

The Saqaliba at Bani Umayyad palaces

Ekhlas Mohammad Al-Eidi

Associate professor
Applied Balqa University
Aqaba University College

Abstract

The word "Saqaliba" was given in Andalusia, during the reign of Umayyad State, to the slaves, brought in as children by sea pirates to be reared up in the palace on loyalty and obedience of emirs and caliphs, then some of them engaged in the military corps, and part stayed in the palace to serve its harem. And, with the increase of their numbers and getting closer to the emirs and caliphs, they became more prominent, and could form a social class similar somehow to the Turkish Mamluk class in the Islamic Orient. This study seeks to shed light on Saqaliba in Andalusia as regards: identification of their origins and the countries from which they came to Andalusia, their development in Bani Umayyad palaces, and their relation with emirs and caliphs, and the historical evolution of their duties from simple employment at houses and palaces as servants and guards until they were able to assume a leading military and administrative positions which enabled them to seize the power.

Keywords: Saqaliba, Abdulrahman AldakheL, Alhakam bin Husham, Abdulrahman Alnaser, Alhakam Almustanser, Husham Almoud, Bani Umayyad, Almushafi, Mohammed bin Amer.

Introducing the Saqaliba

In the Arabian literature, the Saqaliba meant the Slavic people who populated the countries extending from the Caspian sea on the east to the Adriatic sea on the west, the countries which were named in the medieval ages as the greater Bulgaria⁽¹⁾. And, in Andalusia the Arabs gave the expression (Saqaliba) to all slaves procured to Andalusia from different European countries⁽²⁾, and this is evident in the emphasis of the geographer "IbnHouqal" that the Saqaliba in Andalusia were not coming from Bulgaria only, but they had been brought also from "Lambaria" and "Calabria" in Italy, and from "Catalan" and "Galicia" in northern Spain⁽³⁾. Then this term was widespread in the Andalusia community after the Umayyad caliphs in Cordoba used those captives in the service and guard of the caliph palace. Arabian sources underline that such people were unable to create cultural centers because of their ignorance and rare knowledge in sciences, where "IbnKHaldoun" perceived that the environment of Saqaliba region rendered them savage groups and their moods were closer to that of animals⁽⁴⁾, furthermore, "Alqazwieni" stated that their morals were similar to those of beasts⁽⁵⁾, while "SaedAlandaluse" argued that by being away from the sun such people featured ignorance and dullness and stupidity⁽⁶⁾; therefore, Saqaliba couldn't create a civilized community, so they were composed of several tribes, each controlled by its own ruler separately⁽⁷⁾. As regards Saqaliba religion, we find that Arabian sources cite many of their religions, some worshipped the fire, others the sun, and some had no religion, and perhaps the Christian religion was among the most prevalent among them owing to being spread by the Byzantine state inside their countries and such religion was reinforced by the marriage of the Bulgarian King to daughter of the Constantinople King and thereby forced her to become Christian after the year (330AH/912 AD)⁽⁸⁾.

Evolution of Saqaliba in the Umayyad state in Andalusia

Saqaliba were at feud with many people surrounding them, which led them to wage many wars whereby they fell in captivity, and sold as servants in the slavery markets, even they were forming the best white slaves in such markets⁽⁹⁾. Thus the Andalusians, like other European countries people, rushed upon buying such strain of slaves; as they were in need of them in their housekeeping of: kneading, cooking, cleaning, supply of water needed for clothes washing, children nursing, and helping the master in his land or craft. Yet, as regards employing them in grand palaces including the ruler's palace they were entrusted with the provision of food and serving the sedentary and caring for their comfort and needs, in addition to serving the palace women, escorting and protecting them once they are outdoor of the palace⁽¹⁰⁾.

However, Saqaliba class of slaves working in the ruler palace were granted special care, as they were selected from among the youngsters and reared up with great care to be qualified and entrenched with the Andalusia traditions and norms, Arabic language, Islamic education and trained on fighting and knighthood arts. And, such attention reached its peak for this group when the opportunity was given to those who passed their military training to join thereafter the army or administrative work⁽¹¹⁾.

Political role of Saqaliba in Andalusia

The political role of Andalusia Saqaliba started to shape since the emergence of Umayyad state, where emir "Abdulrahman Aldakhel" (138-172 AH/756-788 AD) adopted special group of them for the palace service, and no sooner this emir had established his new Umayyad state in Andalusia than faced many revolts by Arab chiefs, their plots and wars, which forced him to think of creating a new class in the Andalusia community, loyal and honest to the palace only and with no affiliation to the outside Andalusia community⁽¹²⁾. However, "Almaqari" confirmed that by saying "revolts by Arab chiefs in Andalusia grew against "Aldakhel", and they competed his rule... and for such a great number of rebels he created tribes from others, and took up loyalists"⁽¹³⁾.

It's apparent from the sources, that not only Abdulrahman "Aldakhel" who adopted of Saqaliba a new loyalty to stand up against Arab leaders power, but many Andalusia rulers followed suit, and it seems that those new rulers had found themselves compelled to follow such policy of "Aldakhel", for believing that by introducing a new element new balance would be made among the community groups, and this would help them in cementing their power⁽¹⁴⁾. And thus, would ensure for them the continuity of their rule, and "Almaqari" maintained that by saying that the emir "Alhakam bin Husham " (180-206AH/796-822AD) multiplied their number and made use of Mamluks until they reached 5000 in number: 3000 horsemen and 1000 footmen... and increased the number of servants, attendants and entourage ... and employed Mamluks who named them the Dumbs for being non-Arabs"⁽¹⁵⁾.

Emirs of Bani Umayyad continued to mobilize more of Saqaliba, to work within the range of palace service, and the sentry of emir, ruling family and participation in army, without having any participations in works outside the palace, till the era of caliph "Abdulrahman Alnaser " and his son "Almustanser", where the number of Saqaliba swelled greatly in the state, and they started to infiltrate out of their work range as servants in the palace, and soldiers in the army and thus they could reach high administrative and political ranks, and assumed special standing in the state since the era of caliph "Abdulrahman Alnaser".

Political role performed by Saqaliba in the era of " Abdulrahman Alnaser " (300-350AH/912-961AD)

Saqaliba could in the era of "Abdulrahman Alnaser ", to break through their posts limits as servants in the palace and soldiers in the army, and started to leak into higher political and administrative positions. So, how Saqaliba could leak into higher offices of states? And, what are those posts the occupied? And, how they exploited their posts to take control of reign and power?

Saqaliba became, by virtue of their presence in the palace, and accompaniment of the state head and emirs and ministers, more informed about the tiniest secrets and events of the state, furthermore, they were trustworthy by emirs and caliphs, because they were brought to palace as youngsters so they were brought up and educated and instructed with special care by the rulers. And, with the rooted existence of Saqaliba in the palace, they could exit the frames specified for them, exploiting the rulers need for them, whether those rulers who took up Saqaliba as new supporters to stand up against their rivals, or those who were carried away by the looks of elegance and grandeur. So, they found in the Saqaliba the means to realize their desire in surrounding their reign with semblances of magnificence and greatness. This same desire had given the Saqaliba the good chance to take over power and enabled them to take part in government affairs egressing thereby from the crucible of slavery that had circumvented them⁽¹⁶⁾. And, it appears from the sources that the first employment of Saqaliba in the field of administration and army command was in the era of the caliph "Abdulrahman Alnaser ", whereby "Almaqari" mentioned that the boys of palace (i.e. Saqaliba), reached an outstanding position in the era of "Abdulrahman Alnaser " to the extent that they were designated as the "elite caliphs".⁽¹⁷⁾

Among those of Saqaliba who took over high positions in the era of "Abdulrahman Alnaser ", (Najdah Alsqalabi) who assumed the command of army in spite of objection, on the part of Arab suite in the caliph palace, to this commander, yet the caliph "Alnaser" insisted on vesting him with the army command,⁽¹⁸⁾ also, (BaderalfataAlsqalabi) occupied the position of Hajaba (chamberlain), in addition to the task of horses and post exchange⁽¹⁹⁾, a task of military nature, meant to entrust the holder with the command of horsemen.⁽²⁰⁾

Bader" reached a high standing and entitled with the Sword-Holder⁽²¹⁾. Additionally, among those who assumed administrative positions in the era of "Abdulrahman Alnaser ", was "Jafar bin Abdulrahman" holder of horses and hosiery⁽²²⁾, a task in which "Jafar" combined between supervising the role of hosiery for weaving the clothes of palace household, and overseeing the horse stables for the ruler .

The political role performed by Saqaliba in the era of "AlhakamAlmustanser" (350-366 AH/961-976 A)

The role given by "AlhakamAlmustanser" Tobe assumed by the Saqaliba in his kingdom, was not less in value than the role granted to them by "AbdulrahmanAlanser" especially as they who pledged allegiance for him after the death of "Alanser. "Almaqari" stated, "the first who pledged allegiance for him were his palace young Saqaliba known as the "elite caliphs", such as "Jafar" holder of horses and the hosiery and others⁽²³⁾. Therefore, it was natural for them to have the power and influence in the state of "Alhakam", this what the sources expressly disclose and in many occasions, where, "IbnHayanAlqurtubi" mentioned in his book (Almuqtabas), in the context of what he quoted of 361 AH events, that "AlhakamAlmustanser" ordered in the month of Muharam of the same year to remove his entourage and his intimate person the great lad "Faeq Alsqaqlabi" the holder of post and the hosiery from his house on the eastern side of Alzahra palace, to the hajib (chamberlain) house of "JafarAlsqaqlabi" who died in (360 AH), which was on the western side of the palace, where it was greatly valued and near to the palace of "Alhakam". So this gratitude from "Alhakam" to "FaeqAlsqaqlabi" is an indication of the latter loftiness, and suggestive of his standing and an honor to him⁽²⁴⁾ .

Also, "IbnAthariAmarakeshi" underlined the influence of Saqaliba in the era of "AlhakamAlmustanser" and described them as the entourage and intimates of the caliph "the most glorious queen uniforms"⁽²⁵⁾, and he cited that the first nomination issued by the caliph "Almustanser" since his taking over of power was commissioning his state sword "FaeqAlsqaqlabi" with studying the expansion of the Friday mosque in Cordoba, and that was on the second day of his succession in (350 AH), and in the second year of his authority he elevated the importance of such "Sqaqlabi" by entrusting to him the tasks of hijaba⁽²⁶⁾. However, "IbnAthari" added on the Saqaliba news, that they started to encroach upon the subjects, and exhibited "bad manners" that prompted the people to complain against them, yet the caliph tended to justify their conducts by saying "they are our trustees and confidants on the inviolable , so the subjects should be resilient with them, and kind to them thereby would avoid their harm as we cannot deny them all the time"⁽²⁷⁾. And thus, Saqaliba attained in the era of "FaeqAlsqaqlabi" a lofty standing, but even the state became at their hands, and they swayed over the senior court men in the caliph palace .

Saqaliba in the era of "Husham Almoud"

When "AlhakamAlmustanser" died, Saqaliba were the master of status, described by "Ibn Athari" at the time that they were "more consolidated, the mightiest, believing they were invincible, and the reign at their hands"⁽²⁸⁾. One of the strongest and most important guard brigade was the Saqaliba at the control of two Saqalibi men of the senior state notables, "FaeqAlnathami" holder of post and hosiery, and "Jouthur holder of goldsmithing, even they tries to hide the news of Almustanser" death to preclude the selection of throne successor not appealing to them, so they plotted to displace "AlhakamAlmustanser" regent "AlhakamAlmustanser" who was still young and unable to take over the reign whereby his mother "Subeh" would have the opportunity to intervene in the state affairs supported by the Hajib "Jafarbin OthmanAlmushafi" and "Mohammed binabiAmer", attorney of Mrs. "Subeh", mother of "Hishama Almoayyad", and these two were at feud with the senior Saqaliba, and their presence in government would mean depreciating the significance of Saqaliba, therefore, their seniors decided to work on displacing "HishamaAlmoayyad" and appoint the emir "Amughira BinAbdallahmanAlnaser" the brother of "AlhakamAlmustanser" provided that "HishamaAlmoayyad" would be the regent.⁽²⁹⁾"Faeq&Jouthor" started to implement what they contemplated of transferring the caliphate to "Amughira Bin Abdelrahman Alnaser " and in order to execute their plot, "Jouthor" saw that it was imperative to get rid of the hajib "Almushafi", yet "Faeq" refused this proposition believing that the "Almushafi" wouldn't disagree with them as the interest of country required the appointment of a strong caliph capable to subside revolts and seditions that started to erupt among the country's communities.

So they summoned "Almushafi" to the palace, and announced to him the death of "Almustanser" caliph, and revealed to him their intention to appoint "Almugrabi" instead of "HishamaAlmoayyad", and called for his help, at the beginning "Almushafi" approved the idea and said, "this by God the most proper opinion and rightful deed, and the issue is yours, and I, as others at your disposal and proceed with what you intended to do and consult the "Sheikhdom" for removing any disagreement" ⁽³⁰⁾. And, though "Almushafi" contemplated from calling on the "Sheikhdom" to thwart the Saqaliba scheme because he perceived that if "Almustanser" assumed the rule he may be called to account due to his loyalty to "AL-AlhakamAlmustanser" and supporting him in appointing the boy "Hisham" for the regency rather than his brother "Almugera", therefore, he gathered his supporters and at the head of them Mrs. "Suboh" and "Mohammed bin abiAmer" and BaniBerzalTribe and commanders of free soldiers, and the hajib "Almushafi" formed a supporting force of his followers to help him in facing up the Saqaliba, and he started charging and agitating them against the Saqaliba, and urging them to hold on to the allegiance of "HishamaAlmoayyad", illustrating the benefits inured to them from the caliphate of "HishamaAlmoayyad" and the dangers they might encounter if "Almustanser" took over the rule and, some of what he said to them, "that if withhold the state from "HishamaAlmoayyad" we would secured ourselves, and the world would be in our hands, yet, if it went to "Almugera" we would be replaced and retaliate upon us"⁽³¹⁾. Accordingly, they decided to kill "Almugera" before the Saqaliba could bring him to rule, and they attained that at the hands of "Mohammed bin abiAmer" and a troupe of the free soldiers. Then, "Almushafi" instituted "HishamaAlmoayyad" for allegiance of the caliphate, and that was the morning of Monday the 4th of Safar, 366 AH, and thus allegiance was conferred upon him⁽³²⁾

On the other hand, "Faeq&Joather" and their company knew about the fate of their candidate "Almugera", so they recognized their mistake and the scheme in which "Almushafi" had caught them in, and reacted with the situation and went to "Almushafi" and apologized to him and said, "fear stupefied us from what God guided you to, may God reward you well for our master son, and for our state and all Muslims"⁽³³⁾. Whereupon, "Almushafi" showed some satisfaction, while in reality he was taking care against their infidelity and seeking to wipe them.

The end of palace's Saqaliba political power

The era of "HishamaAlmoayyad" started and in which the Saqaliba lost their former standing they boasted in his predecessor's era, so their matters confused after the HAJIB "Almushafi" seized the management of country, as he spared no effort in monitoring the Saqaliba commanders, and laid off many of them from service, and closed the palace door (Alhadidgate) assigned to their entry and exit, and ordered them to use (Alssuda) door earmarked to ordinary people, so their movements would be under control and surveillance, and some of their dangerous elements were exterminated and other deported to places outside of the capital Cordoba⁽³⁴⁾. And, among actions the "Almushafi" had taken to exterminate the Saqaliba, he commissioned "Mohammed bin abiAmer" to divide the Saqaliba into two parts, the Saqaliba "Alfohool" who were outside the palace, and those resident in the palace, and in order to achieve that "Ibn Athari" sought to attract the Saqaliba "Alfohool" by resorting to prefer them over others in position, and in giving, thereby he obtained their affection, and controlled them and in this respect "IbnAthari" said that "Mohammed bin abiAmer", "magnified their status and give them precedence in hosting and giving so they liked him"⁽³⁵⁾ and submitted to his power and thus the condition of Saqaliba transformed from supporting elements for the caliphs, to elements taking orders from "Ibn Athari" until they were lately designated as the "Fityan Alamereien". Methods used by the hajib "Almushafi" and "Ibn Amer" in wiping out the palace Saqaliba were diverse, and they could beset the Saqaliba and force "Jothor&Faeq" to apply for discharge from the service of the caliph "HishamaAlmoayyad", and based on "Almushafi" and "Ibn Amer" desire, the caliph approved of the exit of senior Saqaliba from the palace⁽³⁶⁾, and with the egress of "Jothor and Faeq" from the palace the political influence of the Umayyad palace Saqaliba in Andalusia started to dwindle, and shifted from an influential force in the palace to a mere supporting force in the army of "Ibn Amer" and became known as the "FityanAlamereien."

Conclusion

After the study of political role of palace Saqaliba in the Umayyad state in Andalusia the study concluded the following:

1. Arabs in Andalusia used the term (Saqaliba) to all slaves brought to Andalusia from different European countries .
2. Andalusians turned to possess this sort of slaves; for they their need of them in housekeeping affairs of: kneading, cooking, cleaning, supply of water required for clothing washing and nursing their children and assisting the landlords in their land or craft.
3. Yet, as regards their employment in grand palaces, including the ruler palace, they were tasked with the provision of food and service of the sedentary and observing their respective comfort and providing for their needs, in addition to serving the harem of palace, escorting and guarding them in case they went out of the palace.
4. Saqaliba slave class working in the ruler palace was treated with special care, as they were chosen from youngsters group, and be reared up in the palace quite carefully to be qualified and instructed in the Andalusia habits and tradition, Arabic language, Islamic education and arts of fight and knighthood. Such care of the ruler paved the way for those who passed their military trainings to join the army or work in administration .
5. Political role of Andalusia Saqaliba started to form since the inception of Umayyad state, where emir "Abdulahman AldakheL " (138-172 AH/756 -788 AD) formed from them a new group in the Andalusia community, whose loyalty and affiliation are kept to the palace only with no connection with the outer Andalusia community. Many of Andalusia rulers followed suit, and it seemed that such rulers had found themselves prompted to follow the policy of "Abdulahman AldakheL ", for their belief that introducing a new element would create a balance between the community classes, and this would help them to wield their power, and ensure the continuity of their reign .
6. Saqaliba became, by virtue of their presence in the palace, and escorting the head of state, emirs and ministers, the most informed state men about the smallest details of the state secrets and events, also, they were trustworthy to emirs and caliphs, and this plentiful fortune of power enabled them to take part in ruling issues emancipated thereby from the crucible of slavery that encircled them. The political role of Umayyad palace Saqaliba in Andalusia started to dwindle in the era of "HishamaAlmoayyad", after the hajib "Jafar Bin OthmanAlmushafi" and the minister "Mohammed bin abiAmer" were able to dismiss senior Saqaliba from the palace .

Footnotes:

1. Ibn Fadlan, treatise, PP.37-45
2. Alabbade, In the history of Maghreb and Andalusia, P.211
3. IbnHouqal, Image of Earth, P.110
4. IbnKhldoun, Almuqaddemah, P.94
5. Alqzweni, Wonders of Creatures, P.57
6. Ibn Sadd, Altabaqat, P. 41
7. Almajali, The Saqaliba, P. 41
8. Ibid, P41
9. Pervincal, The Saqaliba, P.250
10. Almajali, The Saqaliba, P.41
11. Altawani, Collapse Calamity of Arab Existence in Andalusia, P.499
12. Ibid, PP.502-503
13. Almaqari, NafhAlteeb, V.3, P.567
14. AbuMallouh, The Almeria state, P.47
15. Almaqri, NafhAlteeb, V.3, P.341
16. Almajali, The Saqaliba, P. 55
17. Almaqri, NafhAlteeb, V.3, P.342
18. Altawani, Collapse Calamity of Arab Existence in Andalusia, P.501
19. Ibn Athari, AlbayanAlmaqahreb, V.2, P.223
20. Almajali, The Saqaliba, P. 76
21. Ibn Athari, AlbayanAlmaqahreb, V.2, P.223
22. Almaqri, NafhAlteeb, V.3, P.396
23. Ibid, V.3, P.396

24. IbnHayyan, Almuqtabas, P.63.
25. Ibn Athari, AlbayanAlmaqheb, V.2, P.233
26. Ibid, V.2, P.233
27. Ibid, V.2, P. 245
28. Ibid, V.2, PP.259-260
29. Ibn Bassam, Althakhera, S.1, V.1, P.58.
30. Ibn Athari, AlbayanAlmaqheb, V.2, P.258
31. Ibid, V.2, P.260
32. Ibid, V.2, P.261
33. Ibid, V.2, P.263
34. Ibn Bassam, Althakhera, S.1, V.1, P.59
35. IbnAthari, AlbayanAlmaqheb, V.2, P.263
36. Ibid, V. 2, P. 263

Sources and References

1. AbuMallouh, HashimAbdelraouf, Alamereia State in Andalusia (366-399 AH), unpublished PhD dissertation, UJ, 1994, P.47
2. Alabbadi, Ahmad Mukhtar, In the history of Maghreb and Andalusia, Dar Al- Nahdha Al Arabia, Beirut, w/o date
3. Almajali, Ahmad Hamdan, The Saqaliba and their political and cultural role in Andalusia, unpublished master's thesis, Mu'tah University, 2008 AD.
4. Almuqari, Ahmad bin Mohamed, Nafh Alteeb from the Analusia wet spring, checked by Ihsan Abbas, Dar Sader, Beirut, w/o date.
5. AlQazwini, Zakariz Bin Mohammad, Wonders of Creatures and Oddities ofBeings, checked by FarouqSaad, Ed. 3, Dar Al Afaq Al Jadida, Beirut, 1987 AD.
6. Altawani, Abdelkareem, Calamity of Arab Existence in Andalusia, Irshad Library, Casablanca, w/o date.
7. Ibn AthariAlmarakishi, AlbayanAlmaghrabi the news of Andalusia and Maghreb, checked by LeveyProvincial, Dar Al Thaqafa, Beirut, w/o date.
8. Ibn Bassam, Althakheira In Amenities of the Peninsula People, checked by Ihsan Abbas, Dar Al Thaqafa, Beirut, 1979.
9. Ibn Fadlan, Ahmad, treatise of Ibn Fadlan, Al Sharq Book International, Beirut, 1994
10. Ibn Hayyan, Hayyan Bin KHalaf, ALmuqtabas In the news of Andalusia Country, checked by Abdelrahman Ali Hajii, Dar Al Thaqafa, Beirut, 1965.
11. Ibn Houqal, Image of Earth, V. 1. Ed. 2, Braille press, Leyden, 1938
12. Ibn KHaldoun, Abdelrahman, Mugaddimat Ibn KHldoun, Dar Al Jeel, Beirut, w/o date
13. Ibn Saed, Saed bin Ahmad, Tabaqat AL-umam, checked by HayatEidbinAlwan, Dar Al Talea, Beirut, 1985.
14. Provincial, Levey, The Saqaliba, article published in the Encyclopedia of Islam, issued by Ahmad Al SHatnawi et al. , w/o number, volume, date, .A.14