

Slavery in the Medieval Mediterranean Readings

*Please note that some of these readings may be inappropriate for some readers. Please read through the sources to determine if they align with your course standards and the learning expectations of your school community.

READING # 1

Source: Whitfield, Susan. "Slaves on the Silk Road." Silk Road Digressions, 18 June 2018, <https://silkroaddigressions.com/2018/06/18/slaves-on-the-silk-road/><https://silkroaddigressions.com/2018/06/18/slaves-on-the-silk-road/>. Accessed 17 September 2022.

Directions: As you read the following passage, highlight 2-3 quotes that stood out to you. Be prepared to share out why the passages stood out to you with your classmates,

Slaves, like silks, were Silk Road goods to be bought, used, and sold for profit, and often transported long distances by land and sea to trade in foreign markets. While no slaves from this time survive to tell their stories, they have left traces in art, archaeology, and texts.[1] From these, we can see that slavery was found throughout the Silk Road, not particular to any culture, place, or period. Its importance to the Silk Road economy probably rivaled silk, horses, or other goods. Yet slaves rarely have a central, if any, role in the Silk Road histories that are told today.

In my book, *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas: Material Culture of the Silk Road*, I use these traces to tell something of the stories of slaves across the Silk Road. Like the other chapters, it addresses the issues of how and why — although the when and where are hardly relevant since, as the *Macmillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery* has noted: 'With the exception of marriage, the family and religion, slavery is perhaps the most ubiquitous social institution in human history.' (Finkelman and Miller 1998: viii)

Slave markets were found across the whole of the Silk Road, from Dublin on the shores of the Atlantic to Shandong on the Pacific. And while much of the trade was by private merchants, governments also profited by imposing taxes both on the movement and on the sale of slaves. As with many other 'things' traded along the Silk Road, there was both local and regional trade, as well as trade over long distances.

Dublin, for example, probably the largest slave market in western Europe, was convenient for the Irish, Vikings, and others who had seized captives in raids and battles. Shandong, in eastern China, was specifically for selling slaves captured from the Korean peninsula. But one of the most extensive trading networks, certainly by the ninth and tenth centuries, was that in Slavs, captured by the Rus in northern Europe and sold at the capital of the Bulgars, Bulgar, and the capital of Khazars, Khamlij (Atil). Ibn Faḍlān visited Khamlij in 922 and wrote:

'I saw the Rusiya when they came hither on their trading voyages and had encamped by the river Itil. . . . With them, there are fair maidens who are destined for sale to the merchant, and they may have intercourse with their girl while their comrades look on. . . . When their boats arrive to come to this anchorage, each one of them goes ashore. . . and prostrates himself before [the great image], Then he says: "Oh my lord, I have come from a far country and have with me so many slave girls for such a price

and so many sable skins. . . I wish that thou shouldst provide me with a merchant who has many dinars and dirhams and who would buy from me at the price I desire.' (Ibn Faḍlan 2005: 63–65)

Marek Jankowiak argues that by the ninth and tenth centuries, there was another distinct system also dealing in Slav slaves. Jewish merchants bought slaves at the market in Prague for sale to the Spanish, making payment, he argues, in small pieces of cloth that had an exchange rate for silver. He cites the travelogue of Ibrahim ibn Ya'qub, a merchant from Tortosa, who noted the trade when he traveled to Prague in the 960s. He also cites Ibn Ḥawqal, who writes on Saqaliba—the land of the Slavs:

'The country [of the Saqaliba] is long and wide. . . . Half of their country . . . is raided by the Khurasanis [Khorezm] who take prisoners from it, while its northern half is raided by the Andalusians who buy them in Galicia, in France, in Lombardy and in Calabria so as to make them eunuchs, and thereafter they ferry them over to Egypt and Africa. All the Saqaliba eunuchs in the world come from Andalusia. . . . They are castrated near this country. The operation is performed by Jewish merchants.'(Jankowiak 2012: n.1)

Ibn Khurradādhbih (ca. 820–912) records a wider network, extending from western Europe through to Africa, Arabia, India, and China, run by Jewish merchants whom he refers to as Radhanites. It is worth quoting in full as one of the few detailed and extant itineraries:

'These merchants speak Arabic, Persian, Greek, Latin, Frankish, Andalusian, and Slavic. They journey from west to east, from east to west, traveling by land and by sea. From the west, they export eunuchs, young girls and boys, brocade, beaver pelts, marten and other furs, and also swords.

They set sail from Firanj [France] on the western sea and then head for Farama [Pelusium] in Egypt. There they transfer their merchandise to the backs of camels and travel to Qulzum [Clysma, Suez] on the Red Sea, a distance of 25 farsakhs. They sail down the Red Sea to al-Jar, the port of Medina, and to Jeddah, the port of Mecca. Then they continue on to Sindh, India, and China.

They return from China with musk, aloe wood, camphor, cinnamon, and other eastern products, docking again at Qulzum, then proceed to Farama, from where they again set sail on the western sea. . . . These different journeys can also be made by land. The merchants that start from Spain or France go to Sus al-Aksa [near Tangier] and then to Tangier, whence they walk to Kairouan and the capital of Egypt. Thence they go to ar-Ramiah, visit Damascus, al-Kufa, Baghdad, and al-Basra, cross Ahvaz, Fars, Kerman, Sindh, and Hind, and arrive in China.

Sometimes, also, they take the route behind Rome and, passing through the country of the Slavs, arrive at Khamlij, the capital of the Khazars. They embark on the Jorjan Sea [Caspian], arrive at Balkh, betake themselves from there across the Oxus, and continue their journey toward Yurt, Toghuzghuz [Turkic lands in Central Asia], and from there to China.' (Adler 1987: 2–3)

It was not only the merchants who profited from the slaves: the governments of the lands they passed through or ports of embarkation and the markets they sold at often imposed taxes or monopolies. For example, although there was a slave market at Constantinople—in the Valley of the Lamentations—several contemporary sources note that merchants often avoided it because of the high taxes and that ships docked instead at Antioch (Rotman and Todd 2009: 68–80).

In eighth-century Khanfu (present-day Guangzhou in southern China), all goods coming into the port were controlled by the government office of ‘the commissioner for commercial argosies’, which purchased all imports desired by the government (Schafer 1963: 23).

Turkic male slaves for the caliphate’s army were taken from the borders of the steppe in Central Asia to Nishapur, which sent thousands of slaves westward to Baghdad each year (Starr 2013: 197). Male slaves could be transported across the Amu Darya only with a government-issued license, costing from seventy to one hundred dirhams (Barthold 1968: 239).

Where are the systems of slavery in this reading?	Why are people enslaved?	What questions do you have?

READING # 2

Directions: As you read the passage, identify 2-3 main arguments from the excerpts.

Excerpt 1

Source: Barker, Hannah. *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260-1500*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022.

“Even at its height during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the Black Sea slave trade was never the sole source of Mediterranean slaves. Genoese and Venetian merchants bought the captives taken in conflicts throughout the Mediterranean region. The Genoese bought slaves from ongoing wars between Christian and Muslim kingdoms in Iberia, and they also enslaved Sardinians caught up Genoa’s war with Pisa. The Venetians bought slaves from pirates and raiders in the Balkans and the Aegean Sea. Both Genoa and Venice enslaved captives taken from North Africa and the Ottomans. When allowed to do so, they also purchased African slaves in Alexandria, Tunis, and other North African ports. However, the greatest demand for slaves in the medieval Mediterranean was concentrated not in Italy but in Cairo, home of the Mamluk sultan and his amirs, the commanders of his army. The Mamluks preferred Black Sea slaves for military service, but they also imported large numbers of African slaves for domestic service as well as slaves from the Balkans, the Aegean, Central Asia, and the Indian Ocean when they were available. Yet within this diverse population of slaves, those from the Black Sea were the single largest group. The trade in Black Sea slaves provided merchants with profit and prestige; states with military recruits, tax revenue, and diplomatic influence; and households with the service of enslaved women and men. (7)”

Excerpt 2

Source: Barker, Hannah. *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260-1500*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022.

“Christians and Muslims shared three fundamental assumptions about slavery in addition to its place at the bottom of the human hierarchy: that it was legal, that it was based on religious difference, and that it was a universal threat. These assumptions formed the core of a common culture of slavery in the late medieval Mediterranean. All free adults knew that they could legally purchase a slave. **They expected the slaves available for sale to come from religious backgrounds different than their own.** At the same time, they were aware that they themselves could become enslaved if captured by pirates or raiders in the wrong place at the wrong time. (15)”

Where are the systems of slavery in this reading?	Why are people enslaved?	What questions do you have?

READING # 3

Directions: As you read the passage, identify 2-3 main arguments from the excerpts.

Excerpt 1

Source: Thornton, John. Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Slavery was widespread in Atlantic Africa because slaves were the only form of private, revenue-producing property recognized in African law. By contrast, in European legal systems, the land was the primary form of private, revenue-producing property, and slavery was relatively minor. Indeed, ownership of land was usually a precondition in Europe to make productive use of slaves, at least in agriculture. Because of this legal feature, slavery was in many ways the functional equivalent of the landlord-tenant relationship in Europe and was perhaps as widespread. (74)

Excerpt 2

Source: Thornton, John. Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Consequently, African slaves were often treated no differently from peasant cultivators, as indeed, they were the functional equivalent of free tenants and hired workers in Europe. This situation, the result of the institutional differences between Europe and Africa, has given rise to the idea that African slaves were well treated, or at least better treated than European slaves. Giacinto Brugiotti da Vetralla described slaves in central Africa as "slaves in name only" by virtue of their relative freedom and the wide variety of employments to which they were put. Likewise, as we shall see, slaves were often employed as administrators, soldiers, and even royal advisors, thus enjoying great freedom of movement and elite lifestyles. (87-88)

Where are the systems of slavery in this reading?	Why are people enslaved?	What questions do you have?

Works Cited

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- Thornton, John. *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Whitfield, Susan. "Slaves on the Silk Road." *Silk Road Digressions*, 18 June 2018, <https://silkraddigressions.com/2018/06/18/slaves-on-the-silk-road/>. Accessed 17 September 2022.