

Ronald Segal: Islam's Black slaves

The context of the slave trade in the Islamic world was a religious imperialism which transformed desert austerities into the development of a consumption culture.

Early exploitation of male black slaves for plantation agriculture came largely to be abandoned, and they were sought for a variety of functions, as doorkeepers and porters, secretaries and musicians. And of peculiar importance was their employment as military slaves or, after the radical, 'level with the abdomen', operation involved, as eunuchs.

The bulk of the trade was, however, in females: two females for every male overall, in contrast to the ratio of two males for every female overall in the Atlantic trade. And here the demand was overwhelmingly for domestic servants and concubines.

Without the transaction ledgers which capitalism in the Atlantic trade so usefully kept, for modern scholars to agree on their arithmetic, the total of black slaves conveyed in the Islamic one remains a subject of much dispute. My own conclusion is that the totals in the two trades are much the same.

Among those arguing for a significantly lower Islamic total is the absence of a black diaspora anywhere near the size of that produced by the Atlantic trade. But this, I argue, is due not to lower numbers in the Islamic trade but to the distinctive treatment of slaves and the attitude to colour in Islam. The far earlier and wider commitment to the freeing of slaves as an act of piety and the absence of any institutionalised racism comparable to that in the West meant that many black slaves came simply to merge into the free population.

None of this should excuse or extenuate the existence of slavery, then and even now in Islam, as a cruel and often murderous business.