

Algeria's Dahia al-Kahina

Algeria's warrior queen Dahia al-Kahina¹ lived during the latter half of the 7th century C.E., though reports are inconclusive about the dates of her birth, death and some of her famous accomplishments (Hirschberg 318). While she is commonly identified as being of the Jerawa or Jrawa² clan of Berbers like her father, Tabeta,³ Dahia's full ethnic makeup and alleged Judaic background are subject to different and sometimes conflicting historical analysis (Rodd 739). It is also widely believed that she married at least once and had two sons who, for a time, served in her army (Frawsen & Ukerdis 19-20, Hirschberg 338-339).

Much of Dahia's military operations were intended to halt the incursion of Egyptian Muslim forces, led by Hassan ibn Noman, into northern Africa (Hannoum 88, Rodd 736). Their first clash resulted in the resounding defeat of Hassan within a space of about five years, during which the Kahina pursued him eastward and further away from her homeland, killed one of his generals and conquered a huge domain that is estimated to have stretched from Tripoli to Tangiers (Hirschberg 318, Frawsen & Ukerdis 19, Rodd 741). Considering that Hassan's army was motivated by a string of recent victories, the Kahina's accomplishment was indeed monumental (Rodd 741).

Following this initial triumph, Dahia purportedly forgave her Arab assailants and released the prisoners she had captured from them, except one by the name of Khalid (or Khaled) (Hannoum 88, Rodd 742). During his capture, Khalid developed a personal relationship with Dahia that some historians have suspected to be more than cordial. Belonging to a religion and an ethnicity that raised suspicion within the Kahina's Berber forces, Khalid was undoubtedly under intense scrutiny. However, it is likely that the Kahina dismissed any concerns expressed about him by her followers (Rodd, 742). In the end, Khalid's repayment for her leniency, or perhaps affection, was treachery as he reestablished contact with Hassan. Though the Egyptian commander had retreated to the edges of Dahia's kingdom, he was still within striking distance of her army (Rodd 742, Hannoum 88).

¹ Also known as Dihya el Kahena or the Kahina/Kahena. Kahina means "soothsayer" or "prophetess" in Arabic.

² The Jerawa or Jrawa originated from the Aures mountain region in present-day eastern Algeria.

³ Also Tabat or Thabitah.

In the years following his defeat, Dahia knew that Hassan was regrouping his forces. He had sent for reinforcement from Egypt, the arrival of which would herald the beginning of a fresh attack. Aware that further conflict was inevitable, the Kahina embarked on a curious offensive against the region she controlled, which separated her army from the Arabs. By systematically destroying villages and burning crops, she hoped to slow Hassan's advance, but this strategy was widely unpopular among the Berbers under her command. As a result, the Kahina lost support for her leadership and was deserted by many of her soldiers (Hannoum 88, Rodd 744, Hirschberg 318).

After receiving long-awaited reinforcement from Egypt, Hassan set out again to do battle with Dahia. While she had been abandoned by a large number of her soldiers, more psychologically discouraging was the decision by her two sons to defect to the Egyptian army. There are two primary theories as to why and how this happened. One posits that the Kahina's sons joined Hassan's forces because of their mother's unpopular assault on Berber lands (Hirschberg 318). The other contends that the Kahina, foreseeing imminent defeat, instructed her sons to return Khalid to Hassan and to subsequently surrender to the Egyptian commander (Rodd 745). A twist to this second theory suggests that she met personally with Hassan after their final battle, at which time she entrusted her sons to him (Hannoum 88). While the exact chronology of this event is unclear, as are the precise reasons behind its occurrence, it remains an accepted, crucial and intriguing element in this narrative.

Dahia's decisive confrontation with Hassan took place in Thysdrus, a Roman coastal town at the eastern reaches of her territory. Fortifying the El Jem amphitheater, a structure similar to the Coliseum in Rome, the Kahina made her last stand at this location (Rodd 745). Betrayed as she was by Khalid, and deserted by many of her former followers, her resistance was weak and she was at last defeated by Hassan's forces. Even so, the Kahina was able to escape and flee 300 miles west to the Aures Mountains. It was here that she was finally apprehended and slain at a place now known as the Well of Kahina (Rodd 746).

Dahia continues to live on in the legends and history of northern Africa. She had, after all, vigorously defended her country against Islamic Arab invaders and achieved considerable success in this regard. She is not only remembered for her outstanding military maneuvers and unwavering courage, but for her success at uniting the many clans of the region—the

Ifriqiya,⁴ which she ruled after her first victory against Hassan in the late 7th century (Frawsen & Ukerdis 19).

But it is as a symbol of African resistance against foreign influence and occupation that the Kahina would secure her place in history. For this reason, she was embraced as a unifying figure in the creation of Algerian nationalism by anti-colonial activists during French colonial rule (1830-1962). Algerian and African pre-colonial history would therefore be incomplete without mention of Dahia al-Kahina. Besides her inspirational military successes, she is also significant in advancing the prominent role of women in African history.

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References & Further Reading

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⁴ Comprising the coastal lands of Tunisia, Libya and eastern Algeria.

