CHAPTER FOUR

THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE TO ASIA AND THE INDIAN OCEAN ISLANDS

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ABSTRACT

Unlike the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade the transportation of slaves from Africa to Asia and the Mediterranean was of great antiquity, but the intense historical interest in the Trans-Atlantic Trade for the past two hundred years has overshadowed the study of the Asian slave trade which, until this past decade, has been largely ignored despite the fact that the total number of Africans exported to Asia was spread out over thousand years (between 800 AD and 1900 AD) but has been estimated at approximately the same as the number of Africans sent to the Americas in four and a half centuries i.e. 12,580,000. This paper describes the African slave trade to Asia across the Sahara Desert, over the Red Sea, and from the coast of East Africa, and how this trade was conducted in each of these regions. History is not a social science, but a member of the humanities family. It is the search of every available source using any discipline to narrate a story and not bound by any rigid theoretical or methodological concepts. In the compilation of this essay, I have employed the latest information and interpretations on the African slave trade to Asia to write the history of that institution as to what happened, where, when, how and why.

Introduction

Unlike the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade the transportation of slaves from Africa to Asia and the Mediterranean was of great antiquity. The first evidence was carved in stone in 2900 BCE at the second cataract depicting a boat on the Nile packed with Nubian captives for enslavement in Egypt. Thereafter throughout the next five thousand

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years African slaves captured in war, raids, or purchased in the market were marched down the Nile, across the Sahara to the Mediterranean, or transported over the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean to Asia. The dynastic Egyptians also took slaves from the Red Sea region and the Horn of Africa known to them as Punt. Phoenician settlements along the North African littoral possessed African slaves from the immediate hinterland or slaves from south of the Sahara forced along the established trans-Saharan trade routes to the Mediterranean markets. The Greeks and the Romans continued the ancient Egyptian raids into Nubia and sent military expeditions from their cities along the southern Mediterranean shore that returned with slaves from the Fezzan and the highlands of the Sahara. African slaves, like those from Europe, were used in the households, fields, mines, and armies of Mediterranean and Asian empires. However, it should be noted that Africans formed only a modest portion of the Roman slave community as the abundant supply from Asia Minor and Europe became more than adequate for the economic and military needs of the empire. Not surprisingly, African slaves were more numerous in the Roman cities of the Mediterranean littoral.

There can be no reasonable estimate of the number of slaves exported from Africa to the Mediterranean basin, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean before the arrival of the Arabs in Africa during the seventh century of the Christian Era. Between 800 and 1600 the evidence for the estimated volume of slaves is more intuitive than empirical but better than none at all. One can only surmise that during the previous four thousand years when slaves were a common and accepted institution in most African societies those slaves marched across the Sahara or transported over the Red Sea and Indian Ocean to Asia during these eight hundred years must have been a considerable number. Until the seventeenth century the evidence is derived mostly from literary sources whereby maximum and minimum numbers can at best be extrapolated given the paucity of direct data. There is a considerable amount of indirect evidence from accounts of the trade, population, and the demand for black slaves for military service from which general but not unreasonable estimates of the Asian slave trade can be proposed.

When European states directly entered the world of international trade in the seventeenth century, the estimates of the number of slaves become increasingly reliable. There is a striking similarity between the total estimated number of slaves exported across the Atlantic and those sent to Asia. The trans-Atlantic trade carried an estimated 11,313,000