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Practices of Slavery

IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, in concert with the Christian conquest of Iberia and the rise of the Mongol Empire, something noteworthy happened to practices of slavery across Eurasia. Slavery itself, in its various forms, has been around for a long time, from at least the late Upper Paleolithic era. Surveying the Afro-Eurasian world in 1200, a phenomenon that most observers would be inclined to call slavery can be found in regions stretching from the Korean peninsula to the Iberian peninsula and across Africa and the Near East.[1] In the Western Mediterranean basin, the Castilian and Aragonese military expansion against the Almoravids and the Almohads in al-Andalus, beginning in the eleventh century, produced a steady stream of captives. In the thirteenth century, this stream grew significantly in volume, as the pace of conquest accelerated.[2]

Thousands of miles to the east, the Mongol expansion, which began around 1200, had an even more profound effect, altering slaving practices across the entire Eurasian landmass. The Mongol conquests enslaved countless folk, feeding the slaving networks that stretched across Eurasia.[3] As the realm grew, the structures characteristic of that vast empire accelerated communication and commercial exchanges, binding the center with its satellite polities into an amorphous whole. Many things moved with ease along the routes promoted during the Mongol peace: goods, diseases, information, and peoples from all walks of life. By the last quarter of the thirteenth century, a growing number of the peoples enslaved in the greater Black Sea region and the Eurasian steppes were being sent westward. Beyond Constantinople, the traffic forked south and west, feeding existing markets across the Mamluk Sultanate and Europe.[4]

On the European shores of the Western Mediterranean basin, the rhythms and patterns associated with practices of slavery are faithfully registered in the region's extensive archival record. These records act as a seismograph, capturing signals generated by perturbations in the broader human ecosystem. From the eleventh century, the rumbling noise generated by the capture and enslavement of Muslims in Iberia could be heard as a steady low hum, one that rose distinctly in pitch with the string of victories by Castilian and Aragonese forces

against their Almohad rivals in the early thirteenth century.[5] In 1239, as reverberations from the Aragonese conquest of Valencia a year earlier rippled across the Western Mediterranean basin, references to captive Muslims begin to appear in significant numbers in sources outside Iberia, notably in Genoa, whose archives are among the earliest and best preserved (figure 2).[6] The Christian conquest of Menorca in 1287, which led to the removal of the entire Muslim population and the enslavement of those unable to pay the redemption fee, had a similar effect.[7]

In the first half of the thirteenth century, the enslaved peoples who surface in European sources outside Iberia were typically Muslims who had been seized in al-Andalus. A strange new signal appears in 1233, the date marking the first known reference in Genoese sources to an enslaved woman from the greater Black Sea region.[8] The proportion of Black Sea slaves in Genoese records grows in the last quarter of the thirteenth century and becomes progressively stronger in the first half of the fourteenth.[9] It leaps in the decades after 1359, following the civil war that shattered the Golden Horde.[10] Thenceforth, the slaves passing through the hands of the Genoese and the Venetians came primarily from the Black Sea.

The ascendance of the eastern trade is marked even in Iberia. As conquest gave way to border skirmishes between Christian kingdoms and the Nasrid state in Granada, the source of captives dried up. But the demand for slaves in Iberia was not changed by the declining traffic in Mudejar slaves. As a result, after 1350, the proportion of Eastern slaves rose significantly in Iberia, as Tatars, Ruthenians, Russians, Greeks, and other easterners filled the market.[11] Everywhere, the traffic in slaves seized in the Black Sea region, Greece, and the Slavic lands reached its height in the early Timurid era, in the decades around 1400, before entering a phase of stasis and eventual decline later in the fifteenth century. Practices of slavery gained ugly new life in the sixteenth century: in Europe, with the rise of galley servitude and the growing enslavement of Black Africans in Spain and Italy; abroad, with the horrors that set in across the Atlantic Ocean.

Slavery is present as a potential in any human society.[12] Like degrading gender asymmetries, social hierarchies that generate injustice, violence practiced in the interest of power, all the poisonous forms of "us versus them" thinking, it is one of a host of scourges that can plague the human condition. In any moment or phase, that potential can be activated or deactivated to one degree or another, following logics that are particular to the circumstances of the day. Slavery is thus constantly being reinvented "in novel ways and to particular strategic ends," as Joseph Miller has put it.[13] When we spin out the implications of this perspective, it becomes meaningless to locate the "origins" or "roots" of medieval slavery in the practices of the ancient world. It is equally

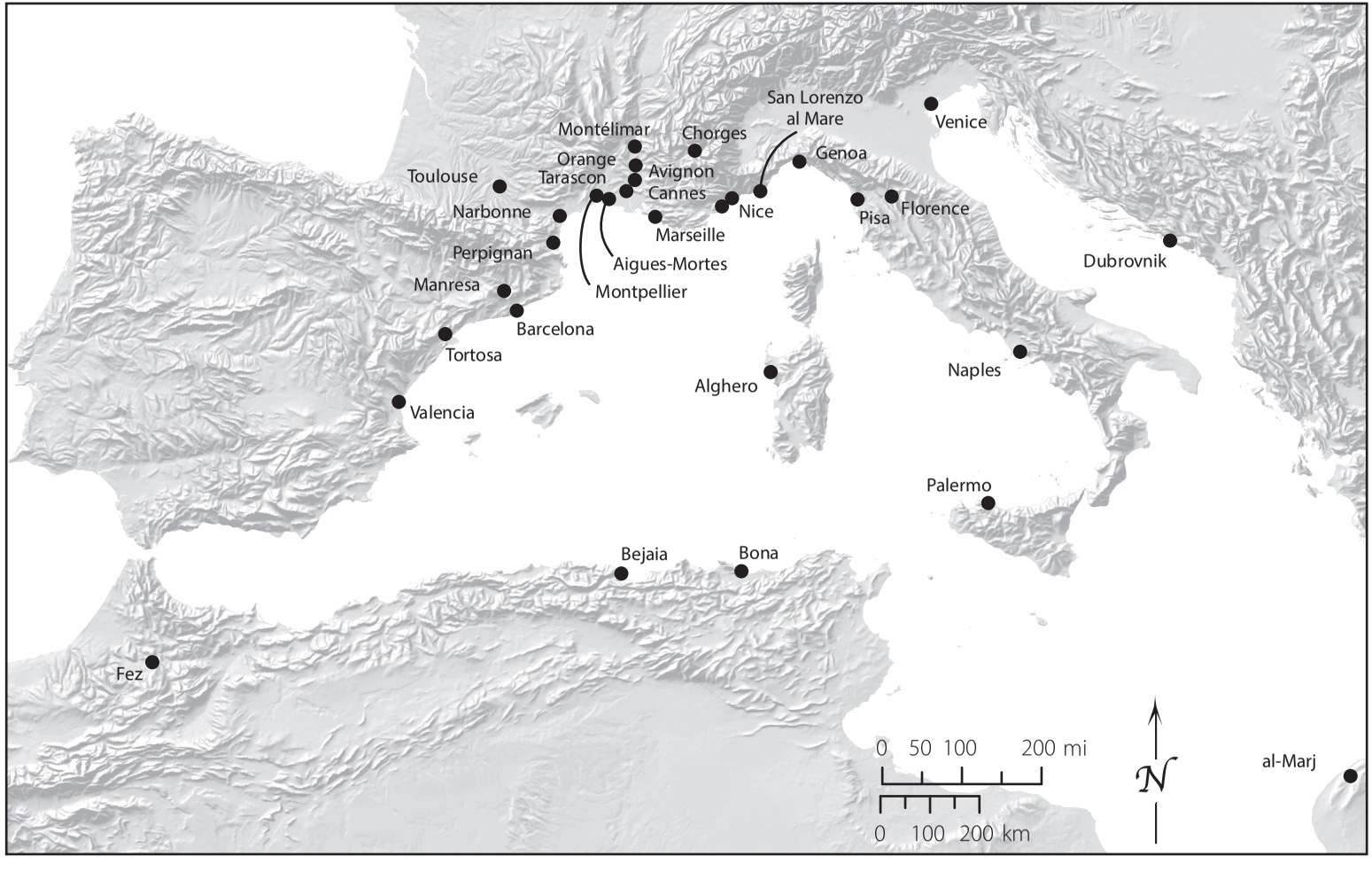

FIGURE 2. The Western Mediterranean basin, with places featured in the text. *Credit:* Scott Walker.

meaningless to imagine a handoff from medieval slavery to the systems of slavery practiced in the Atlantic and Indian oceans, the Ottoman world, Korea, China, and elsewhere in the early modern period. The persistence of certain elements associated with the practice of slavery, such as words, laws, and literary tropes, provides the illusion of continuity, deceiving observers into thinking that such tracing is possible and brings understanding. But it does not. In every world-historical configuration scarred by the practice of slavery, the practice itself is a constant reinvention, in much the same way that the ripples in a streambed, remade following episodes of spate and periods of drought, are unique in their particular configurations while broadly similar in form. Our duty, as historians, is to explore the variation. In so doing, it becomes possible to understand why the ripples ceaselessly return.

The forms of slavery practiced in Mediterranean Europe between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries merit our attention not because the region served as a waystation on the road passing from ancient slavery to the early modern Atlantic slave trade, but because study of the period helps us understand the protean nature of slavery. What the study reveals, again and again, are shifting trends and moving distributions rather than stable norms. To take a notable example, the principal geographical source of those enslaved in Europe gyrated like a weather vane from decade to decade, often in keeping with geopolitical events happening far away.

In Palermo, on the island of Sicily, the gyrations of the weather vane are particularly visible. Up to 1310, the population of enslaved people consisted predominantly of Spanish Mudejars and North African Muslims. Over the next half-century, the source shifted to Greece, before swiveling to the lands above the Black Sea, as enslaved people of Tatar origin filled the markets. By 1400, the provenance of slaves was turning once again: a plurality of the enslaved people, more than 35 percent, were Black Africans, trafficked across the desert by Muslim traders through Barqah, a site in the modern state of Libya. The proportion of Black Africans in the enslaved population rose to 43.7 percent after 1440.[14] Grosso modo, the patterns in Palermo describe trends across the Mediterranean, with significant variation from region to region. The distributions that track similar trends in gender ratios, prices, and ages are equally unstable, their centers shifting restlessly back and forth across the plot as they dance to the rhythm of time.

To attend to distributions rather than norms frees us from the need to issue *ex cathedra* statements that purport to isolate some inner essence or quality of a given practice. Practices of slavery in medieval Mediterranean Europe allowed for the assimilation of slaves—except when they did not. Attitudes toward the enslaved were generally not racist—except when they were. Most of the enslaved were women—except in the many regions where sex ratios

were more balanced. The tendency to search for norms obscures the fact that some of the most interesting phenomena are those that appear in the margins of the distribution, such as the anonymous woman, 28 years of age, who was described as "black" in a record from Marseille in 1359, a century before Black Africans became common in the city's records pertaining to slavery.[15]

The Topography of Servitude

The demographic data that have been generated in the many studies of Mediterranean slavery are fragmentary and highly skewed toward Latin Christendom. Even so, they are enough to give us a sense of the scale of the phenomenon. According to Monica Boni and Robert Delort, data available from Venice and Genoa suggest that each city was importing 2,000 slaves from the Black Sea region per year in the later medieval period, for a total of 4,000.[16] This figure aligns with an estimate proposed by Michel Balard, who used Genoese fiscal records from the Black Sea port of Caffa to suggest exports of slaves in the range of 3,200 per annum in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, though dropping to no more than 600 per year in the middle of the fifteenth century.[17] In the Iberian circuit, the population of enslaved people, formerly derived from Iberian Mudejars, gradually gave way to a population skewed toward Eastern slaves, many of whom were supplied by Venice and Genoa. But the enslavement of Muslims never ceased, and as the rise of Ottoman power began to restrict the Black Sea trade, growing numbers of enslaved men and women entered the Iberian circuit from sub-Saharan Africa and the Canary Islands. In the absence of hard data, it is plausible to suggest that the traffic in the Iberian circuit matched that of Venice and Genoa, and if so, the combined traffic across both circuits may have totaled 8,000 enslaved people per year.

Where the Byzantine, Ottoman, Mamluk, and Berber states are concerned, it's all guesswork. The sources point to the ubiquity of the practice. Shaun Marmon cites a proverb of the poet al-Ghuzuli that is relevant to this: "a slave is he who has no slaves."[18] In addition to military duties and domestic chores, slaves served as doormen, stable hands, and entertainers, and it appears as if most reasonably high-status households were well supplied with slaves. An observation by the Venetian trader Emmanuele Piloti suggests that the Mamluk sultan alone was purchasing 2,000 slaves per year, though undoubtedly this is exaggerated.[19] For the sake of having some numbers to think with, let us assume that the traffic in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa was at least as voluminous as that practiced in Latin Christendom. If so, we can hazard a guess that the total annual traffic across the Mediterranean basin and surrounding lands amounted to 16,000 enslaved people, bearing in mind the constant fluctuations from decade to decade.

It is helpful to compare this to later centuries. For Europe between 1500 and 1650, primarily in the Iberian and Italian peninsulas, Salvatore Bono has proposed an annual traffic of 15,000 African and Turko-Arabic captives, declining to 2,500 per year until 1700 and then 1,500 per year across the eighteenth century.[20] At the height of the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century, by contrast, the annual trade in African captives ranged from 36,000 to 80,000, sometimes spiking to over 100,000. As the comparison reveals, the volume of the slave trade in the medieval and early modern Mediterranean, judging by the present state of knowledge, was distinctly smaller. But as noted earlier, the Mediterranean was one sector in a larger system that stretched across Afro-Eurasia and the Indian Ocean, the size and scope of which are currently unknown, especially for the medieval period.

If we were somehow able to represent the topography of Afro-Eurasian slavery in the form of a heat map displaying the variable density of enslaved populations, the corner of the map that depicts western Mediterranean Europe would appear as a dappled canvas of hot spots and cool zones, with the intensity of the shading waxing and waning over the years and decades. Down south, in Sicily and southern Italy, the colors would be warm. A similar tint would extend across the Balearic islands, Catalonia, and Valencia.[21] In Barcelona, around the year 1424, slaves comprised 10–18 percent of the population; in Palermo, the figure may have been as high as 12 percent, and in Mallorca, possibly as much as 16–19 percent in the last quarter of the fourteenth century.[22] Nowhere was the distinction between slavery and freedom a cornerstone of the social order, two sides of an indivisible coin where each constituted the other.[23] Even so, slavery was an active presence in the warm zones of the map, enough to have generated one of those complex things described by Émile Durkheim: a social fact, omnipresent to the mind, defined not so much by law or by material signs as by a shared set of norms and expectations embedded in bodily comportments, patterns of speech, and habits of thought.

Further north, on our theoretical heat map, the tints applied to cities such as Genoa and Perpignan are markedly less saturated. At the outset of the fifteenth century, the enslaved population in Genoa, the northern Italian city with the highest enslaved population, hovered around 2,000 and declined rapidly to around 800 after 1450. Since Genoa's population ranged between 50,000 and 80,000, this suggests an enslaved population between 2.4 and 4.1 percent.[24] For Perpignan, Élodie Capet has assembled some 530 slave sales and related notarial acts between 1350 and 1500. These represent but a fraction of the slaves in the city, and the percentages there are probably similar to those found in Genoa.[25] The map would be tinged by ever-cooler tones as one moves both north and inland. The enslaved populations of Florence and Pisa barely reached 1 percent, a figure that likewise holds for the Catalan town of Manresa

in 1408.[26] Along the coast of French Languedoc and Angevin Provence, enslaved people appear in proportions so small that it is impossible, in our current state of knowledge, to come up with an estimate. Beyond that zone, slaves, or at least those named *sclave* or *sclavi* or similar words to distinguish them from serfs, disappear entirely.

Interesting questions arise when we approach the topographical variation as a question to be explained. To speak of "Mediterranean slavery," after all, is to flatten out the striking variation between the many zones. The variation has not gone unexamined in the scholarly literature. The prominent role played by Genoese and Venetian merchants and slave traders, for example, helps explain why those cities had more slaves than, say, Pisa or Lucca. The presence of Mudejars, coupled with the omnipresent fear of capture and enslavement by Muslim corsairs, may help explain why slavery was so robust in the Crown of Aragon and Sicily. These and other factors combined in complex ways to create the dynamic relief of Mediterranean slavery.

Zooming back, a wide-angle view of Europe as a whole reveals something equally important. Stretching across the entire north, from Iceland and Scandinavia to the British Isles and the societies of the Great European Plain stretching across France and Germany and beyond, the map reveals zones that were growing cooler even as the Mediterranean was warming up. The societies of the north had abounded in slaves in the centuries following the Iron Age. Enslaved people show up in early medieval texts ranging from laws and annals to saints' lives and sagas and also, dimly, in the archaeological and genetic record. As Michael McCormick has shown, the slaves exported to the Islamic world constituted a significant proportion of the merchandise that circulated in the early medieval European economy.[27] Yet slavery, as distinct from bonded labor, faded dramatically everywhere across northern Europe. Though there remains significant debate about the timing, pace, and the causal factors involved, the overall trend is well known, and scholars tend to agree that slavery waned in England, northern France, and Germany in the eleventh century.[28] In Scandinavia, the trajectories were different, and in Russia, even more so.[29] Nowhere in Northwest Europe, though, do we find the growth trajectory that defines practices of slavery in the Mediterranean. Even as Mediterranean regions were undertaking a pivot toward the new system of commercialized slavery, the lands in the north charted a different course.

Between them lay a broad borderland, a zone where the social fact of slavery was an ambiguous or uncertain thing. In the later Middle Ages, the borderland ran straight through Languedoc and Provence. At present, we have only a limited idea about where that border ran, how or when it oscillated, and what it meant to the men and women of the region, in part because the ongoing presence of slavery on French soil has been somewhat neglected as a

subject of historical inquiry. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Provence, we can find slave owners in cities and towns as far north as Avignon. But that is where it ends. Reportedly, no slaves have been found in the records of Orange, a small city north of Avignon. Slaves are equally unknown in the records of Lyon, to date.[30] Further research in the region's archives will make it possible to define the contours of the borderland with greater precision than we have now.

In certain regions of the postmedieval world, it is possible to draw a line on a map and declare that slavery existed on one side of that line and not on the other. That is because the postmedieval world is a world of states with defined borders and sets of positive laws that distinguish citizens from strangers and the free from the enslaved. In the case of slavery in the nineteenth-century United States, the Mason-Dixon line served this function. In the fourteenth century, a border possessing a similar cartographic exactitude appears to have separated the Crown of Aragon from the Kingdom of France. Slaves making a bid for their freedom certainly thought so, as attested by the angry letters sent by Aragonese magistrates to French officials in Toulouse demanding the return of fugitive slaves.[31] But there was no such line to be found in greater Provence. The utility of the topographical metaphor lies in the way that it can suggest how a society with slaves, generally hugging the Mediterranean coastline and stretching up the Rhone valley, gave way imperceptibly to a society where slavery was a foreign practice.

As Orlando Patterson has pointed out, it is essential to attend to the places on the map where slavery did not attain structural significance.[32] The very existence of the borderland creates its own set of research questions. Among other things, it provides a setting in which we can ask whether the topography of the fact of slavery mirrored a similar topography in the social fact of slavery.

Slavery and Gender

The topographical variations of slavery can be measured not only in terms of proportion but also in terms of gender. Up to the eleventh or twelfth century, gender differences in slavery were not marked, since conflicts and raids along the frontier between Christian and Muslim states in Iberia, Southern Italy, and Sicily led to the enslavement of women and men in roughly equal proportions.[33] Enslaved men were especially prevalent among those reduced to slavery by Aragonese and Castilian aggressions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. By the later thirteenth century, however, a significant gender imbalance begins to appear in the Italian circuit. Hundreds of references to slaves in notarial registers from Genoa between 1239 and 1300 demonstrate that women constituted 61–64 percent of the slaves.[34] Around the same time, in Dubrovnik, on the Dalmatian coast, it was even higher, at 89 percent.[35]

According to the sample gathered by Henri Bresc, Palermo was marked by distinctive fluctuations in gender ratios. Around 1300, when the traffic was still tilting west and south, to the Muslim world, women predominated, constituting 64 percent of those appearing in slave sales. Between 1310 and 1359, Bresc describes a phase dominated by slaves of Greek origin. During this phase, the proportion of women sold in Palermo dropped to 45.5 percent. As is true elsewhere in Europe, a new phase featuring Tatar slaves was inaugurated in 1360, and the proportion of women rose again, to 61 percent.[36] Elsewhere in the Italian circuit, the growing gender imbalance across the fourteenth century is even more visible. In Florence, data from the *Registro degli schiavi* from the years 1366 to 1368 show that 203 of the 222 slaves registered were women, that is, more than 90 percent. The catasto of 1427–1428 shows an even higher proportion, 98.4 percent.[37] In Genoa across the fifteenth century, 86 percent of the slaves were female, with the percentage rising from 72 percent in 1413 to over 97 percent in 1458.[38]

One explanation that has been offered for the growing proportion of enslaved women lies in the growing demand for domestic labor in patrician households.[39] Most of that demand was met by young women who immigrated from the countryside and entered domestic service. As Dennis Romano has shown for Venice, however, the labor of enslaved women also contributed to satisfying the demand.[40] In Genoa and Florence, it is common to find households with one or just a few female slaves, often providing domestic labor alongside free women.

Across the Mediterranean zones of Latin Christendom, the comparative data collected by Charles Verlinden and Sally McKee suggested that sales of female slaves in Christian sources were four times more common than sales of male slaves.[41] In the scholarly literature, an understanding that later medieval slavery was largely feminine in nature has been accepted since the mid-nineteenth century.[42] These data, however, were collected in the period largely before the historical community had fully appreciated the massive evidence available in Aragonese archives. Thirteenth-century charters from Barcelona indicate that women, making up 57 percent of the enslaved population, were only slightly more numerous than enslaved men.[43] The balanced gender ratio persists through the next two centuries. In fifteenth-century Valencia, according to Debra Blumenthal, men and women were equally represented among the slave population.[44]

Male slavery, in short, was a robust and important component of the Mediterranean slave system, and enslaved men become increasingly more prevalent in the sources as the observer moves west and south, from the northern Italian to the Iberian and Sicilian circuits. The topography of male slavery is interesting partly for what it says about labor. Although male slaves in al-Andalus and

elsewhere in the Muslim world often served as domestic servants or soldiers, in Christian Iberia many of them also performed manual labor of a sort that would have been familiar in the ancient world and the early modern Atlantic, such as working in the mines, chopping wood to feed the furnaces, laboring in the agricultural sector, working in the coral trade, and even performing a service as trumpeters.[45] We find labor of the male slave-gang type elsewhere in the Mediterranean. Philippe Bernardi cites a dramatic example involving one of the towers of the papal palace in Avignon whose foundations were set in place in 1341 through the labor of twenty male "Saracen" slaves, a gift from Alphonse of Castile to the pope.[46] In southern Italy, male slaves, including slaves from sub-Saharan Africa, continued to be used in the agricultural sector in the later Middle Ages.[47]

There was a noticeable divergence in the point of origin of female and male slaves, especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The fact that ethnic labels were routinely attached to slaves at the point of sale has been a matter of some interest for historians since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, as these labels appear to make it possible to describe the swirling currents of the later medieval trade.[48] The need for labeling arose from the fact that not everyone could be legitimately enslaved; hence the ethnic labels served to guarantee the fact that the captive had been lawfully enslaved.[49] As Hannah Barker has astutely pointed out, though, the important legal function of ethnic labels means that we should doubt the literal accuracy of any given label, since raiders and traders had an incentive to lie.[50] Bearing this caveat in mind, we should use ethnic labels cautiously, assuming no more than an approximate accuracy.

As noted above, most of the enslaved women from the late thirteenth century onward were of Eastern origin, having been kidnapped and enslaved in the region of the Black Sea. The enslaved men, by contrast, continued to come largely from al-Andalus, the Maghrib, and, from the fifteenth century onward, from sub-Saharan and Western Africa. In Palermo in the period 1440–1460, the percentage of enslaved men described as "black" was strikingly high, 71 percent, a trend matched in Barcelona a few decades later.[51] Bresc reports an ominous correlate to this trend: a pathetically reduced number of manumissions given to Black slaves. Mediterranean slavery, in short, was becoming racialized along gender lines, with cascading social consequences for the enslaved people.

Running through the literature on practices of slavery in Mediterranean Europe is a tension between scholars who emphasize the labor performed by enslaved people and those who focus on the prestige and even the power that could be derived from the ownership of slaves. The tension between slavery perceived either as an economic institution or a social one is characteristic of the broader field. The dispute is based on the reductionist assumption that

slavery needs to be "explained" primarily in terms of a single factor, where the other is rendered as subsidiary. This is not helpful. Among other things, there is nothing more prestigious than the spectacle of having others do work for you. For some analytical purposes, it may be legitimate to distinguish between the work demanded of laboring slaves and the symbolic performance that a slave offers simply by being. But it is essential to flip everything around and look at it from the perspective of the enslaved, for whom these distinctions made little difference. Here, what is interesting from the perspective of gender is the fact that both male and female slave owners derived prestige from the presence of slaves. Dowry contracts make it clear that some high-status women expected to acquire domestic slaves as part of their passage into married life. Navigating the streets, as Nevan Budak has pointed out, a woman would carefully position her slaves around her, with the slaves preceding the cortege in Italy and trailing it in Dubrovnik.[52]

A Marginal Phenomenon?

During the 1930s, in the shadows of war, the great historian Marc Bloch set to work on his magnum opus *La société féodale*. Ever curious, Bloch became intrigued by the question of how and why ancient slavery had come to an end in Europe, since it had a bearing on the question of serfdom. He drafted a paper setting out some of his preliminary thoughts on the matter. Bloch was killed by the Nazis before he had a chance to consider it further, but the manuscript was discovered among his papers after the war and published in the journal *Annales* in 1947.[53] The trajectory, as it appeared at the time to Bloch, was stark and simple. The ancient world of Rome had been full of slaves, and practices of slavery persisted well into the Germanic era of the early Middle Ages. Yet modern Europe no longer tolerated slavery on its own soil, with some rare exceptions. To Bloch, this was a remarkable transformation, which he described as one of the greatest that humanity had ever experienced. How was one to explain such a monumental shift?

With the benefit of hindsight, Bloch's rendering of the history of slavery seems curiously inattentive to things that had taken place beyond European soil in the early modern era. Yet where medieval scholarship is concerned, his description of the medieval transformation had a galvanizing effect on the field. In 1985, writing an homage to Bloch, Pierre Bonnassie surveyed the abundant scholarship on the passage from slavery to serfdom that had developed over the previous four decades. The literature, unsurprisingly, was characterized by profound disagreements among scholars concerning the causes of the transformation. Yet there was general agreement about the timing, for most participants in the debate agreed that ancient slavery was well and truly gone

by the onset of the feudal era, in the eleventh century, if not earlier. Bonnassie himself located the extinction in the turn from the tenth to the eleventh century.[54]

To anyone who sought to describe the decline and fall of Roman slavery, the massive evidence collected and published by Charles Verlinden between 1955 and 1977 was more than a troublesome anomaly, for it threatened to undermine the beating heart of the argument, namely, that ancient slavery had collapsed under the weight of its own inefficiency as a form of labor mobilization. Juliane Schiel and Stefan Hanß describe an additional mental obstacle in this way: "How could slavery be part of what is thought to be the cradle of today's Europe?"[55] It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Bonnassie dismissed the slavery of the later Middle Ages as "a marginal phenomenon which really only affected the large Mediterranean ports."[56] The phrase aptly summed up the widespread indifference to Verlinden's findings that characterized much of the field at the time. Some of the indifference came from scholars, like Bonnassie, who were ideologically committed to the extinction narrative. But resistance also came from historians who were committed to an equally powerful though rather different narrative, one that insisted upon rupture. In a widely cited 1995 article, Robin Blackburn, like Bonnassie, insisted upon the decline or withering of ancient slavery, but he did so in order to emphasize the gruesome novelties of New World slavery: starkly racial, capitalist, consumer oriented—in effect, utterly without precedent.[57] In Blackburn's model, it was necessary to treat the forms of slavery practiced in the medieval Mediterranean as insignificant.

The understanding of Mediterranean slavery as a marginal phenomenon has generated a certain amount of resentment among those who study it. Reading the recent literature, you will find any number of variations on the statement recently made by Ivan Armenteros and Mohamed Ouerfelli:

> Slavery in the medieval and early modern Mediterranean is often considered to have been a marginal phenomenon, not comparable to the deportation of millions of African slaves toward the Americas. In effect, it has been asserted that both before and after the blooming of the traffic in black slaves and its impact on colonial America, slavery in the Mediterranean was limited to the importation of a small number of men and women destined primarily for household tasks and, along with this, had a limited capacity to affect the structures of production that made use of enslaved labor. One finds this image repeatedly in the historiography.[58]

No one has any desire to claim relevance for a subject by claiming equivalence in pain and ugliness. What matters, then, is not so much whether the practices of slavery in the Mediterranean were objectively as gruesome as

those characteristic of Atlantic and Indian Ocean slavery and Ottoman slavery from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century. What is interesting is why some scholars used to find it necessary to trivialize it in the first place.

Two different arguments stand out. The first of these, as noted by Armenteros and Ouerfelli, is the economic relevance of slave labor. This lies behind a central aspect of Bonnassie's argument. Ancient slavery, he claimed, was a mode of production, built into the economic fabric of ancient society, and lasting, according to Kyle Harper, through the long fourth century.[59] Medieval slavery, by contrast, was artisanal and domestic, and therefore epiphenomenal, since it supplied labor that could easily be supplied by existing labor channels. Several historians have been inclined to rebut Bonnassie and others who argue for the economic insignificance of Mediterranean slavery by claiming that slave labor mattered to the growth of the European economy.[60]

These interventions are well intentioned. Even so, by virtue of accepting Bonnassie's implicit measure of labor value, they obscure the fundamental problem with his argument, a problem so glaring that it hardly needs rebuttal. From the 1970s, following the pathbreaking work of Ester Boserup, a great deal of effort has been put into measuring both the value and the volume of unpaid women's labor. What this literature has shown is that what is often dismissed as "women's work" is itself a form of labor, even though it is largely invisible to metrics such as GDP.[61] Beyond that, enslaved women suffered from rape and other forms of sexual exploitation that can be theorized as labor. Enslaved women who gave birth to their masters' children were sometimes sold abroad so that the children could be raised in their fathers' houses without the embarrassing presence of their mothers.[62] A clearer instance of coerced reproductive labor is difficult to imagine.

Second, Mediterranean slavery is sometimes dismissed as a kind and gentle form of slavery by comparison to its ancient and Atlantic counterparts. Some of the most abundant evidence for late medieval slavery, paradoxically, resides in the ubiquitous acts of manumission. These acts take the form of contracts of manumission as well as testamentary manumissions. Manumissions were not quite what they appear at first glance, since they often came with strings attached. But even so, the practice points to the existence of what Alan Watson has described as an "open slave society," and the rate at which manumission was practiced suggests that the phenomenon was normal enough.[63] The manumission of women, in turn, was often associated with coerced sexual and reproductive labor, since women who bore their enslavers' children were sometimes eligible for manumission. This brings us back to the prominence of enslaved women in Mediterranean Europe. Here, the literature at times takes on a lurid quality, suggesting how masters sometimes fell in love with their enslaved concubines. The unstated implication is that well-treated slaves

were content in their subjection and happy to wait until their masters deigned to free them. The point here is not to deny that some masters may have felt affection for their enslaved concubines. The point is that no one ever thought to ask the women what they thought about any of it. Debra Blumenthal's vivid description of the anger and frustration experienced by a formerly enslaved woman whose enslaver, the father of her children, sent her love letters, provides a reminder of the importance of attending to both sides of the question.[64]

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that medieval Mediterranean slavery was trivialized because the enslavement of women was somehow seen as less violating than the enslavement of men. As recent scholarship on the lives of enslaved women in the Black Atlantic has painfully demonstrated, this is no longer a stance that needs rebutting.[65]

Slavery as a Social Fact

The postulated existence of a borderland running along the edges of Mediterranean slavery and passing through southern France invites some of the most important questions asked in this book. First, how did men and women in the borderlands construe the social category of slave? How did they recognize and treat the slaves among them, and how did they interact with former slaves following manumission? Second, to what degree did practices of slavery depend upon the assent of the community? Was slavery embedded in Provençal society, treated as a normal or ordinary thing, or was it instead understood as an alien practice?

Lying behind these questions is an important premise, namely, that much is missed if we approach slavery only as a system of laws and transactions. As argued earlier, it is also a cultural or social system embodied in attitudes, gestures, comportments, and dispositions.[66] Unsurprisingly, the sources pertaining to Mediterranean slavery have little to say about the cultural understandings of slavery. As noted earlier, in the slave sales, manumissions, and fiscal accounts that constitute the bulk of our evidence, enslaved men and women appear as little more than representations or legal abstractions. But it is important to think very carefully about what these documents are telling us. The sources upon which we rely were once living elements of the worlds that generated them. The very processes that brought them into being contributed to the social fact of slavery. Contracts and records, in other words, do more than merely reflect a status quo. They were also an instrumental part of how slavery was created and known. In every act we have before us, therefore, we need to be alert to the presence of the members of the community who, though silently off-stage, are actively participating in the systems of classification and objectification upon which slavery depends.

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