonetta Calderini, "Sayyida Rasad: A Royal Woman as "Gateway to Power" during the Fâtimid Era", *Egypt and Syria in the Fâtimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras V*, ed. U. Vermeulen and K. D'Hulster (Leuven: The University of Leuven, 2007), 27-36.

54 El-Azhari, *Queens, Eunuchs and Concubines in Islamic History*, 212-213.

55 There are other examples of black concubines who played important roles in the Fâtimid State. For instance, al-Maliha faithfully served Sitt al-Mulk and took care of her wealth. See Cortese and Calderini, *Women and the Fâtimids in the World of Islam*, 118.

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