SLAVES AND SLAVEGIRLS
IN THE CAIRO GENIZA RECORDS*

BY

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In order to be able to understand the economic role and the social position of the slaves in the society reflected in the Geniza records, we must free ourselves entirely of the notions familiar to us from our readings about life on American plantations or in ancient Greece or Rome. Slavery in the period under consideration was neither industrial nor agricultural; with the exception of the armies, which were largely composed of mercenaries, who were legally slaves, it was not collective, but individual. It was a personal service in the widest sense of the word, which, when the master served was of high rank or wealthy, carried with it great economic advantages, as well as social prestige.


The manuscripts are quoted according to the towns and collections, in which they are preserved, and the signs used by the latter. Note the following abbreviations:


ULCambridge: Other collections of Geniza papers in the same library.


MT: Jacob Mann, Texts and Studies I, Philadelphia, 1931.

India Book: A collection of Geniza documents on the India trade, prepared by the present writer for publication.

Med. Soc.: “Mediterranean Society in the High Middle Ages, based on Records from the Cairo Geniza”, a volume in preparation by the present writer. The article printed above corresponds to Section 7 of Chapter II of this book.

Mediterranean Reader, Selected Documents from the Cairo Geniza: another publication in preparation by the writer.

N: Geniza records connected with Nahray ben Nissîm, a Qayrawanese merchant, scholar and public figure, who emigrated to Egypt and Palestine and lived in those countries between 1048 and 1098. Prepared for publication by Mr. M. Michael.

In a famous passage in his *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith says: "It appears ... from the experience of all ages and nations ... that the work done by free men comes cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves". In this general form, this statement does not hold true and has been refuted by competent historians. It certainly does not apply to the period of early Islam, when an abundant supply of captives was available in the wake of the incessant wars of conquest, so that free labor could be replaced by the cheaper work of slaves. As is well known, the ninth century, the third of Islam, witnessed a tremendous revolt of masses of negro slaves in southern Iraq, which shook the very foundations of the caliphate of Bagdad, and, somewhat later, the council of a comparatively small Carmathian community in Eastern Arabia owned a labor force of tens of thousands of negroes doing agricultural work.

However, in the Mediterranean area during the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries the situation was different. Slaves had to be imported from far away countries and were expensive. If we disregard the armies, slaves certainly formed only a minority of the population, unlike the situation in imperial Rome, where three quarters of the inhabitants were either slaves or freedmen. His high value protected the slave and made him an object of consideration, in addition to the humanitarian laws and admonitions made in his favour by the three monotheistic religions.

The very word "slave" 'abd, was felt as being improper and was replaced by circumscriptions such as "boy" and "young man".

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3. The word 'abd seems to have become already in Geniza times a racial term for black people and even in this meaning it is rare, cf. 12, 582, Tārbīz, 21 (1950), p. 187; T.-S., 13 J 22, f. 33 (*India Book*, p. 84), verso, 1. 11. For "boy" and "young man" exceptionally ḥaddām, "servant of a higher grade", is used, see below e.g., p. 4, note 2.