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# *Modern Takes on Motivations Behind the Zanj Rebellion*

## By Emily Martha Silkaitis

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The Zanj Rebellion lasted nearly fifteen years, from 255-70/869-83 in southern Iraq. Believed to be slaves of African origin, the Zanj toiled under harsh conditions, working the land by removing the nitrous topsoil in order to make the terrain cultivatable. The exact motivations behind the uprising are subject to debate, but the impetus seems to stem from this taxing agricultural labor, coupled with the effective leadership of 'Alī b. Muḥammad. For the first ten years of the rebellion, the Zanj experienced success, though by 266/879 their support was waning and eventually the 'Abbasid army defeated the rebel coalition. By branding this occurrence a "slave rebellion", it is inherently linked to more recent events even in the United States, such as Nat Turner's raid on Harper's Ferry, which occurred a mere 150 years ago in 1849. Slave uprisings are by no means a thing of the distant past. In addition, certain themes of the Zanj uprising are still prevalent in more current events: the idea of an oppressed class rising up against the existing social order, religion as a motivation for revolt, and the issue of racism. Then and now, the Zanj Rebellion merits significance in Islamic history.

Spanning over one hundred years and a multitude of disciplines, a particularly colorful group of scholars has attempted to reconstruct various aspects of the Zanj Rebellion in their works. Rich in primary sources, the rebellion seems only to be lacking in modern scholarship, thus the need to examine sources as far apart in time as Theodor Nöldeke's account from 1892<sup>1</sup> and Zakariyau Oseni's article from 1989.<sup>2</sup> The recent translation of Alexandre Popovic's *The Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> Century*<sup>3</sup> from French into English has undoubtedly made this subject matter more available to numerous researchers. Originally published in 1976, Popovic's book and Ghada Hashem Talhami's article<sup>4</sup> came out a mere two years apart, while Jere L. Bacharach's work was published only a few years later,<sup>5</sup> thus ironically making the 1970s and early 1980s, right after a period famed for Civil Rights strife, a booming time for Zanj Rebellion scholarship. This amalgamation of authors presents a cavalcade of information on military history, commerce, the purportedly sorrowful plight of black men, and piety. The broader subject of the Zanj links these scholars, and what follows below is a literary review of the mentioned sources in the areas where they can best be compared. In the first section, I will analyze the motivations for the rebellion according to certain authors, focusing on race, economic and class-based attributes, and

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor Nöldeke, "A Servile War in the East," in *Sketches from Eastern History*, Reprint from 1892 ed. (Beirut: Khayats, 1963), 146-75.

<sup>2</sup> Zakariyau I. Oseni, "The Revolt of Black Slaves in Iraq under the Abbasid Administration in 869-883 C.E.," *Hamdard Islamicus* 12/2 (1989), 57-65.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandre Popovic, *The Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq in the 3rd/9th Century*, transl. Léon King (Princeton, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Ghada Hashem Talhami, "The Zanj Rebellion Reconsidered," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 10:3 (1977), 443-461.

<sup>5</sup> Jere Bacharach, "African Military Slaves in the Medieval Middle East: The Cases of Iraq (869-955) and Egypt (868-1171)," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 13 (1981), 471-95.

religion. In the second section, I will discuss how some of the works comment on military aspects of the rebellion.

Evaluating the Zanj Rebellion in terms of racial motivation sparks a lively debate, beginning with Zakariyau Oseni's "The Revolt of Black Slaves in Iraq Under the 'Abbasid Administration 869-883 CE". Oseni makes no attempt to hide the fact that he views the Zanj rebellion as a modern author who feels passionately for the plight of the black man: ". . . especially Black slaves whose race, more than any other, had suffered the atrocities and humiliation inherent in that ancient institution throughout the course of known history."<sup>6</sup> Oseni cites examples of slavery throughout world history, drawing comparison to revolts that happened as late as the nineteenth century. In blatant contrast to Ghada Talhami's article, which will be further discussed below, Oseni states that slave trade started earlier than the ninth century A.D., insinuating that a large slave community existed on the coast of East Africa for hundreds of years before the Zanj Rebellion. He argues that resentment from the black slaves against their harsh treatment had been building up for hundreds of years before the actual revolt.<sup>7</sup> This discontent felt by the Zanj slaves served as a driving force for their uprising.

In terms of race as a motivating factor for the rebellion, the core of Ghada Hashem Talhami's argument stems from the writing of al-Ṭabarī. Al-Ṭabarī's account of the event is cited by all five authors in varying degrees and hence provides the largest trove of information on the rebellion, yet it is his very words that lead Talhami to contend that that the Zanj were not the main actors in the rebellion. She points out that al-Ṭabarī alternately describes the dissident group as *Zanj* and *Soudan*, while simultaneously using *Zanj* to refer to all slaves who did not speak Arabic. Talhami also claims that little evidence exists that directly links a thriving East African slave trafficking economy to the commercial activity of the 'Abbasid Empire before the tenth century. Therefore, the Zanj revolt, according to Talhami, was not actually carried out by the Zanj, but instead by people like the Bedouins, Bahranis, artisans, and a number of black slaves. As a result, this would not merit the the label of a "slave" rebellion.<sup>8</sup> In a broader sense, Talhami attempts to prove that race mattered little in the actual rebellion, but instead falsely united many later historians concerning the issue. Describing these Westerners as using ". . . a historiographic bias perpetuated by defenders of the European colonial regime",<sup>9</sup> Talhami attempts to view the Zanj rebellion separate from those Western historians with whom she disagrees, though even she admittedly draws from the same sources as they do.

Theodore Nöldeke also presents the issue of race as an influence for the revolt, albeit inadvertently. His account clearly contrasts with Talhami's work, though Nöldeke wrote nearly one hundred years earlier and therefore was likely more affected by imperialism than Civil Rights. Nöldeke does not specifically analyze the Zanj Rebellion in regards to race as a motivating factor, but a modern-day reader would certainly take notice of the coarse descriptions provided. Writing at the height of imperialism, Nöldeke describes the Zanj in one of four ways: slaves, blacks, East Africans, and negroes. In fact, he calls the rebellion the "negro insurrection."<sup>10</sup> Though these words are certainly salient to today's reader, Nöldeke's intended audience of fellow scholars in 1892 most likely would not have registered as much

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<sup>6</sup> Oseni: 65, 57.

<sup>7</sup> Oseni: 57-8.

<sup>8</sup> Talhami: 445, 451-2, 457-9, 460-1.

<sup>9</sup> Talhami: 443.

<sup>10</sup> Nöldeke: 149, 153, 152.

surprise. Therefore, though his description may seem to be racially oriented, this particular theme would not have been as applicable to him and would comprise a gross understatement of his monumental work.

Bacharach and Popovic do not comment on race as a relevant cause for the Zanj Rebellion and thus will not be discussed in this section.

This next section will discuss economic and class-related factors as motivators for the rebellion. Oseni argues the applicability of class warfare in describing driving forces behind the revolt. He waxes poetic on the oppression and inhumane working conditions of the Zanj, which served as the catalyst for the so-called insurrection. Within the first paragraph of his article, Oseni emphasizes the reasoning for the existence of the Zanj in the region: to remove the salt from the fields and make the land profitable. Oseni believes this economic coloration of the Zanj's essence eventually leads to their revolt. Furthermore, an overall sense of mistreatment by the 'Abbasids brought other ethnic groups into their ranks and provided some degree of solidarity based on discontentment. Oseni goes so far as to assert that "... the uprising was that of the oppressed classes under the 'Abbasid regime."<sup>11</sup> To claim that the Zanj and their allies possessed the acumen to revolt on the basis of their economic class may be a stretch and undoubtedly a product of the hindsight of a twentieth-century historian, but Oseni assuredly is not alone in claiming the importance of economic attributes for causing the rebellion.

In agreement with Oseni, Talhami admits that the rebellion involved a variety of factors, including the oppression of certain groups. Since numerous parties came to join the revolt, it should not strictly be seen as an attack on the use of slavery but rather as an affront against social injustice. Talhami analyzes this aspect in regards to the leadership of 'Ali bin Muhammad, seeing him as one of the uniting forces of the disheartened.<sup>12</sup> Talhami brings the issue of economic dissatisfaction into her argument, though this supplies only one part of her overall illustration of an incorrectly-named rebellion by oppressed individuals.

In discussing the relevance of economic and class incentives for the Zanj Rebellion, Popovic initially appears to diverge from Oseni and Talhami. He expressly states in his introduction the necessity of not examining the insurrection with modern day ideas such as class struggles, even quoting an example of the usage of the term proletarian. Yet one hundred and fifty pages later in his conclusion, Popovic offers a closing argument that the rebellion was indeed a "political (power struggle) and social (betterment of certain class living conditions) revolt."<sup>13</sup> In attempting to show this true character of the revolt, Popovic quotes al-Ṭabarī more than any other of the discussed scholars and uses a semi-chronological approach, therefore making the work read like a clear-cut history text. Thus, even though *The Revolt of African Slaves* showcases a variety of themes in regards to the uprising, Popovic's conclusion essentially cancels out the significance of the other issues. He purposefully chooses to end the work with the perspective of a twentieth-century writer and thus his ultimate argument must be considered one centered on economic attributes as significant stimuli of the revolt.

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<sup>11</sup> Osen: 57, 60.

<sup>12</sup> Talhami: 460.

<sup>13</sup> Popovic: 1, 3, 27, 153.

Nöldeke and Bacharach do not focus on the economic or class-based motivations for the rebellion, and therefore will not be discussed here.

Lastly in this section on motivations for the Zanj Rebellion, the role of religion is seen by three scholars as a significant driving force. Oseni addresses the importance of religion from two standpoints: the Kharijite doctrine and the piety of 'Abbasid rulers. He views the Kharijite beliefs as being imperative for understanding the activities of the Zanj. They were attracted to the doctrine because of its egalitarian tendencies, and likewise were drawn to the charismatic leader of 'Ali who preached such principles. This leader spoke to the Zanj for the first time on their right to a lawful, happy existence according to Islam. Oseni draws a noteworthy connection between the periodic Kharijite uprisings against the 'Abbasids and the insurrection of the Zanj, suggesting that the slave revolt was actually a manifestation of the Kharijite uprisings. This religious milieu gave the slaves a certain zeal and hope as they fought, but in the long run these beliefs did not carry enough weight to bring them to victory. In addition, Oseni points out that the lack of information pertaining to the administration of the Zanj means that an ad hoc government could have been established based on Kharijite ideology.<sup>14</sup> Oseni's claims about the relevance of Kharijite beliefs appear to be exaggerated in comparison with the opinions of the other scholars, but his interpretation poses vital questions to the reader and certainly attracts attention. Oseni acknowledges the lack of sources regarding the internal workings of the Zanj government, therefore opening the door for him to provide his own explanation on the character of the temporary ruling establishment.

Likewise, Oseni sheds light on a separate religious aspect of the revolt: the practices of the 'Abbasid rulers. He cites examples of the Prophet Muhammad's just treatment of slaves in the early community (570-632 C.E.) and highlights how only two centuries later these practices seem to have faded out under the 'Abbasids. Though the Zanj Rebellion failed for numerous reasons according to this article, it did raise fundamental questions about the nature of the caliphate involving the treatment of disadvantaged members of society and how rulers should help them in accordance with the doctrines of Islam.<sup>15</sup> Oseni combines these two ideologies of Kharijism and Islamic practices of the 'Abbasids within the scope of his work, accentuating his view on the significance of religion but also acknowledging that these beliefs were not sufficient enough to lead to victory for the Zanj or alter the institution of slavery under the 'Abbasids.

The bearing of religion can also be seen in Nöldeke's work, as he also elaborates on Kharijite beliefs. He delves into issues regarding the lineage of the leader 'Ali and the question of his legitimate claims to the divine house, though overall Nöldeke mainly concentrates on Kharijite practices as a mobilizing factor for leadership. He calls the sect enemies of the Shi'a and zealots, though he believes Kharijism affected the leader 'Ali more than the Zanj themselves. According to Nöldeke, the Zanj were eager to believe that they were the legitimate followers of Islam and consequently had the right to annihilate others. However, the slaves needed a dominant personality to stir up these sentiments and provide leadership for their movement.<sup>16</sup> Nöldeke sees 'Ali as a supporter of the Kharijite doctrine, but the Zanj Rebellion was not essentially based on these beliefs; religion only motivated the rebellion in the sense that it greatly influenced the leader of the Zanj and he used it to appeal

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<sup>14</sup> Oseni: 58-9, 60, 62, 63.

<sup>15</sup> Oseni: 63-4.

<sup>16</sup> Nöldeke: 147, 151.

to the slaves. Of all the discussed publications, Nöldeke's is the only one that references another religious revolt in comparison to that of the Zanj, as opposed to the numerous cited examples of slave and social rebellions. Al-Mukhtār's revolt during the second *fitna* (685-687) also raised a dominion with a religious pretext with the help of an underprivileged class.<sup>17</sup> Like the Zanj Rebellion, Mukhtār's revolt utilized religious sentiment to take advantage of social discontent. Nöldeke is interestingly the only author to reference a religious rebellion in comparison to the Zanj, but he was likely using this example to showcase the effectiveness of combining spiritual beliefs with the mistreatment of oppressed groups. In total, Nöldeke provides a succinct account, albeit emotional at times, of the Zanj Rebellion with emphasis on religion as a motivating factor.

Lastly, Popovic incorporates the influence of religion into his book by first presenting the leader 'Ali as a compelling orator to the slaves but also as a dishonest, zealous man. At times, Popovic seems to mock 'Ali's spiritual convictions, waxing lyrically on his beliefs in the supernatural, such as telepathy, hearing voices from heaven, and the meaning of a lunar eclipse.<sup>18</sup> By characterizing 'Ali in this manner, Popovic undermines the actual ideology that may have appealed to the Zanj or induced them to follow 'Ali. In the conclusion, Popovic asserts that 'Ali attempted to appeal to both the Shiites and Kharijites and use these two groups as political tools.<sup>19</sup> This, in essence, reflects Popovic's belief that religion in the Zanj Revolt was no more than a means for manipulation.

Alternatively, Popovic claims that the 'Abbasids were motivated by Islam to overtake the rebels. *The Revolt of African Slaves* begins with a brief discussion on the beliefs of 'Ali (Master of the Zanj), and then as the book progresses, it begins to emphasize the religious incentives of the 'Abbasids, so that by the end all religious legitimacy has been contextually removed from 'Ali's movement and applied to the 'Abbasid military. The caliphal military are even said to read the Qur'an, pray before battle, and participate in Friday prayer. As the revolt progressed, they came to view the rebelling slaves as people lacking religion and laws. By the conclusion of the Zanj Rebellion, Popovic brands the insurrection a "holy war".<sup>20</sup> Popovic specifically links the Zanj to Shi'ism and Kharijism while the 'Abbasids are more generally portrayed as pious people supporting popular Islamic practices of the time period. By applying the notion of a religious impetus to both the 'Abbasids and the Zanj, Popovic makes quite a case for the significance of faith in the Zanj Rebellion. Without it, the Zanj may never have had a leader and the 'Abbasids may never have possessed the necessary motivation to win.

Talhami and Bacharach do not incorporate the importance of religious motivations into the main arguments of their articles and thus do not merit analysis in the section.

For the second part of my paper, I will discuss how certain authors relay military attributes of the Zanj Rebellion. Due to the length of their works, Bacharach, Popovic, and Nöldeke have the capacity to include more extensive military accounts of the revolt in comparison to Talhami and Oseni. Bacharach, Popovic, and Nöldeke differ in their descriptions of the events and emphasize distinct military aspects. Bacharach's "African Military Slaves in the Medieval Middle East: The Cases of Iraq (869-955) and Egypt (868-1171)" approaches the Zanj Rebellion in a remarkably different manner than the other scholars.

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<sup>17</sup> Nöldeke: 149.

<sup>18</sup> Popovic: 31, 57, 60, 63.

<sup>19</sup> Popovic: 152.

<sup>20</sup> Popovic: 92, 118, 120, 129.

First of all, his work encompasses a broader spectrum than just the uprising of the Zanj. As reflected by the title, Bacharach concentrates on the use of African military slaves in two particular areas, spanning a time frame much greater than that of the uprising. However, his article provides insight on the background, motivations, and results of the usage of African military slaves. Expressly relating to the Zanj Rebellion, he argues that the composition of the 'Abbasid and Zanj fighting forces effectively led to the defeat of the Zanj. Though primary sources say nothing on the subject, Bacharach argues that the slaves commenced the uprising with little military training, yet within a few years transformed themselves into a formidable army. While this transformation is underway, the 'Abbasids had to direct their attention to other problematic areas in the empire, such as Egypt, instead of devoting all their efforts to bringing down the rebellion. Bacharach combines these two points to show that the makeup of the 'Abbasid military came to include a variety of talented soldiers, such as the Tulunid general in Syria, Lu'lu, who defected and joined 'Abbasid ranks in 268/881. A number of now-trained Zanj joined the caliphal army as well. The skill of this enriched 'Abbasid army, according to Bacharach, is largely responsible for the ultimate failure of the rebellion. He argues that the uprising is fundamentally a political and military power contention between the Africans and the 'Abbasids. Bacharach concludes his article by putting forth the notion that African military slaves are most significant as a reflection of Islamic military history and an exemplification concerning the conclusion of earlier Islamic ideas on military organization.<sup>21</sup>

This sense of overall significance afforded to the Zanj in Islamic military history, or any other field for that matter, is not shared by Popovic, who maintains that, "the revolt does not seem to have influenced, in any lasting way, the course of Islam's history, nor brought about a radical change in social structure."<sup>22</sup> Though his book offers a different conclusion from the article discussed above, Popovic still primarily conveys the story of Zanj Rebellion as an organized military event. Starting with the origins of the uprising and a description of the leader, *The Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq* then devotes nearly eighty pages of accounts regarding battles, torture, and noteworthy individuals on both sides of the fight. Popovic also labels the rebellion as a war, singling himself out from the other historians.<sup>23</sup> By attaching this label to the events, it makes sense that the structure of the book and recounting of affairs reads like a straightforward military history. However, this stress also can create confusion, and he mentions nearly every single Zanj and caliph military commander, the dates of every clash, and geographic location. The pages that recount the details of battle draw heavily from al-Ṭabarī, thus the narrative is rather one sided. Popovic includes endnotes with provocative questions and clarification regarding al-Ṭabarī's writing, but the end result of the chapters is still the same: a chronological interpretation of al-Ṭabarī's version of the Zanj rebellion. Retelling the revolt from this perspective also strikes one as definitively unemotional and yet provocatively gory. Popovic reports incidents of cannibalism and violent massacres without sparing many details,<sup>24</sup> thus making his account a graphic military history indeed.

Tantamount to Popovic's war-like retelling of event, Nöldeke also relays the revolt in a chronological order based on specific clashes and labels it as a war. Though unlike the previously discussed work, he sees the slave uprising as being highly significant because it was one of ". . . the bloodiest and most destructive rebellions which the history of West Asia

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<sup>21</sup> Bacharach: 474-5, 490-1.

<sup>22</sup> Popovic: 153-4.

<sup>23</sup> Popovic: 45, 53, 70.

<sup>24</sup> Popovic: 112, 114.

records. Its consequences must long have continued to be felt . . .”<sup>25</sup> The physical effects of the rebellion, such as casualties and the altered relations between the ‘Abbasids and the slaves, make the Zanj Rebellion so important in history according to Nöldeke, and hence his choosing of recounting the rebellion in terms of battles and people. Nöldeke writes without citing sources, which gains criticism from Popovic, and also refrains from using the plethora of names and dates that Popovic includes. Yet with this approach, *Sketches from Eastern History* also retains an epic-like story about the Zanj. Their courage in battle, the statesman-like conduct of Mawaffak, and the occasionally horrifying massacre imposed by the slaves<sup>26</sup> make for a dramatic retelling of the events in comparison with that of the other scholars.

Talhami and Oseni composed shorter articles on the rebellion and therefore write notably less on military attributes. Consequently, they do not need to be discussed in this section.

Inspiring a variety of scholarly works in an abundance of academic fields, the Zanj Rebellion remains a hotly debated subject due to lack of primary sources (except for al-Ṭabarī) and differing perspectives of modern-day writers. The uprising can be viewed through the various lenses of racism, socioeconomic class, religiosity, and even within the confines of military history, thus demarcating the Zanj Rebellion as highly unique and allowing for the innovation of modern scholars, as thoroughly explored in this literary review. Unfortunately, aside from a few names and dates, little concurrence seems to exist regarding the nature of the Zanj uprising, though there does seem to be a certain degree of awe at the overall epic character of the fifteen-year rebellion. However, the usage of the term “Zanj” cannot even be agreed upon, much less the overall significance or lack thereof in the scheme of Islamic history. Nevertheless, this insurrection will confidently continue to attract the attention of scholars as we optimistically hope for the revelation of new information in the form of archaeology or perhaps manuscripts. Only then can a complete picture of the Zanj Rebellion be revealed.

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<sup>25</sup> Nöldeke: 146, 174-5.

<sup>26</sup> Nöldeke: 159, 164.

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