

THE SLAVE TRADE ACROSS THE SAHARA

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The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade. By JOHN WRIGHT. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. Pp. xiv + 226. £75 (ISBN 0-415-38046-4).

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John Wright's latest book is a very fine, clearly written, well-documented and comprehensive overview of the slave trade across the Sahara desert responsible for the arrival in North Africa and the Middle East of between 6 and 7 million people from Sub-Saharan Africa over 1,250 years, from the era of the rise of Islam to the twentieth century (p. 167). Indeed, Mauritania's abolition of slavery and the slave trade in 2007 – for the *third* time since 1980 – signals that this ancient commerce in captives is not yet dead.¹ I begin simply by listing the titles of Wright's thirteen chapters, because they describe the contents very well, and doing so frees space to comment on several of his many important and original points: (1) Slaves, slavery and the Sahara; (2) The Sahara: grazing, war and trade; (3) The medieval Saharan slave trade; (4) The land ways and the sea ways; (5) Faith in abolition; (6) The slave trade through Murzuk; (7) The slave trade through Ghadames and Ghat; (8) The Wadai road; (9) The slave trade between Sahara and Mediterranean; (10) The Mediterranean middle passage; (11) Morocco: the last great slave market; (12) The delusions of abolition; (13) Conclusions.

First, as is apparent from these titles, Wright concludes that the bulk of the trans-Saharan slave trade took captives to Morocco, and to and through Libya. In part, this was a matter of geography: the western routes were shorter and better watered than those through the central desert; and the eastern itineraries through Libya were both shorter (due to the southern turn of the Mediterranean coastline into the Gulf of Sirte) and somewhat less arduous because the extensive oases of Fezzan offered water and respite two-thirds of the way across. In the nineteenth century, the disposition of European power and control in North Africa was also an important factor. The French conquest of the Algerian coast and hinterland after 1830, the French protectorate over Tunisia after 1881, and the British protectorate over Egypt in 1882 made slave trading more problematic in the hinterlands of these coastal zones. However, the slave trades to and within Libya and Morocco were also very different. Sparsely populated Libya was a transit zone through which most African captives passed on the way to other lands – notably the heartlands of the Middle East. As for Morocco, Wright argues that most slaves who arrived in the many cities of the Sharifian empire remained there; despite a steady demand, trans-shipment of captives would have been more difficult, given the distance between Morocco and the Middle Eastern heartlands (p. 49).

Second, Wright demonstrates and analyses with great aplomb the truly extraordinary sources available for the study of the slave trade through Libya and its hinterland in the nineteenth century. Taking advantage of its privileged position with the Ottoman Porte, the British government in mid-century named consuls and vice-consuls in Tripoli, Murzuk, Benghazi, Ghadames, Derna and Ghat. Many of these men served for many years – indeed for decades. They sent regular diplomatic dispatches about the organization of the trans-Saharan slave trade and estimates of the number of slaves who passed through their jurisdictions. All

¹ Ahmed Mohamed, 'Mauritania law promises jail for slavery', *African Herald* (Dallas) 18 (August 2007), 1, 27, 29.

obvious caveats accepted, their reports offer the most authoritative series of data that we have about the evolution of the trans-Saharan slave trade. Wright analyses these figures with great care; so much so that I believe that his evaluations may be accepted as definitive until such time as we might be fortunate enough to find estimates from other sources. This said, I would hope that one day, too, scholars will compare the very Orientalist written discourse of these British representatives with what must have clearly been more personal social (and, dare I say it, sexual) engagement with women and men in the host societies in order to unveil more completely the roles these men played in constructing our understanding of the trans-Saharan slave trade and the history of Libya in general.

Third, Wright forcefully challenges the oft-repeated cliché that the Muslim slave trade and Muslim slavery were benign (pp. 5–6, 120, 151, 163). It is probably not surprising that Muslim rulers such as the sultans of Morocco and the Ottoman empire would make such claims, given their positions at the apex of slave-holding societies. However, Westerners such as Sir John Drummond Hay, who served over four decades (1844–85) as British consul in Morocco, repeated this refrain. His opinion had real consequences; Wright argues that Hay, more than anyone else, shielded Morocco from the abolitionist campaigns that, supported by the British government, led other North African rulers to issue decrees that – at least nominally – ended the traffic in the second half of the nineteenth century. Morocco, on the other hand, abolished the slave trade only in 1922, and slavery had not yet been abolished by the end of the French protectorate in 1956. Wright's many descriptions of the horrors of slave-raiding in the Sahel and Sudan, the perilous trans-Saharan crossings, the male genital mutilation that 'produced' eunuchs, the exploitation of plantation slaves in oases everywhere and in southern Morocco and Egypt in particular, and the sexual predations to which slaves of both sexes were subject would, if communicated widely to popular and scholarly audiences, close the book on this discussion.

Finally, I disagree with one aspect of Wright's analysis. He maintains with some consistency that the trans-Saharan slave trade changed fundamentally little in the millennium and, more, that it bridged the desert. Routes and timing might have shifted in response to new circumstances, he concludes, but basic patterns remained the same (pp. 34, 45). Ralph Austen and I have arrived at almost the opposite conclusion, at least for the period 1500–1900.² On the other hand, Wright is undoubtedly correct in concluding that the slow disappearance of economically valuable slaves from trans-Saharan caravans after 1850 ultimately condemned the system to a very marginal role in the economic history of the northern third of Africa. We can only hope that revelations of unscrupulous traffickers who have taken people desperate for work in Europe along some of the same routes to Libya and Morocco do not signal the rebirth and reconfiguration of the cruel trade in what Elizabeth Savage called 'the human commodity'.³

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² Ralph A. Austen and Dennis D. Cordell, 'Trade, transportation, and expanding economic networks: Saharan caravan commerce in the era of European expansion, 1500–1900', in Alusine Jalloh and Toyin Falola (eds.), *Black Business and Economic Power* (Rochester NY, 2002), 80–113.

³ See, for example, Norimitsu Onishi, 'Out of Africa or bust, with a desert to cross', *New York Times*, 4 Jan. 2001, A1, A12; Elizabeth Savage (ed.), *The Human Commodity: Perspectives on the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (London, 1992).