

Swarthmore College

Works

History Faculty Works

History

1998

Historiography: Medieval European And Mediterranean Slavery

Stephen P. Bensch

Swarthmore College, sbensch1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Stephen P. Bensch. (1998). "Historiography: Medieval European And Mediterranean Slavery". *A Historical Guide To World Slavery*. 229-231.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/176>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Medieval European and Mediterranean Slavery

The modern historiography of slavery in medieval Europe addresses two fundamental problems. The first concerns the chronology of and the reasons for the transition from ancient slavery to medieval serfdom by the eleventh century. The second deals with the stubborn persistence of slavery on the frontiers of Latin Europe in the late Middle Ages and its transfer to the New World.

The eventual disappearance of rural slavery in most of Europe after the dissolution of the Roman Empire holds a privileged place in discussions about the early Middle Ages. Following a line of argumentation already traced out during the Enlightenment, historians tend to regard the disappearance of Roman slavery and the emergence that mitigated servitude of European serfdom as a general movement toward freedom throughout the West. Marc Bloch (1995, p.1) claimed that this transformation was "one of the most profound mankind has known." The continued existence of slavery on the margins of Latin Europe during the later Middle Ages, however, contradicts the optimistic view of "medieval liberation." Until interest grew in the medieval background to European colonialism, medieval slavery tended to be dismissed as a peripheral aberration in European society.

"How and Why Ancient Slavery Came to an End," the problem posed succinctly as the title of a famous essay by Bloch, provides a point of departure for all subsequent research. In it he set out the main economic interpretations advanced to account for the shift from slavery to serfdom. Did slavery die out because of the lack of a supply of new slaves? Historians of imperial Rome have pointed out the difficulty of recruitment by the third century and noted the growth of *coloni*, originally free men settled on tenured holdings, at the expense of slave gangs. But as a result of the disturbances produced by the incursions of new people in the Roman world from the late fourth century,

incessant tribal warfare and raiding may well have increased the availability of slaves. Thus, many historians today would agree with Bloch that, far from diminishing gradually from the fourth century, the availability of slaves may have increased in the barbarian kingdoms.

If slavery did not wither from a lack of supply in human chattel, what economic forces led to its decline? Marxist historians helped to set the outlines for the debate; in their view the transition from a slave to a feudal mode of production marked a transition as fundamental as the movement from feudalism to capitalism. Marxist interpretations, however, have varied substantially in explaining this fundamental shift. Charles Parain (see Bonnassie, pp. 10–11) argued that technological advances, including water-mills, heavy plows, and crop rotation, lessened the need for a concentration of slave labor. Stressing class conflict, Pierre Dockès maintained that slave revolts in late antiquity and the declining power of the state lessened the ability of the masters to maintain the slave mode of production.

According to Bloch, however, the expense of maintaining large slave estates became too great a burden as the economy contracted. Rather than house and clothe slaves at central locations, which required high cost and substantial organization, masters gradually settled them on separate tenures and granted them quasi-liberty through "manumission with obedience." Georges Duby and others now argue, however, that even though the early medieval economy exhibited signs of growth, particularly from the seventh century, slavery nevertheless remained an anachronistic presence throughout the early Middle Ages. Only a fundamental change in social structure could bring it to an end.

Cultural and anthropological perspectives have added new dimensions to answer the problem of why ancient slavery came to an end. Although the early medieval Roman Catholic Church, which itself owned substantial numbers of slaves, did not oppose the institution, Pierre Bonnassie (1991)

maintains that Christianity indirectly promoted slavery's decline. By insisting on conversion and manumission as pious acts and forbidding the enslavement of other Christians, the church helped to reduce the cultural alienness of slaves by considering them full human beings rather than "tools with voices," to use Aristotle's definition. Conversion, marriage, and flight gradually made slaves indistinguishable from the rest of the peasantry alongside whom they toiled.

Distinguishing between slavery and less absolute forms of servitude has proven a particularly difficult and divisive issue. By the Carolingian period many slaves and descendants of former slaves held tenures and shared the same labor obligations as free tenants. Differences in legal status, therefore, increasingly failed to reflect differences in economic function. Substantial disagreement exists among historians about the continuing relevance of the legal category of slavery in a society that recognized various forms of dependence. Bloch (1995) maintained that the legal distinctions between free and unfree gradually became muddled as slaves improved their lot and the fate of freemen deteriorated to produce medieval serfdom. Léo Verriest (see Bonnassie, pp. 13–14), by contrast, holds that the servile population of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were direct descendants of the "housed slaves" of the Carolingian period.

The chronology of slavery's decline has proven controversial because it provides an acid test for the transition from the ancient to the medieval world. Against an older historiography that argued for a gradual movement from slavery to serfdom between the fifth and eleventh centuries, French historians influenced by Duby have emphasized a sharp rupture in European society around the year 1000. This sudden transformation, sometimes called the "feudal revolution," finally caused agricultural slavery to disappear. Whereas Duby himself at first emphasized institutional changes, particularly the rapid disintegration of traditional public courts (which helped to distinguish free liti-

gants from servile dependents), others following him have argued for an even broader and more abrupt transformation around 1000. Guy Bois recently offered the most far-reaching model of the "feudal revolution." As a result of a profound and dramatic change in the means of production, lords began to extort labor and rents from both free and unfree peasants. The nobility found in serfdom a preferable alternative to the use of slaves. Thus Bois decisively postponed the end of ancient slavery to the threshold of the second millennium. His position, however, quickly provoked criticism. Retreating from a history of sharp ruptures, Dominique Barthélemy, Adriaan Verhulst, and others returned to an older interpretation emphasizing a gradual, even imperceptible evolution from slavery to serfdom from the third to the tenth century. Although the debate about chronology continues today, scholars generally agree that by the eleventh century slavery had given way to radically different means of exploiting agricultural labor.

Nevertheless, slavery did not completely disappear in medieval Europe, although it did move from the heartland of Latin Christendom to its frontiers, and from the countryside to the towns. Historians utilizing the richer archival sources of the late Middle Ages have tried to gauge the nature of the slave market and to determine its economic impact. From notarial contracts recording slave purchases, distinct cycles have emerged in the importation to the Latin Mediterranean of Muslim, Greek, Tartar, and—by the fifteenth century—African captives. Mediterranean towns received the majority of these unwilling immigrants. Because entrepreneurs and artisans found in wage labor a flexible means of meeting their business needs, slaves usually served their masters as domestic help or as occasional, unspecialized laborers. Susan Mosher Stuard (1995), however, maintained that because historians have misunderstood the role of servile female labor, they have failed to stress that women provided a fundamental link in the history of Western slavery. Substantially outnumbering male slaves in the late Middle Ages, un-

free women met the needs of masters of large households for display and consumption.

Slavery also took other forms. Verlinden emphasized the importance of servile labor in Genoese and Venetian medieval colonies, such as Chios and Crete. After employing slaves on their island outposts in the eastern Mediterranean, Italians, with Spain's backing, transferred this system to the Canary Islands, which lacked an adequate labor force to cultivate sugar-cane. Spain and Portugal then transferred this incipient colonial slave system to the Americas. Verlinden established substantial structural continuity, despite a difference in scale, between slavery in the medieval Mediterranean and that in the colonial Atlantic.

After exploring questions of recruitment and exploitation, which largely reflect the view of the masters, historians have now begun to turn to other social and cultural dimensions of late medieval slavery. Jacques Heers (1981) placed many slaves in late medieval households on the same footing as domestic servants. Through conversion, sexual intimacy, and manumission, chattels and their descendants were eventually integrated into their host society. Whereas this approach stresses mechanisms for integration rather than the reproduction of a servile class, the fear produced by an alien, resentful population of slaves has drawn scholars to investigate methods of repression, surveillance, and control, and to explore the moral dilemmas these caused for both church and state. Although the medieval church in general did not question the foundations of slavery, individual clerics, especially those concerned with missionary activities, began to raise doubts about the legitimacy of the institution.

Historians at the end of the twentieth century no longer consider the Middle Ages a pleasant intermezzo between the massive movements of ancient and colonial slavery. Transformed but still recognizable, slavery persisted in the West from ancient Rome to the encounter with the Americas.

[See also Europe; Mediterranean; Serfdom; and Slave Trade, *article on* Medieval Europe.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bonnassie, Pierre. *From Slavery to Feudalism in South-Western Europe*. Translated by Jean Birrell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Bloch, Marc. *Slavery and Serfdom in the Middle Ages: Selected Papers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.
- Bois, Guy. *The Transformation of the Year One Thousand: The Village of Lournand from Antiquity to Feudalism*. Translated by Jean Birrell. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992.
- Dockès, Pierre. *Medieval Slavery and Liberation*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Duby, George. *The Early Growth of European Economy: Warriors and Peasants from the Seventh to the Twelfth Century*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974.
- Heers, Jacques. *Esclaves et domestiques au moyen âge*. Paris: Fayard, 1981.
- Stuard, Susan Mosher. "Ancillary Evidence for the Decline of Medieval Slavery," *Past and Present* 149 (1995): 3–28.
- Verhulst, Adriaan. "The Decline of Slavery and the Economic Expansion of the Early Middle Ages." *Past and Present* 133 (1991): 195–203.
- Verlinden, Charles. *The Beginnings of Modern Colonization*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970.

—STEPHEN P. BENSCH

Latin American and Caribbean Slavery

The historiography of Latin American and Caribbean slavery since 1960 has revealed the enormous diversity of the African slave experience through time, and in the numerous regions and economic sectors where slavery became a major form of labor exploitation. The difficulty of making generalizations about African slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean is perhaps the most important general conclusion that has emerged, and this has encouraged much archival research at the regional and local levels.

In most studies scholars have addressed important themes that reflect the developing historiography of slavery elsewhere. Demographic aspects in different periods and regions are an important focus. Historians comb local archives for data on reproductive rates, fertility, mortality, age structures,