

The King of Kanem-Bornu

Leo Africanus, former Muslim jurist and diplomat to the Sultan of Morocco, captured by pirates and bought by Pope Leo, who convinced him to convert to Christianity, describes the kingdom of Kanem-Bornu (Africa) in 1526 from his *History and Description of Africa* about his travels

They have a most powerful prince. ... He has in readiness as many as three thousand horsemen and a huge number of foot soldiers; for all his subjects are so serviceable and obedient to him, that whenever he commands them, they will arm themselves and will follow him wherever he leads them. They pay him no tribute except tithes on their grain; neither does the king have any revenues to support his state except the spoils he gets from his enemies by frequent invasions and assaults. He is in a state of perpetual hostility with a certain people who live beyond the desert of Seu, who in times past marching with a huge army of footsoldiers over the said desert, devastated a great part of the Kingdom of Borno. Whereupon the king sent for the merchants of Barbary and ordered them to bring him a great store of horses: for in this country they exchange horses for slaves, and sometimes give fifteen or twenty slaves for a horse. And by this means there were a great many horses bought although the merchants were forced to stay for their slaves until the king returned home as a conqueror with a great number of captives, and satisfied his creditors for his horses. Frequently it happens that the merchants must stay three months before the king returned from the wars. ... Sometimes he does not bring home enough slaves to satisfy the merchants and sometimes they are forced to wait a whole year. ... And yet the king seems marvelously rich, because his spurs, bridles, platters, dishes, pots and other vessels are made of gold. The king is extremely covetous and would rather pay his debts in slaves rather than gold.

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