

## The Year 652

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While the year 652 CE marked a major victory for African civilization against the expansion of foreign forces, it also could be conceptualized as the beginning of the targeted enslavement of African people. In this year a peace treaty was signed between the Christian Nubian kingdom of Makuria and the expansionist Islamic forces. This date is intrinsically tied to the political developments that accompanied the spread of Islam onto the African continent; to understand the significance of this year properly, this history of Islamic expansion, as well as African resistance must be analyzed together.

The Islamic Prophet Muhammad dies in 632 CE. At this point in time Islam heralded by the caliphate had expanded to most of the Arabian Peninsula. After the prophet's passing there was debate on who should succeed the prophet Muhammad as the leader of the faith. In the end the Prophet Muhammad would be succeeded by his companions, and early converts from Media. These successors would be known as the 'rightly-guided' caliphs. The Caliphate that they ruled would be known as the Rashidun Caliphate, which loosely translates to 'rightly-guided' in Arabic.

In the early days following the Prophet Muhammad's passing these successors ventured to subdue disillusioned Arabian tribes. Soon after, the caliphs, not satisfied with being cloistered in Arabia began to spread into the war-torn areas of the Levant, North Africa, and Middle East. During this time what was left of the Roman Empire, sometimes referred to as the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire by later historians, was plunged in conflict with its historical cultural adversary, Persia.

The Rashidun Caliphate was able to take advantage of the weakened state of these two empires and were quickly able to seize both Roman and Persian territory. By the mid-630s the Arab-Islamic forces had gained control of the Levant. Following this victory Arab commander and companion to the Prophet Muhammad, Amr ibn al-As urged the 'rightly-guided caliph' Umar ibn al-Khattab to further their advance into Roman Egypt.

Egypt, a Roman territory for the past seven centuries, was one of the wealthier provinces of the dying empire. Amr ibn al-As specifically stated "the conquest of Egypt will give great power to the Muslims and will be a great aid to them, for it is the wealthiest land and the weakest in fighting and war power".<sup>1</sup> By 642 the Rashidun Caliphate had wrestled control of Egypt and set their eyes south towards the land now known as Sudan.

Like the Romans and the Persians, the Christian Nubian states of Noba and Makuria became targets of a series of Rashidun invasions. Unlike Persia, these African states weren't recovering from a decades long conflict with the Byzantines and under the threat of Arab invasion were able to unite together to face their enemy.<sup>2</sup> In 642 Amr ibn al-As launched an expedition into Nubia. This expedition was severely crippled by the Nubians famed archers, swift cavalry, and asymmetric warfare. Following a series of defeats, and set back, and failing to capture Makuria's capital city of Dongola, the Arab-Islamic forces retreated back to Egypt. Ten years later, hostilities were resumed in what is known as the Second Battle of Dongola. While much is not known about the particularities of the battle, it is known that Nubian forces defeated a force of more than 5,000 Arabs in a pitched battle, and were able to lift the siege of their capital city.

Under this united Nubian front of Noba and Makuria, they were able to defeat the Arabs at both the first and second battle of Dongola in 642 CE and 652 CE respectively, temporarily halting the Arab advance and the spread of Islam for the next half millennia. However, this victory came at a price. To ensure lasting peace, a treaty, known as the *Baqt*, was signed in 652 CE by Makurran King Qalidurat and the Arab general Abi Sarh.<sup>3</sup>

There were many provisions in his treaty, the most impactful of the provisions required that some three hundred and sixty African people were to be enslaved and sent to Arab

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<sup>1</sup> Sijpesteijn, Petra M. "The Arab conquest of Egypt and the beginning of Muslim rule". In Bagnall, Roger S. (ed.). *Egypt in the Byzantine World*, 2007, p. 440

<sup>2</sup> Williams, Chancellor. *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.*, Third World Press, 1987, pp. 142-144

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

occupied Egypt on a yearly basis.<sup>4</sup> This treaty represented the institutionalization of the Arab enslavement of African people and extraction of African people from the African continent. Even more devastatingly, this particular treaty is one of, if not the longest peace treaty in human history lasting almost 700 years. From 652 CE till about 830 CE thousands of African people were enslaved and sent to Arab-occupied Egypt.

Initially, early Islamic Arabic writers used two terms to reference African peoples; *Habash* and *Sūdān*.<sup>5</sup> *Habash* was a term reserved for the neighboring African peoples in the Horn of Africa, related to the pan-ethnic term *Habesha*<sup>6</sup> which is still in use today. The term *Sūdān* was originally a catch all term that Arabs used for any Black Africans that weren't *Habesha* who were often given more respect culturally. While the name Sudan now is correlated to lands south of Egypt but north of the Horn, it was used by these Arabs to essentially refer to all of Black Africa, or 'land of the Blacks', *bilād as-sūdān*. Overtime, as the Islamic forces became more familiar with African peoples the term *Sūdān* came to be localized to refer to the lands once known *Kush*, or as *Nubia* by the Romans, and *Ta-Nehesi* or *Ta-Seti* by the ancient Egyptians.

Around the ninth century, Arab and Islamic writers begin to provide more detailed information on where African people are being enslaved and where they are going.<sup>7</sup> The Africans enslaved in the land now known as Sudan were often taken directly north into Egypt, as had been tradition since the *Baqt*, while a lesser number were taken directly east through the Red Sea to be enslaved in Arabia, Iraq, and Iran. By this point in time other African communities, usually taken as war captives or tribute, had also begun to be enslaved by Islamic forces. In the Western Sudan, in the modern-day countries of Senegal, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Chad, Africans were enslaved and brought to North

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<sup>4</sup> Spaulding, Jay. "Medieval Christian Nubia and the Islamic World: A Reconsideration of the Baqt Treaty", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1995, p. 584

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, Bernard. *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 50

<sup>6</sup> According to Austrian Arabist and archeologist Eduard Glaser the term *Habesha* is etymologically derived from an ancient Egyptian hieroglyph transliterated as *ḥbstjw*, which was a demonym for the ancient kingdom of Punt which has long been speculated to have been located near the Horn of Africa.

Breyer, Francis. "The Ancient Egyptian Etymology of Ḥabašāt "Abessinia", *Ityopis*. Extra Issue II, 2016, pp. 8–18

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, Bernard. *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 51

African markets; this is what would be known as the Trans-Saharan Trade. In East Africa, or the land of the *Zanj*, African peoples from the interior were enslaved and brought to markets along the coast of East Africa, often to be sold across the Indian Ocean. In this Indian Ocean Trade of enslaved Africans, many African were sent far from the African continent to places like Iran, and the South Asian sub-continent. It was these people who ultimately would lead a series of successive rebellions, the largest rebellions against the institution of slavery in fact, against the Abbasid Caliphate between 868 to 883.

These enslaved African endured the hardships of working the Persian salt flats. It was not uncommon for enslaved African to work in the salt or gold mines of their Islamic enslavers, however in central Islamic lands it was more common for enslaved Africans to be used for domestic and menial purposes.<sup>8</sup> The Abbasid era Arab Christian theologian Ibn Buṭlān included notes in his handbook on the best uses for enslaved Africans. He recommended that Nubians, along with Indians, be used as laborers, servants, and eunuchs.<sup>9</sup> For the *Zanj* of East Africa, he recommended that they be put to military service.<sup>10</sup>

In general, and unsurprisingly, the life expectancy of enslaved Africans was compromised by their conditions. Additionally, other factors such as pious liberation of enslaved individuals, the liberation of the illegitimate offspring of enslavers, castration, the prevention of marriages and couplings amongst enslaved individuals led to a low natural growth of the population of enslaved individuals in the Islamic world. To circumvent this low natural growth of the enslaved population, there was a continuous concerted effort, usually through *jihad* against non-believers, to bolster the population of enslaved individuals. In light of this, many communities over the next few centuries, some of which had offered fierce resistance to the spread of Islam in Africa, relented, or

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis, Bernard. *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 56

<sup>9</sup> Ibn Buṭlān. "Risāla", *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople*, vol. 2, Religion and Society, 1974, p. 247

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

were capitulated, and eventually converted to the faith. According to Bernard Lewis in his text *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*,

Muslim law unequivocally forbids the enslavement of free Muslims of whatever race, and was usually obeyed in this. There is, however, evidence that the law was not always strictly enforced to protect Muslim captives from Black Africa.<sup>11</sup>

The victory of Makuria against the invading Rashidun Caliphate was not long lasting, and the compromise for peace was too damning. The victory at Dongola in 652 ultimately did not stop the spread of Islam and Arab influence in what is now known as Sudan, and more critically it opened the door for a centuries-long onslaught, which arguably still exist to this day, which is continuously endured by African peoples.

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis, Bernard. *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 57

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