

The Abyssinian Slave Trade to Iran and the *Rokeby* Case 1877

Abstract:

In March 1877, the British searched a ship named *The Rokeby* and discovered eight Abyssinian child slaves on board. It is argued that, hitherto frustrated by the constant evasion of their attempts to suppress the slave trade, they used the event to bring pressure on local government officials and merchants of Bushehr to cease their collusion and involvement. The result was a decline in the trade at least in the coast around Bushehr. There having been hitherto no specific studies of the Abyssinian slave trade to Iran, the case has also been taken as an opportunity to discuss it from its country of origin through Mecca and Jeddah, then in Ottoman territory, and to the Gulf ports of Iran, which allows an indicative comparison of Ottoman and Iranian policies of suppression. Rare insight has been provided into the experiences of the slaves themselves by the first-hand accounts of their journeys from Abyssinia given to the British.

Key words: Slave trade, Abyssinian, Iran, British campaign of suppression, route through Ottoman territory, *Rokeby* case, its impact, ending the trade.

In March 1877, the British in Bushehr received a warning from the British in Muscat that a British owned ship named *Rokeby* would shortly be arriving in Bushehr with eight slaves on board. The slaves were to be seized and their purchasers to be brought to account. Given the difficulties that had faced the British in suppressing the slave trade in the face of market forces and local government indifference, the case was to prove an opportunity to oblige the Iranian authorities to tighten control of the slave trade, and a disincentive to further purchase and ownership at least on Iran's north-eastern Gulf coast, though it would still be some way from being entirely ended. The unusual level of detail on the case, which includes the personal accounts of the slaves, provides an opportunity to explore the Abyssinian slave trade from its origin in Africa through Ottoman territory to Iran, till now an understudied subject.¹

The slaves on board were Abyssinian, that is to say north-east African. This particular slave trade has received little detailed attention in Iranian studies by contrast with the trade in East Africans centred in on the Island of Zanzibar and the coast of what is now Tanzania, which was the source of the majority of slaves brought to Iran for sale. The *Rokeby* was a British owned steamer. Unknown to the captain, its passengers included eight child slaves, who were seized by the British and interrogated as to their origins and experiences of capture and sale. Their purchasers were obliged to give accounts of how they came to be bringing slaves to Iran when it was against the law. A variety of government officials were interrogated, and the governor of Fars was obliged to summon a meeting to call slave owners to account. It was a wide-ranging case, as officials in Jeddah, Muscat, Baghdad, Basra, Bushehr and Tehran were involved in it. The prominence of the event in southern Iran was to hasten the ending of the slave trade there.

Slavery in Abyssinia

In order to understand the trade in Abyssinians to Iran it is necessary to investigate briefly the nature of the trade in Abyssinia itself, where slavery had existed for many centuries as an acceptable practice.² It partly arose from economic circumstances, as elsewhere in Africa, particularly because land was abundant and labour was scarce.³ Many people were captured in war, which was endemic in Abyssinia, where the incessant warfare in the southern and western principalities was the source of slaves, to the extent that their export was a significant part of the economy.⁴ Some slaves were sold by their own people in times of economic difficulty at a cheap rate in return for such items as beads and cloth.⁵ Crimes, such as theft and banditry could also be causes of enslavement.⁶ Others, principally women and children, were sold into slavery after being captured in war, and sometimes children were kidnapped.⁷ Young slaves could be bought and sold many times.⁸ Children could be exchanged for grain during a famine and were sometimes used as compensation for homicide.⁹

The slaves were principally of two peoples, the Galla and Shankalla. The former, who were more significant in the Iranian trade, were Christians from the south, and were known among Muslims as *habashi* (as which they will henceforward be referred to). These slaves were supplied to the trade by Muslim merchants, who acquired them by various means, including engaging with the tribal chiefs of Abyssinia.¹⁰ The British were particularly concerned to end the trade in Galla slaves as so many of them were children, which arose in part from a desire on the part of their clients that their slaves be of an impressionable age, and therefore easier to train.¹¹ In Abyssinia, captured children could be 'deliberately mutilated' (i.e. castrated) for service in the harems of the wealthy.¹²

Females outnumbered males, and the great majority were under twenty years of age. Most of the females were destined for domestic service, but the most beautiful *habashi* were costly and highly prized, and therefore purchased by the wealthy male elite in the Ottoman Empire and Iran as concubines for their harems. Sometimes a slave was made the wife of her owner, at other times slaves were used as concubines by their master and his fellows for the duration of the journey, and sold on arrival in their destination.¹³ Male slaves, on the other hand, fulfilled a variety of functions, usually in the owner's household, some carrying out menial tasks, some acting as guards, and some rising to positions of considerable responsibility as managers of their master's affairs.¹⁴

The slave trade expanded in the nineteenth century as trade in the area grew and prospered in general, the transfer of both people and goods in larger numbers being facilitated by the introduction of steamboats. It is estimated that nearly half a million slaves were exported across the Red Sea from Abyssinia and the area to its south in this period.¹⁵ Their principal ports of departure were Massawa and Zeyla on the Ottoman controlled coast north-east of Abyssinia.¹⁶ Of these, Massawa was significant for the trade with Jeddah, where the market provided slaves for shipment on to the Persian Gulf ports of Iran,¹⁷ the purchasers being mainly pilgrims on the *haj*. The trade was difficult to suppress as the slaves were presented as part of the owner's or dealer's household, and also the British could not ask forceful questions of those ostensibly engaged in a religious obligation.¹⁸

In January 1847, the Sultan ordered the governor of Baghdad to prohibit the slave trade in the Gulf under the Ottoman flag. The right of searching vessels in the Gulf only, and seizing any slaves found, was granted to the British navy.¹⁹ In 1852 the British Representative in Abyssinia reported that he had been told to take advantage of any opportunity to end the slave trade carried out by the chiefs in Abyssinia. However, he was also instructed not to spend any money on it, which in effect meant the effort was useless.²⁰ A further total prohibition of the

black slave trade by the Ottoman Government in 1857 likewise made little impression. Significantly the Ottomans did not grant the right of search and seizure in their territory outside the Gulf to the British navy.²¹ This wholesale prohibition of the black slave trade was, in fact, the utmost measure the Ottomans could undertake under the circumstances without challenging the authority of the Shari'a, and thus risking the disturbance of the socioreligious fabric of their society. However, it should be pointed out that the realisation of the kind of 'gradual abolition' envisaged by the Ottomans was contingent upon one thing: the cessation of the flow of supplies. As the 1857 Ferman offered many loopholes, such as recognising the rights of masters to trade in 'second-hand' slaves or not prohibiting the masters from transporting their old slaves, it was inevitable that the 'transitory' stage, as it was termed by the Foreign Minister, Ibrahim Edhem Pasha, would take a very long time to expire. Indeed, despite the best efforts of the British, the trade showed little sign of declining by 1861.²² The trade from Abyssinia via Jedda, however, was somewhat reduced, as more slaves were being landed along the coast of Arabia and in Yemen. Otherwise, despite the ban, there were as many slaves as formerly in the market at Jeddah, and prices had not come down.

The Ottoman authorities did little to enforce the prohibition, as social attitudes on the subject of slavery were too deep-rooted.²³ Not only did the practice exist from ancient times, but also the fact that it was accepted by Islam, albeit with strict conditions on good treatment of slaves, made the case against abolition more difficult. Further it provided a useful service to wealthy and powerful individuals, including government officials, merchants and the traders themselves. In Abyssinia itself a similar problem of entrenched social and economic practice prevailed, and slaves were procured as usual in the mid-nineteenth century, despite the professions of the new Emperor, Tewodros, of respect for the British,²⁴ and an attempt by him to abolish the slave trade in 1854. It proved futile, even though it was reiterated by his successors.²⁵ Nevertheless, by 1877 the slave trade in Massawa had declined as a result of a

more positive attitude on the part of the Ottoman government towards abolition.²⁶ In particular, they were cooperative in giving information on the trade. After repeated efforts to end it, the trade was finally abolished in 1942.²⁷

The Black Slave Trade in Iran

Iran initially objected to the British opposition to the slave trade on grounds of religion. One of the reasons produced by the Shah was that many people would be prevented from becoming Muslims, as there would be no slaves to convert. However, some said it should be abolished as it was abominable, even though it was permitted in Islam.²⁸ According to one view 'the Qur'an places a high priority on manumitting slaves with the ultimate objective of abolishing slavery'.²⁹ 'The slave was a possession but he was also a human being with a particular religious status and rights under the shari'a'.³⁰ However, an estimated ten to twenty thousand slaves were brought into the Persian Gulf as a whole in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, the centre of the trade being Muscat. The slaves were carried by large and swift moving dhows (also known as buggalows) or sailing boats, in cramped conditions.³¹ The cargo of slaves varied in size between 50 and 200 slaves in the Persian Gulf traffic, and, on the whole they were adequately clothed and fed.³²

In Bushehr and elsewhere, there were no specific market-places for slaves.³³ They were therefore sold in hired premises or at a caravanserai. In 1842 one overall estimate of sales of slaves in Persian Gulf coast annually was 1000 *zangis*, and 80 *habashis*, the number of *habashi* females being twice that of males. Their prices were estimated as being 75 German crowns for a female Abyssinian and 70 for a male, though a good-looking female could fetch up to 200 German crowns. By contrast, a male *zangi* fetched 35 and a female 40 German crowns.³⁴ In addition, many pilgrims to Mecca returned with on average at least one slave.

When, in 1847, the Ottoman Government agreed to end the trade in African slaves in its ports in the Persian Gulf, control of the trade at sea passed into the hands of the British.³⁵ Their position was reinforced by the agreement with Iran in 1851 (see below). However, they did not have the means to control the numbers of slaves now being sent to Muhammarah, instead of the Iranian coastal ports.³⁶ Ottoman control over the Shaikhs, particularly the Shaikh of Muhammarah, on the west side of the Shatt al-Arab, was still weak, especially as local opinion favoured the traders.³⁷ When the question arose as to whether it would be practical to persuade the Sultan to forbid the sale of Abyssinian slaves in his dominions, the main reason for making such a request was that the trade involved children.³⁸

The treatment of *habashi* slaves in Iran

Habashis of both sexes were well cared for, clothed and fed. Some of the males were sent to school, where they learned to read and write, and then became involved in the household and carrying out its duties, in which they could reach positions of considerable responsibility.

Habashi eunuchs were highly prized, but only kept by the elite. Other males were employed as domestic servants, and in the south, they could be used as agricultural labourers. The females did light domestic duties being used in the running of the house, especially in the harem.³⁹ A few females became concubines in wealthy households. The greater value of females suggests that there was a higher market demand, not only for their beauty, but also for their type of labour.

The British Attempts at Suppression

In June 1848, using the Sultan as an example, the British persuaded the Shah to forbid the importation of African slaves by sea.⁴⁰ This in effect meant, or was hoped to mean, that it would cease altogether, as the land route to Iran was not feasible. The wording was intended to forestall the objections of some of the 'ulema (and those of their following) who were

opposed to an end to the slave trade.⁴¹ The example of the Sultan meant that Iran could no longer claim that prohibition was not consistent with the tenets of Islam.⁴² The British also gained the right to seize all slaves found on Iranian vessels, following which they would be released in British territory, and the Arab chiefs of the Gulf were to be informed of this decision.⁴³ They did not, as yet, have the right to seize the ships themselves, which would have made the ruling more effective to enforce, and discussions continued early in 1851 with the Prime Minister, Amir Kabir.⁴⁴ Eventually, a new and stronger agreement was reached on 4 August 1851 to be made effective from 1 January 1852. British ships were to have the right to detain and examine Persian vessels and to remove any slaves on board. An Iranian officer would be on board each British ship of war and would cooperate in inspection and detention, ensuring that the seizure was carried out with the full authority of the Iranian government.⁴⁵

By the mid-1850s, the attempts to control the slave trade in both *habashis* and *zangis* had produced mixed results. On the one hand, the Arab chiefs in the Gulf were cooperating, but on the other, the slave vessels continued to evade the British. An additional problem, in the British view, was the reluctance of the local authorities to cooperate on suppression of the trade.⁴⁶ The local officials were insecure and wary of local resentment undermining their positions. In addition, they were not rewarded as all benefits of capture went to the shah, so they lacked incentive to cooperate. Also, the greater wealth and more advantaged position of some of the officials and traders involved discouraged them.

However, following the vigorous activity of the British in the 1850s the slave trade in the Persian Gulf seems to have abated, and, more probably, had also shifted to the area around Jask and Lingah on the south eastern coast of Iran, and also to Basra, where the Ottoman authority remained complacent about it. In Abyssinia itself, the trade showed little signs of dwindling, except that the slaves were not initially being shipped to Jeddah but were being landed along the coast. The prices remained at a constant level.⁴⁷ By 1861 the Ottoman

authorities were cooperating more on the suppression of the trade, and, as a result of British complaints, letters went from the Porte to the Governor of Jeddah and the Kaimakam of Massawa ordering them to take strong measures to suppress the trade in the Red Sea.⁴⁸ However, it was also observed that efforts to suppress the trade were still much impeded by its legality according to the precepts of Islam, as well as by the considerable profits that accrued to all involved. Therefore, it was worthwhile for the traders to bribe the authorities responsible for suppression of the trade.⁴⁹ As a result, the trade in Jeddah, for example, which was mostly in Christian slaves, and therefore likely to be Abyssinian, flourished as before, as did the prices.⁵⁰ In fact nine Abyssinian slaves were seized at sea on 31 August 1861.⁵¹ Although the records are scarce, more vigorous action by the Ottoman Government and the local Ottoman governor, does seem to have produced some decline in the trade from Massawa by 1877.⁵²

The *Rokeby* Case

On 8 March 1877 the British in Bushehr received anonymous information that Abyssinian slaves were being imported into the Persian Gulf by pilgrim vessels, and one in particular, the *Rokeby*, travelling from Jeddah, was expected soon in Bushehr. Two Abyssinian boys had already been seized on board and then released in Muscat.⁵³ The British owned ship, commanded by Richard Summerson, an Englishman, arrived in Bushehr on 13 March 1877.⁵⁴ On its arrival the British had the *Rokeby* searched and discovered two male and at first five, and then a sixth, female slaves. The persons in charge (presumably their owners but possibly also members of the crew) tried to bribe the British who had discovered them. One male slave, a very young boy was taken by the Iranian Foreign Office Agent and sent to the British Residency. Meanwhile, on 22 March, the British Representative in Basra forwarded a complaint from the Governor General there on the seizure of these slaves on the grounds that their purchasers were Ottoman subjects, and the case should be adjudicated in Basra.

At first, the investigation by the British into the importation of the slaves was frustrated, as the local authorities took no positive action. The Iranian government agent sent to inquire into the matter was ineffectual in the face of members of the local elite supporting each other. The British requested the appointment of a slave commissioner to investigate the matter, and a meeting finally took place on 27 April 1877 initially to deal with the specific case of a slave boy named ‘Abdullah (for details of whom, see below).⁵⁵ It included the British Resident and Mirza Zain al-Abidin, the Slave Commissioner sent by the Governor of Fars to Bushehr, who had arrived on 21 April 1877, as well as local merchant purchasers and owners of the slaves. The owner of ‘Abdullah contrived to absent himself and disappear.

However, at the meeting, the owners became vague and made various evasive claims.⁵⁶ Asked how many slaves he had, one merchant answered that he had no way of knowing, to which the Mirza Zain al-‘Abidin responded that how was it possible not to know how many people one was feeding.⁵⁷ A further merchant said he had fifty domestic slaves. Otherwise the attendees stonewalled, and either refused to produce their slaves, refused to produce the females, or brought in their slaves who declined to answer questions. One attendee was requested to swear an oath on the Quran that he had no imported slaves, to which he replied that this event was not a law case and therefore an oath was not required. Others insisted, for example, that their slaves had been bought six or seven years ago and had gone on a pilgrimage in the service of the family. Or that the slaves were not ‘freshly imported’, that is so say none of them were new to Iran. This term was significant, as according to the agreement between the British and Iranian government in 1851, only slaves that were newly arrived in Iran could be seized by the British.

In conclusion, a document was prepared for the signatures of the parties concerned to the effect that, if within a year, any of the slaves imported at this date be found in the possession of any one of them, that person would be fined 500 tomans by the governor. One imported

slave, the small child above mentioned, was made over to the Residency, where he would remain. The representative of the Governor of Fars announced that no further investigation would be necessary.

The British were dissatisfied with the outcome of this procedure. A letter was sent to Mirza Zain al-Abidin insisting that the slaves were illegally imported, by, or on account of, Iranian subjects. A new meeting was requested, and one merchant in particular, Ka' Naushad, was obliged (in vain) to appear as it had been proved that he had imported the slave now in the British Legation. Further, the governor was to provide the British with a copy of the instructions to his representative, Mirza Zain al-'Abidin.

The next meeting duly convened at the Residency on 22 May 1877.⁵⁸ The attendees were reminded of the terms of the Agreement of 4 August 1851 specifically on the point that persons travelling by sea on pilgrimage or otherwise should obtain a passport from the Iranian passport office for their accompanying slaves in Bushehr. The merchants attending claimed that no passport had ever been obtained for a slave from the Iranian Passport Office in Bushehr.⁵⁹ The British concluded that everyone involved in the matter had moved on, and that it was costly and futile to pursue it further.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs complained to the Residency that its Agent had exceeded the bounds of his duty in seizing the child slave of Ka' Naushad (which demonstrates the influence of wealthy merchants over local officials). Having kept the slave in the British Residency, the Residency Agent had summoned Ka' Naushad himself to account for his possession of the slave, rather than referring the matter to the Iranian authorities, in which they had a point. The Residency responded that the boy was being kept there till an order was given on what to do with him. They added that the Iranian Foreign Office Agent had agreed to his being taken to the residency, and that, when the Iranian Slave Commissioner next

arrived in Bushehr, the case of this slave would be addressed, especially as he alone of the slaves taken provided really satisfactory evidence of being an illegal import, since he was ignorant of the Persian language and had no passport.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the *Rifleman*, the British naval ship that had brought the slaves to Bushehr, proceeded to Muscat, where there was a British East African Consular Court, and requested adjudication there on the position of the slaves. They were duly pronounced to be 'prize to H.M.S. *Rifleman*' (meaning that their seizure was legal).⁶¹ Therefore, the eight slaves handed over to the British resident at Bushehr were pronounced to be lawfully seized and forfeited to the Crown.⁶²

Slaves on board the *Rokeby*

The eight Abyssinian child slaves on board, two male and six female, were imported from Jeddah, having come there via Massawa.⁶³ Being Abyssinian and valuable, they had evidently been well-treated.⁶⁴ The crew of the *Rokeby* tried to conceal them in cupboards and boxes before the ship could be searched. One was destined to remain in Iran, and the others were intended for conveyance to the Ottoman Empire, in particular Basra, where the owners were resident. One of the slaves, a girl, died on landing.

They were listed by number:

Slave No. 1 Abdullah, owned by a Persian, Ka' Naushad, a very young child who was, as already mentioned, given over to the care of the British Residency. The local Persian authorities complained over the Resident's action and demanded the surrender of the slave to his owner and importer. The British replied that, as he was a recently imported slave, rather than a slave already belonging to an Iranian or Ottoman family and travelling with them to and from Mecca, he would remain in British custody.⁶⁵

Slave No. 2, a boy named Faraj, had been passed to a resident of Bushehr, found, and taken from him by the local Farrash Bashi, and sent to the British Residency. His owner was said to be Muhammad bin Haji Yusef Ezree, an Ottoman subject.⁶⁶ However, he had not been claimed, and it was proposed that he be sent to Bombay, if suitable arrangements could be made.

Slave No. 3 Saidah was owned by Haji Hussein Ibn Thalib, an Ottoman subject. Her case was dealt with as with case No. 2, and arrangements for her were under discussion. Her wish was to remain with Slave No. 7, Zahinah, as her attendant, if she were allowed to go to Basra. She was initially in the charge of the British Resident.⁶⁷

No. 4. Hassinah was owned by Haji Khalil ibn Muhammad, an Ottoman subject, and was claimed by him as his wife, which she said was true. An *istishad* (legal disposition) was expected and later received, accompanied by a letter from the British Vice-Consul in Basra supporting the statement. Hassinah said that she wished to join her husband in Basra. For the time being she was also in the care of the Resident.

No. 5. Wardah was also owned by Haji Khalil ibn Mohammad, and claimed by him as the servant of his 'wife' Hassinah. She wished to remain with Hassinah and accompany her to Basra. She also was currently in the charge of the Resident.

No. 6. Zainab was in the charge of an Arab, who carried a letter addressed to a Mukhbil bin Abdul Rahman in Basrah, the person for whom the slave was intended. The letter showed that slave was newly purchased in Jeddah. No special claim was made for this slave. She

herself said that she was married to an Abdul Mubarak of Kuwait, and wanted to proceed to Basrah to join him. She was also now in the charge of the resident.

No. 7. Zahra. Her owner was not known and his name could not be ascertained from the other slave owners. However, she had been claimed by Abd al-Majid, an Ottoman subject, as his wife. She corroborated this statement and expressed a wish to go to Basra and join him there. She was also now in charge of the resident.

No. 8 Subah a female slave whose owner was unknown. She was found suffering from the effects of small-pox and died in Bushehr on 22 March 1877 from that disease.

Slaves owned by Ottoman subjects

In the cases of slaves nos. 2-7, a question of jurisdiction arose, which pertained to the legality of their seizure. On 22 March 1877 a complaint was forwarded from Nasir Pasha, the Governor General of Basra, on the subject of the seizure of the six slaves with Ottoman owners. He demanded that they be brought to Basra for adjudication as they were domestic slaves being taken from one Ottoman port to another (i.e. Jeddah to Basrah).⁶⁸ The British answered that as (purchase of) the slaves in question had been 'condemned' in the East African Court of Muscat, the alleged owners of the slaves had no alternative but to appeal to the High Court of the (British) Admiralty in London. The British view was that the above-mentioned complaint applied only to slaves on ships in Ottoman territorial waters and did not apply in the open sea. There, the status of a slave changed, and a person seized at sea by the British came under their control, and could not be returned to slavery.⁶⁹ However, a stronger point was whether a slave was already married to an Ottoman subject, in which case he had a right to claim her, providing there was evidence of the marriage.

On 25 May 1877 a letter was received by the Residency from an Abdu Majid of Baghdad claiming that a girl named Zahra (Slave No. 7 and presumably otherwise called Zahirah) was his wife. A further claim was made by a Haji Khalid b. Salibi to Hasainah (Slave no. 4) as his wife and Wardah as her servant. His claim was accompanied by a letter from the British Vice Consul in Basra which confirmed that Hasainah was indeed his wife, and said that she should not have been seized.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, the Governor of Bombay stepped in with a telegram authorizing the Resident to hold an inquiry in collaboration with the Iranian Slave Commissioner, and with the cognizance of the Ottoman consul in Bushehr, on the subject of releasing all the slaves said to be imported. Those claimed as belonging to Ottoman subjects were to be sent to Baghdad, and the remainder were to be sent to Bombay. A decision was taken to ask the slaves themselves as to their wishes.⁷¹

In addition, an Iranian Commissioner had been sent from Tehran to Bushehr to inquire into slaves imported at the behest of Iranian subjects, which in effect meant only the small boy, Abdullah, in the charge of the Residency. The owner was not in Bushehr and his whereabouts were unknown, therefore no further was action taken. Orders on the matter were awaited, as Abdullah had no wishes as to his future.⁷² The owner of a second young slave, Faraj, could not be found.

Eventually, the five female slaves left for Basra on 18 December 1877, having declined a British offer of freedom in Bombay. Their choice of Basra in preference to Bombay, was supported by the British Resident, who had had previous experience in Bombay, and who warned that 'slave girls sent there were, after a short time, left to pick up their own livelihoods.'⁷³ The Ottoman Consul in Tehran and the Iranian Foreign Office were

consulted, and affirmed that it would be wisest to allow them to follow their own inclination, in other words to go on to Basra.

Not long after the *Rokeby* incident, a further case emerged of two Abyssinian boy slaves, and a girl of uncertain origin, having been found hidden on board the same ship by the captain, when bound from Jeddah to Iran. The ship duly docked in Muscat on 28 February 1878 to report the matter.⁷⁴ The two boys involved were liberated and found homes by the Sultan of Muscat, to which the British agreed. A claim for the girl as his wife had come from a purported owner from Bushehr. On this occasion the British took fuller statements from the slaves themselves, which provide evidence of their own experiences. The first was a statement by Bilal, an Abyssinian boy:

I was stolen from my country about two years ago, and taken to Jeddah, where I was purchased by Shaikh Ali Bashir, and I remained with him for four years. I was then purchased by a Mekkawi named Mohammed and taken to Mecca. I was with him for four years. My present owner purchased me at Jeddah. His name is Zain al-'Abidin. He took me to Mecca, then to Medina and back to Jeddah.⁷⁵

A further statement was taken from Zain al-Abidin bin Ali Khuja, at Jeddah, as follows:

I purchased Bilal at Jeddah and took him to Mecca and Medina on pilgrimage, and brought him back to Jeddah. I have no children, I told him I would adopt him if he would come to my country. I intended to write a deed of freedom for him. He said it was not necessary, and that I could write one at Muttrah. Zain al-Abidin claimed not to be aware of a proclamation forbidding slave trading in Muscat.⁷⁶

The statement of Murjan, the second Abyssinian child slave was that:

My native country is Mujjah and I am a Galla. I do not remember my father's name. I was taken to Massawa as a small boy. I was brought by 'Ali a *dalal* (dealer) from my country to Jeddah. At Jeddah, I was sold to a Turk named Hussain Effendi. I was taken to Mecca, whence I went to Medina, where I was sold to my present owner, Shaikh 'Ali, an Arab.

The experiences of these boys illustrate how slaves were treated as mere property to be passed on when no longer useful existed in the slave trade in Iran and the Ottoman Empire as well as that to the Americas.⁷⁷ It could be argued that the arrangement demonstrated personal relationships with a promise of manumission. However, in all my reading of primary material on slavery in this period I have never come across an example of an implementation of such an agreement. More to the point, this slave makes no mention of having had such a chance.

The third slave, Saleha, is reported as saying that she was an Arab born of free parents at Moeha and that she had married an Arab named Sayyid Ibrahim in Mecca with her mother in attendance.⁷⁸ The British were suspicious of the story, not least because she spoke better Abyssinian than Arabic, but Sayyid Ibrahim duly produced an *istishad* to support his claim, and saying they were married in Jeddah, and this was passed on through the Iranian Foreign Office Agent at Bushehr. The British were still doubtful, but believing that sending her to him was her best option, they let her go.⁷⁹

In 1880 the pressure on the slave trade tightened when the British and Ottoman governments signed the Anglo-Ottoman Convention for the Suppression of the Slave Trade.⁸⁰ Certificates were required by this convention, and 'the goodwill' of the Sharif of Mecca was to be sought in stopping the trade.⁸¹ It was followed by a slave convention signed by the Ottoman Empire and Iran.⁸² The British hand in stopping the trade was strengthened by new conditions which

distinguished between slaves newly imported into the Ottoman Empire, who could be seized, and those accompanying their master to Mecca and back on the Haj who could not.⁸³ Where there was evidence of new importation, the British had the rights of seizure of the slaves in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. It should be noted that the rights of the British in pursuing slave traders in these Ottoman areas still did not include seizing the ship itself, a sign of how much stronger British influence in Iran was than in the Ottoman Empire. An Agreement was signed in 1882 between Britain and Iran which gave the British the right to search all ships in the Persian Gulf without the presence of previously required Iranian supervisors, thus strengthening their hand.⁸⁴ The Convention was followed in 1883 by a Slave Convention signed by the Ottoman Empire and Iran.⁸⁵ Eventually, pending the Brussels conference on slavery of 1889, the Sultan signed a law banning the black slave trade, and was then party to the signature of the General Act of the Brussels conference on Slavery in 1890.⁸⁶

During the 1880s few reports were received of the importation of slaves into southern Iran.⁸⁷ One example is of two Indian boys sold as slaves by Iranians in Shiraz.⁸⁸ In 1883, a boy eunuch, said to be Abyssinian, was discovered in female dress, having been brought from Jeddah by an Iranian subject.⁸⁹ Otherwise in the 1880s the trade seems to have declined and indeed all but disappeared in Bushehr and the surrounding coast.⁹⁰ However, it continued on the coast near Charak, Jask and Lingah to the far south east of Iran, and still remote from central control. Seven slaves imported into Lingah in 1889 proved impossible to trace once they had been landed, and the authorities in Lingah denied their existence.⁹¹ In 1890 the governor of Bushehr explained that the area was outside his jurisdiction, except Charak, where he would make inquiries.⁹² The trade was mainly in East African slaves, who were landed in large numbers, one cargo reportedly including 100 slaves.⁹³ Despite Iran signing the Act for Repression of the Slave Trade of 1890, enforced from 1892, the trade in Iran

trickled on into the twentieth century until it was finally banned by the Majles, on 7 February 1929.⁹⁴

Conclusion

The *Rokeby* case was significant as it more or less ended the trade in Bushehr. The vigorous action taken by the British deterred the slave traders and the local officials who colluded with them. They summoned the local officials responsible and the slave purchasers to account, and treated them with less than the respect usually accorded, discouraging them from further purchases. The trade along the adjacent coastline continued where central control was weak, and there were occasional reports of seizures in the further Iranian ports close to Oman. The *Rokeby* case, however, also had a significance beyond Iran, as the reports mentioning the involvement of officials in Basra and even Baghdad show. It formed part of a turning point which led to Iran signing the Act for Repression of the Slave Trade of 1890.

With regard to the slaves themselves, the *Rokeby* case reveals the nature of the experience of the Abyssinians, in particular in providing detail from the accounts of children told by themselves. These slaves, being valuable, were on the whole well treated, as is demonstrated by their willingness to stay with their new owners. For the females, as pointed out by the British Resident, there really was no alternative that could give them security when they were granted manumission. The male slaves might in this instance were found other places, so we do not know what their choice would have been.

There is a question of whether any of the slaves exercised agency, in other words did they have to struggle over their future and assert themselves to make a choice. Of the seven *Rokeby* slaves the five females were given the choice of liberation in Bushehr, which given the social conditions surrounding women at that time, would have meant insecurity or worse, or joining their masters. All five willingly chose the latter, no doubt for the reason of security

as much as any other. One of the boys was too young to choose. The other, Faraj, vanishes from the accounts, and it is possible that he exercised agency and took up local employment of his own accord. Of the three slaves discovered in February 1978, the two boys were given the choice of continuing with their owners or of being set free and being found employment in Muscat. They chose the latter. Much pressure was brought on the female slave to do the same, but she fought tenaciously to join her master, and was allowed to go. Therefore, she did exercise agency.

The girl slaves from the discovery in 1877 on the *Rokeby*, who chose to go on to Basra as the wives or servants of their purchasers, may well have formed a favourable opinion of their owners. However, there is no question that this choice offered much more security than any alternative, and ultimately that was probably the main reason that they made it. The actual status of the servants in terms of slavery is not discussed, and seemingly they would simply have become members of the household. Of the two young boys on the *Rokeby* we do not know the fate of the elder, and, as there is no indication of what happened to him, nothing more can be said. With regard to the slaves discovered on the *Rokeby* in 1878, Saleha made a similar choice to that of the girl slaves in 1877. However, the two boys, Bilal and Mujjah, whose position as free people would have been less vulnerable, both chose to remain in Muscat, where workplaces were to be found for them. They would at least have had some choice other than to be repeatedly sold on as though they were a commodity.

Notes

¹ Behnaz Mirzai, *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800-1929* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), p.188, refers briefly to the Rokeby case in L/PS/20/C246, British Library.

² Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery A History of Slavery in Africa Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.28-29. It was a common practice throughout Africa, including the west, as Lovejoy shows.

³ Gareth Austin, 'Slavery in Africa 1804-1936' in David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman (eds), *Cambridge World History of Slavery*, Vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp.174-96.

⁴ Ehud Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1998), p.15.

⁵ No. 21, 20 December 1850, FO 84/858.

⁶ William Clarence Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (London: Hurst and Company, 2006), pp.78-79.

⁷ For example, see the case of kidnapping of a boy in Zanzibar, No. 239, 16 Aug. 1856, FO 248/168. He was lured by sweet treats till he was a long way from his village, and then seized. Kidnapped Abyssinian children also passed through Egypt to supply the Egyptian and Arabian markets, Cairo, no number, 15 January 1880, FO 84/1571. Kidnapping was carried out more on a small-scale basis, rather than by large planned raids, Toledano, *Ottoman slave Trade*, p.17.

⁸ Richard Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1992), p.241. The crews of boats were seldom involved in kidnapping. Men were employed for this purpose in the interior. No. 421, 1 Sept. 1842, FO 84/426.

⁹ Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers, 'African Slavery as an Institution of Marginality' in Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds), *Slavery in Africa. Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), pp.12-13.

¹⁰ Lovejoy, *Transformations*, p.154; No. 3, 8 April 1852, FO 84/886.

¹¹ No. 37, 6 Nov. 1854, FO 84/949.

¹² No. 21, 20 Dec. 1850, FO 84/858.

¹³ No. 98, 28 March 1877, FO 84/1482; Pankhurst, *Social History*, p.245.

¹⁴ Vanessa Martin, *The Qajar Pact Bargaining, Protest and the State in Nineteenth Century Persia* (London: I.B. Tauris 2005), p.171.

¹⁵ Lovejoy, *History of Slavery*, p.142.

¹⁶ No. 21, 20 December 1850, FO 84/858.

¹⁷ Lovejoy, *History of Slavery*, 154; No. 21, 20 December 1850, FO 84/858. For further details of this trade see also Behnaz A. Mirzai, *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800-1929* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), p.54.

¹⁸ Johan Matthew, *Margins of the Market. Trafficking and Capitalism across the Arabian Sea* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), p.69.

¹⁹ Y. Hakan Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and its Demise 1800-1909* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 1996, p.99.

²⁰ No. 3, 8 April 1852, FO 85/886.

²¹ Erdem, *Slavery*, p.113.

²² 1 Nov. 1861, FO 84/1144.

²³ Indeed, slavery had a high degree of legitimacy in Ottoman society, which drew on the sanction of the shari'a, and long established social and religious practice.

²⁴ No. 5, 20 March 1862, FO 84/1180. In Massawa, under Ottoman control, the trade still prevailed, and as a protest, the British Consul there seized nine slaves from Abyssinia.

²⁵ William Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (London: Hurst and Company, 2006), p.229; R. Pankhurst, *Social History*, p.328.

²⁶ No. 1, 1 May 1877, FO 84/1482. In addition, Ottoman officials were taking stronger measures with the slave traders. In 1880, Nashid Pasha, the Ottoman Governor in Mecca, had

the slave markets in Mecca closed, seized and freed thirty slaves, and condemned their owners to one year's imprisonment. No. 2, 13 March 1880, FO 84/1571.

²⁷ Gareth Austin, 'Slavery in Africa 1804-1946' in David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman (eds), *Cambridge World History of Slavery*, Vol. 4, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017), p.192.

²⁸ No. 4, 27 April 1847, FO 84/692.

²⁹ According to one view 'the Qur'an places a high priority on manumitting slaves with the ultimate objective of abolishing slavery'. Chouki El-Hamel, *A History of Slavery, Race and Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.17, cited in Mirzai, *Slavery*, p.160. The text of the Quran on this point neither explicitly permits nor prohibits slavery but does enjoin the good treatment of slaves. See Surah 24 An-Nur verse 33.

³⁰ Robert Brunschvig, 'Abd', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition (Leiden, 1960), p.6.

³¹ Martin, *The Qajar Pact*, p.153.

³² For details of this trade see Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade* pp.27-36

³³ No. 421, 1 Sept. 1842 FO 84/426.

³⁴ These details are in a letter of 8 July 1842 from Karrak, in No. 54, 1 Sept. 1842, FO 84/426. The treatment of slaves on the voyage to Iran was severe but not cruel. They were scantily clad and given enough food to keep them alive. For more details of slave trade prices see Mirzai, *Slavery*, which, in particular, gives estimated prices of the slaves in tomans, on pp.66-67.

³⁵ No. 178, 14 May 1847, encl. dated 8 May, FO 248/129. British vessels now were permitted to stop and send to an Ottoman port all vessels carrying slaves under an Ottoman flag. Such vessels were to become the property of the Ottoman government.

³⁶ No. 11, 11 Jan. 1850, FO 248/138

³⁷ Erdem, *Slavery*, p.99. Following pressure from the British, the Ottoman government ordered the Vali of Baghdad to prohibit slave trade in the Gulf under the Ottoman flag. No. 131, 23 May 1853, FO 248/150.

³⁸ No. 37, 6 Nov. 1854, FO 84/949. Examples of two such children were a boy and a girl bought by a eunuch (on behalf of his master) at Kerbala. No.142, 11 April 1854, FO 84/157.

³⁹ No. 421, 1 September 1842, FO 84/426.

⁴⁰ Mirzai argues that Sufi influence, particularly in the person of the Prime Minister, Haji Mirza Aqasi, played a part in Mohammad Shah's agreement to prohibition. See Behnaz Mirzai, 'The 1848 abolitionist *farman*: a step towards ending the slave trade in Iran' in Gwynn Campbell (ed.), *Abolition and its Aftermath in the Indian Ocean, Africa and Asia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p.98.

⁴¹ No. 4, 7 June 1848, FO 84/737. The British had tried to obtain from a leading *mujtahid* in Najaf a prohibition of the slave trade, but he responded that slave ownership was recognized by custom practised since the establishment of Islam. He also added that abolition would deprive many people in the trade of their livelihood. No. 2, 15 January 1848 FO 84/737.

⁴² No. 2, 12 March 1897, FO 84/692.

⁴³ Encl. dated 19 June 1847 in No. 5, 27 June 1848, FO 84/737.

⁴⁴ According to Amir Kabir, who supported the initiative, one impediment was that the lack of slaves would, among other factors, cause inconvenience to the women of Iran, who were unaccustomed to servitude. No. 2, 7 Feb. 1851, FO 84/857.

⁴⁵ No. 10, 4 August 1851, FO 84/857. The vessel itself was to be delivered to the authorities in the Iranian ports, who would deal with the owner. In addition, the owners of slaves should procure for them a passport from the passport office in Bushehr for journeys abroad by sea.

⁴⁶ No. 239, 16 Aug. 1856 FO 248/168

⁴⁷ From Abyssinia, no number, 1 Nov. 1861, FO 84/1144.

⁴⁸ Letter of 9 Jan. 1861 Encl. in No. 1. Slave Trade from Cairo, 18 Jan 1861, FO 84/1144.

The matter had been brought to their attention by the British Consul General in Egypt.

⁴⁹ No. 1, Slave Trade, 18 Feb. 1861, FO 84/1144.

⁵⁰ From Stanley, 17 April 1861, FO 84/1144.

⁵¹ Slave Trade, No. 4, 7 Sept. 1861, FO 84/1144. A further nine Abyssinians were seized in March 1862. Slave Trade No. 1, 14 Mar. 1862, FO 84/1181.

⁵² No. 1, 1 May 1877, FO 84/1482. The slave traders ignored the new Ottoman regulations and the local authorities avoided enforcing them. No. 3, 20 May 1877, FO 84/1482.

⁵³ No. 152 1878 IOR/V/23/32, p.129.

⁵⁴ No. 54, 8 May 1877, FO 248/329 and summary of the facts in No. 288, 18 Dec. 1877 FO 248/342.

⁵⁵ There had in fact been a Slave Commissioner in Bushehr from 1861 to 1876, when he was recalled to Tehran ostensibly for inactivity, but really for financial reasons. Mirzai, *Slavery*, p.154.

⁵⁶ No. 54, 8 May 1877, FO 248/329.

⁵⁷ Mirza Zain al-‘Abidin demonstrated a robust attitude to the owners, by contrast with previous local officials. His view may in part reflect the modernising ideas introduced into the bureaucracy by Amir Kabir and other early Qajar reformers. See Shaul Bakhash, *Iran: Monarchy, Bureaucracy and Reform under the Qajars: 1858-1896* (London: Ithaca Press, 1978), pp.1-53.

⁵⁸ No. 70, 11 June 1877, FO 248/329.

⁵⁹ In other words, that the Iranian Passport office did not offer such a facility, which, at this stage of bureaucratic development in Bushehr, was probably true.

⁶⁰ No. 81, 4 July 1877 FO 248/329.

⁶¹ No. 288, 18 Dec. 1877, FO 248/342.

⁶² No. 288, 18 Dec. 1877, FO 248/342.

⁶³ Report in No. 81, 18 Dec. 1877, FO 248/342. This despatch gives the personal details of each of the slaves.

⁶⁴ Slaves were differently treated depending on whether they were *habashi* or *zangi*. For differences in slave treatment see Matthew, *Margins of the Market*, p.57.

⁶⁵ In the latter case, a slave was not liable to seizure according to the agreement with the Iranians in 1851. This slave was significant because the Iranian owner had demonstrably broken the law.

⁶⁶ No. 81, 18 Dec. 1877, FO 248/342, and No. 3, 5 January 1878 FO 248/342.

⁶⁷ According to the British Resident in Bushehr, three of the female slaves were very young, indeed described as childish and below the age of puberty. They did not speak Arabic, so were clearly imports. No. 98, 28 March 1877, FO 84/1482.

⁶⁸ The British Consul in Jeddah, reporting on the *Rokeby* case, stated that although the trade had been abolished by a proclamation of the Sultan in early 1877, the authorities in Jeddah treated it with indifference, and large shipments continued to arrive and depart. Therefore, he could not raise the issue in Jeddah itself as they would not support his case. No. 1 Jeddah, 16 February 1878, in FO 84/1510. He also observed that every steamer that left Basra had slaves on board, and one trick was to give them a paper saying they were servants, which was taken from them on arrival. However, the traffic in slaves had virtually ceased in Baghdad due to the British campaign. They were now so costly only the rich could afford them. No. 9 26 March 1877, FO 84/1510.

⁶⁹ No. 30, 16 Feb. 1878, FO 248/342. It is worth noting that, by contrast with their Agreement with the Ottomans, the British were permitted by the Agreement of 1851 with Iran to search ships whether in the open sea or in Iranian territorial waters, a sign of their position being stronger in dealing with the Iranian government than with the Ottomans.

⁷⁰ The British Vice-Consul in Basra supported the claim of Haji Khalil that Hasina was his wife and Wardah her servant, who had gone with him to Mecca, and were now returning, by sending an attestation (*istishad*) No. 143, 8 Oct. 1877, FO 84/1482. See also No. 95, 27 Nov. 1877, FO 84/1482.

⁷¹ Letter No. 143, dated 8 Oct. 1877, FO 248/342.

⁷² It is not known what happened to him, but he may have gone into service in Bushehr.

⁷³ No. 2, 3 January 1878, FO 248/342.

⁷⁴ No. 93 (Muscat), 7 March 1878, FO 248/342; No. 41 (Muscat), 13 March 1878, FO 248/342 and No. 32, 25 March 1878, FO 248/342.

⁷⁵ No. 3, 14 Jan. 1878, FO 248/ 342.

⁷⁶ No. 5, 17 Jan. 1878, FO 248/342 (continuation of same subject as No. 3,14 Jan. 1878).

⁷⁷ On this kind of treatment see Lovejoy, *Transformations*, pp.1-2. Once the slaves reached Iran they could still be sold on several times. Antony A. Lee, 'Enslaved African Women in Nineteenth century Iran: the Life of Fezzeh Khanom of Shiraz', *Iranian Studies*, 45, No. 3, p. 417-37; the article also provides an example of the slave's memory of being taken from her family and home town, *ibid.*, p.436.

⁷⁸ No. 5, 17 Jan. 1878, FO 248/342.

⁷⁹ No. 42, 15 March 1878, FO 248/342.

⁸⁰ Erdem, *Slavery*, pp.132-36 It should be noted that the Convention referred to the trade only. Slave trading and ownership continued to be legal within the Ottoman Empire.

⁸¹ No. 72, 13 February 1883, FO 248/402.

⁸² No. 72, 13 June 1883, FO 248/402.

⁸³ Erdem, *Slavery*, p.135.

⁸⁴ Mirzai, *Slavery*, p.155.

⁸⁵ No. 72, 13 June 1883, FO 248/402.

⁸⁶ Erdem, *Slavery*, pp.142-46. Iran also signed this Act. Mirzai, *Slavery*, p.156.

⁸⁷ No. 92, 4 August 1881, FO 248/381.

⁸⁸ No. 92, 4 August 1881, FO 248/81.

⁸⁹ No. 39, 19 Mar. 1883, FO 248/402.

⁹⁰ I have trawled every possible file in the FO 248 consular series in search of an example of slave importation along this particular part of the coast and found none from 1879 to 1890, where there had been many in the mid-nineteenth century.(See No. 373, 5 Dec. 1848, FO 248/138). The British were powerful along the northern Persian Gulf coast and in Bushehr because of their substantial presence there as part of the defence of the route to India. However, evidence for the southern Gulf and the Makran coast accords with Reilly's view that the British lacked success in their searches because of the difficulties of policing lengthy coastlines. See Benjamin J. Reilly, 'A Well-Intentioned Failure: British Anti-Slavery Measure and the Arabian Peninsular, 1820-1940', *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 5, No. 2 (2015), pp.91-115.

⁹¹ No. 82, 14 October 1889, FO 248/484.

⁹² No. 102, 6 December 1890, FO 28/502.

⁹³ No. 381, 3 Dec. 1890, FO 248/502.

⁹⁴ <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/91872>, Islamic Parliament Research Centre.