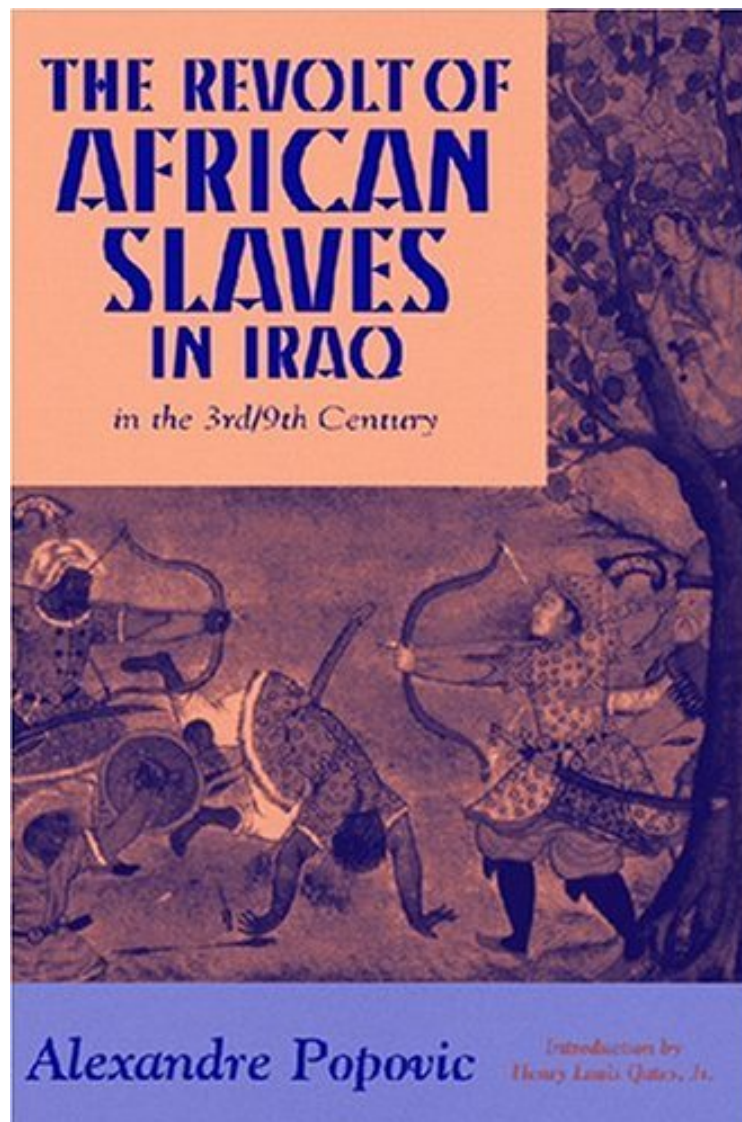


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## The Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq in the 3rd / 9th Century (Princeton Series on the Middle East)

*Alexandre Popovic*

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**Alexandre Popovic : The Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq in the 3rd / 9th Century (Princeton Series on the Middle East)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq in the 3rd / 9th Century (Princeton Series on the Middle East):

10 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Dull and UninterestingBy Tron HontoThe Zanj revolt is a

fascinating moment during the nadir of the Abbasid caliphate. The slave-revolt resulted in a state that eventually minted its own money and enslaved their former Arab master, but the extended revolt was also one that was the result of large number of extremely bloody massacres--mostly able to do so because the caliphate was too busy with the Saffarids to the East at the time. It's not a nice moment either in the history of central caliphate or in world history generally. The preface to the English translation states that comments deemed too scholarly were deleted, glosses for the non-specialist added, transliteration simplified, and references amended. However, the end result is an indecipherable, insipid transliteration system which the translator was often too lazy to at least anglicize (French differs greatly often from English transliteration of Arabic), useless bibliography and notes, and a stilted wooden translation. Honestly though, this is a mere frustrating technicality. The sole virtue of the book must be that it is the only one dedicated exclusively to the revolt of the Zanj in Southern Iraq. However, its analysis-free, anallistic, stream of consciousness narrative makes an extremely interesting topic vapid and bland. Insofar as it adds little to nothing to the Arabic sources, such as al-Tabari and al-Mas'udi, there is little reason to read this account rather than going straight to the sources. Both Tabari's *Annales* (in print) and Mas'udi's *Prairies of Gold* (not in print) are in English. I would only recommend this book if someone was possessed of an ambition to understand the revolt of the Zanj, not for example a general reader interested in the history of slavery generally or only with reservation for a person interested in the history of Islam and the slave-trade/revolts.

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Leaves a lot unsaid  
By studentofislamichistory  
Perhaps the main virtue of Popovic's work is that it remains the only significant scholarly study of its subject, the 9th-century revolt of Zanj slaves who worked in the marshlands of southern Iraq. Although the event played a key role in everything from the fall of the Abbasid caliphate to changes in trade routes throughout the Indian Ocean, historians have shied away from studying it because the only real source we have is the chronicle of al-Tabari. Popovic has collected the fragments of al-Tabari which touch upon the revolt, and sought to provide some analysis. However, it is sometimes difficult to see the basis of his conclusions, and there are many issues which he does not explore, such as a possible ethnic connection between the African troops of the caliph who joined the rebels and the Zanj themselves. He also tends not to touch the broader impact of the revolt mentioned above. The religious ideology of the movement also needs further scrutiny. Nonetheless, for a general reader interested in this little corner of history, Popovic can provide the details in a readily accessible form.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. reviews for *The Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq*  
By history buff". . . an extremely important book."-David Brion Davis, Yale University, author of *Slavery and Human Progress*  
BOOK REVIEW  
*Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq*  
The revolt of African slaves in Iraq, led by a certain 'Ali b. Muhammad, created turmoil in the heartland of the 'Abbasid caliphate for almost two decades (255-70/869-83). It was one of those rare events in medieval Islam in which genuine social and economic issues are detectable, with elements of class and race thrown in for good measure. This should make it of almost irresistible interest to modern historians; indeed, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his introduction to this volume compares the Zanj revolt, rather generously, to the insurrections of Spartacus and Toussaint L'Quverture (p. xi). This book was first published in French as *Rvolte des Esclaves en Iraq* (Paris, 1976). In it, Alexandre Popovic collected and judiciously evaluated all the extant source material on the revolt and surveyed its treatment in modern accounts. His account showed that the available evidence is far too meager and fragile to support grandiose world-historical theories about the Zanj revolt but, ironically, is extensive enough to bring out its many paradoxes, ambiguities, and shortcomings. It was a revolt by oppressed slaves who, once free, had few scruples about owning slaves themselves. The revolt initially had, but quickly transcended, an ethnic character (attracting peasants, Bedouin, and others). It was a vehicle of social struggle, but also of simple banditry and terrorism. It is uncertain whether the leader of the revolt, 'Ali b. Muhammad, was an Arab or a Persian and whether he infused the revolt with a Shi'ite or a Kharijite ideology or ideas of any other character. Furthermore, it is difficult to say whether the revolt was responsible for weakening the 'Abbasid caliphate, or was, itself, the outgrowth of the weakness of the caliphs and the unique circumstances of the 3rd/9th century. Although the revolt was radical and revolutionary, it seems to have lacked clear objectives and vision. As Popovic notes, it cannot be said to have affected the course of Islamic history or its social structure in any significant way (p. 154). Popovic's original study in French has been widely accepted as a standard study of the Zanj. The following review appeared in the July/August '99 issue of CHOICE: The Zanj revolt, centering around an uprising of East African slaves in the Tigris-Euphrates delta, lasted from 869 to 883 in and around Basra, and was one of the events that contributed to the late-9th-century crisis of the Abbasid caliphate. Its leader, Ali b. Muhammad, known as Sahib-I zanj ("Master of the Zanj"), claimed to be an Arab Alid from Rayy, but it is surmised that he was probably a Persian mawla (i.e., client) with a spurious genealogy reminiscent of that most celebrated clandestine agent, Abu Muslim. But why did the revolt drag on for so long? The government in Baghdad was caught unaware, at a time when the Tulunids in Egypt and the Saffarids in the east were virtually independent, the Shiite Carmathians were threatening Iraq itself, and al-Mutamid, the caliph when the revolt broke out, was a poltroon. Fortunately for Baghdad, his brother al-Muwaffaq and the latter's son, al-Mutadid, worked tirelessly and successfully to crush the uprising. Ali b. Muhammad was killed in the final battle; his head preceded al-Muwaffaq's triumphal entry into Baghdad. Basra, however, never recovered its former prosperity. First published in Paris in 1976, this is a monograph in the best tradition of French Islamic scholarship. Graduate, faculty. - G. R. G. Hambly, University of

The Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq in the III/IX Century is the only full-length study on the revolt of the Zanj. Scholars of slavery, the African diaspora and the Middle East have lauded Popovic's work. '

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About the Author  
Alexandre Popovic, Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Paris, is the author of numerous books, including *Les Voies d'Allah: Les ordres mystiques dans le monde musulman des origines aujour d'hui*.