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978-0-521-11255-0 - From Slavery to Feudalism in South-Western Europe

Pierre Bonnassie

Excerpt

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I. *The survival and extinction of the slave system in the early medieval West (fourth to eleventh centuries)**

In memory of Marc Bloch

During the night of 16 June 1944, somewhere near Lyons, Marc Bloch died, shot by the Nazis. Among the many unpublished texts which he left was a study entitled 'How and Why Ancient Slavery Came to an End'. This article, later published in his journal, *Annales*,¹ was the outcome of many years of research into one of the problems which, throughout his life, most preoccupied him; in fact, for Marc Bloch, the disappearance of slavery constituted 'one of the most profound [transformations . . .] mankind has known'.² His article not only provided much information and formulated new hypotheses, but opened up many lines of research. To what

* This chapter comprises the revised text of three lectures given at the Centre d'Etudes Supérieures de Civilisation Médiévale, University of Poitiers, on 5, 6 and 7 July 1984, in commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the death of Marc Bloch, and published in *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, 28 (Oct.–Dec., 1985), 307–43. Earlier versions were presented to the Society for the Study of Feudalism, the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the CESC of the University of Poitiers, and, of course, my students at the University of Toulouse–Le Mirail; I would like to thank them all for their helpful comments and suggestions. Particular thanks are owed to my colleagues A. Mundó of the Autonomous University of Barcelona and P. Le Roux of the University of Toulouse–Le Mirail.

¹ *Annales* (1947), 30–43, 161–70. Reprinted in M. Bloch, *Mélanges historiques*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1963), pp. 261–85; also translated by William R. Beer in *Slavery and Serfdom in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley–Los Angeles, 1975), pp. 1–31.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1. Marc Bloch wrote other essays on servitude; amongst the most important are 'The Rise of Dependent Cultivation and Seigneurial Institutions' in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1941), pp. 224–77, and 'Liberté et servitude personnelles au moyen âge, particulièrement en France: contribution à une étude des classes' in *Anuario de historia del derecho español* (1933), pp. 5–101. Both articles are reprinted in *Mélanges historiques*, vol. 1, pp. 210–58 and pp. 286–355; the latter also appears in *Slavery and Serfdom*, pp. 33–91. Nor should we forget *Rois et serfs* (Paris, 1921) and *La société féodale* (Paris, 1939/40), both of which devote many pages to this subject. The latter has been translated by L. A. Manyon as *Feudal Society* (London, 1961).

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extent, in the forty years since his death, have these been explored and are we today in a position to answer the two questions he posed – why and how? Are we even able to determine *when* – this third question follows on from, but also determines, the other two – ancient slavery ended? My aim here is to review what we know (and do not know), and also to propose some new orientations and venture some answers; and this from a triple perspective – that of the factors in, and the forms and chronology of, the extinction of slavery in the rural societies of the early Middle Ages.

Forty years of research

Let us begin by looking at what Marc Bloch said. He asserted, firstly, something which was quite new at the time and is still far from being discredited, that ‘at the time of the barbarian invasions and in the early days of their kingdoms, there were still many slaves in all parts of Europe . . . more, it would appear, than during the early days of the Empire’.³ Far from putting an end to slavery, the arrival of the Germans led, according to Bloch, to a revival of the slave trade, and this for two reasons: because the wars of the fifth century threw a large number of prisoners onto the market, and because the impoverishment caused by these wars drove many people to sell either themselves or their children. Thus, ‘at the beginning of the Middle Ages, human merchandise had become abundant again at a reasonable price’.⁴

So there was an abundance of slaves around the year 500. They were, however, relatively rare three or four centuries later; in the Carolingian period, ‘slavery was far from holding a place in European society comparable to that which it previously had held’.⁵ Why had slavery so declined between the fifth and the ninth centuries? Marc Bloch put forward three possible reasons for its decline – religious, military and economic.⁶

As far as the Church was concerned, he was extremely cautious, emphasising the ambivalent character of its doctrinal positions. On the one hand, it proclaimed the equality of all men before God; on the other, it affirmed, quite unequivocally, the legitimacy of

³ *Slavery and Serfdom*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶ This is particularly clearly formulated in ‘The Rise of Dependent Cultivation and Seigneurial Institutions’ (especially pp. 246ff.).

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slavery, and this through the voices of its most celebrated teachers (St Augustine and Gregory the Great amongst others). In practice, however, the teaching of the Church tended to promote a decrease in the number of slaves, but in two ways only – by the encouragement given to manumission, which was included in the ranks of pious works, and, above all, by forbidding the reduction of Christians to slavery. This prohibition, which adversely affected the mechanics of capturing slaves by obliging raids for human cattle to be made often very far afield (in pagan countries), constituted ‘the strongest action that Christianity had ever exercised’.⁷

As for the military situation, was it responsible for the failure of supply, and if so, to what extent? On this point, Marc Bloch referred, curiously, not to the early Middle Ages but to Roman Antiquity; it was the *pax Romana* of the two first centuries which might explain the relative decline in the number of slaves in the High Empire and the increase in their cost; conversely, the renewal of wars and internal troubles in the fourth and fifth centuries replenished the markets and reprovisioned the great estates with servile labour. For the early Middle Ages, Bloch was content to emphasise the persistence of the practice of capturing slaves, especially in the British Isles (during the wars between the Anglo-Saxons and the Celts) and Germany (during the wars of conquest of the first Carolingians and during the conflicts between Germans and Slavs).

But for Marc Bloch, neither religious nor military factors were sufficient to explain the reduction in the slave population. It could only really have been reduced through enfranchisement. Hence, of course, the importance of the Church’s appeal for manumissions; but this could only be heard to the extent that the economic situation was favourable.

The question must, therefore, be argued in terms of profitability. The maintenance of immense herds of slaves was expensive, extremely so, and of all animal husbandry, that of human animals was the most difficult. The exploitation of the soil by systematic and intensive recourse to servile labour could thus only be contemplated in the context of an economy with a very open trade, procuring important outlets and assuring large profits. This type of exploitation had to be abandoned in the early Middle Ages

⁷ *Slavery and Serfdom*, p. 25.

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as a result of the recession which, for Marc Bloch, as for all historians of his time, characterised this period. Direct cultivation was succeeded by a system of tenure which allowed the master to free himself from the cares of feeding *servi* and *ancillae* and rearing their children. Slaves were settled on manses, and these *servi casati* were no longer completely slaves. Indeed, many were freed and turned into free, or more accurately, half-free, tenants. The early Middle Ages experienced, in fact, a great wave of manumission *cum obsequio* (with obedience and services retained), from which the large group of *colliberti* (slaves of the *familiae rusticae* freed collectively), benefited in particular.⁸ Marc Bloch put great emphasis on this type of manumission for economic reasons. It is clear that for him, even if he avoided saying so explicitly, this type of enfranchisement went a long way towards answering the two questions which figured in the title of his essay. Why did ancient slavery end? Because many masters chose to free (at least partially) their slaves, reckoning it too costly to maintain a labour force which was not efficient in the new economic circumstances. How did it end? By giving way to a new class of dependants, the serfs, whose status was prefigured by that of those who were enfranchised *cum obsequio* (the *colliberti*, or future ‘culverts’), and among whom was a mass of former free peasants fallen, for various reasons, under the subjection of a master.

In fact, Marc Bloch did not provide such a clear conclusion to his study. He opened up the enquiry, gathered information, and reflected deeply, producing a remarkable crop of new ideas, but he left the debate open, calling for further research.

FROM CHARLES VERLINDEN TO JEAN-PIERRE POLY

It must be said that this call for research was little heeded. Until recently, the problem of the end of slavery was for the most part ignored.⁹ Little work has been done on the slavery of the early Middle Ages, with one exception, that of Charles Verlinden.

Verlinden has given us, in two stages, in 1955 (volume 1) and 1977 (volume 2), a veritable compendium on slavery in medieval

⁸ ‘Les “colliberti”: étude sur la formation de la classe servile’, *Revue historique* (1928), 1–48, 225–63, reprinted in *Mélanges historiques*, vol. 1, pp. 385–451, and in *Slavery and Serfdom*, pp. 93–149.

⁹ Except by Marxist historians, of whom I shall speak below.

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Europe.¹⁰ The two thousand pages of this work, which are based on very considerable documentation, constitute a mine of information and an obligatory tool of reference for anyone working on this subject. That said, through the weakness of its problematic, the work is disappointing; written from an essentially juridical standpoint, it totally neglects the anthropological dimension of slavery. Its economic analysis is limited; we are spared nothing on the subject of variations in the market price of slaves, but the concept of a slave mode of production is totally lacking. The massive enterprise of Charles Verlinden represents, in fact, no advance as concerns the range of questions formulated by Marc Bloch. On the contrary, it tends to obscure the issue by treating without differentiating the two very different types of slavery known to medieval Europe, the rural slavery of the early Middle Ages (a dominant mode of production bequeathed by the ancient world) and the slave trade of the late Middle Ages (urban slavery, artisanal or domestic, a marginal phenomenon which really only affected the large Mediterranean ports). Further, on the specific issue of the end of ancient slavery, Verlinden's ideas were far from clear, much inferior to those of Marc Bloch. One gets the impression that, for him, the transition from slavery to serfdom was accomplished almost imperceptibly, even smoothly. But since he never defines either slavery or serfdom, his description of the transition fails to convince.¹¹

So it is rather to the great syntheses of social history that we must turn to find answers to the questions posed by Marc Bloch. These answers are, it must be said, frequently allusive or confused, sometimes contradictory.

On the causes of the disappearance of slavery, there is general agreement in rejecting increasingly firmly the religious factor. According to Georges Duby, 'Christianity did not condemn slavery; it dealt it barely a glancing blow.'¹² Robert Fossier goes further: 'The Church played no role in the slow disintegration of

¹⁰ Charles Verlinden, *L'esclavage dans l'Europe médiévale*, 2 vols. (Ghent, 1955/77).

¹¹ In this respect, chapter 2 of Book 2, 'De l'esclavage au servage', vol. 1, pp. 729–47, is certainly the weakest in the whole work.

¹² G. Duby, *Guerriers et paysans VIIe–XIIe siècle: premier essor de l'économie européenne* (Paris, 1973), p. 42, translated by Howard B. Clarke as *The Early Growth of the European Economy, Warriors and Peasants from the seventh to the twelfth centuries* (London, 1974), p. 32.

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the servile system.¹³ And more recently, according to the same author, ‘The progressive elimination of slavery was in no way the work of the Christian peoples. The Church preached resignation, promised equality in the hereafter, let people assume that God had singled out the wretched and, as it was of its time, felt no compunction about keeping large herds of animals with human faces.’¹⁴

The military situation (that is the cessation of *razzia* or raiding wars) is still cited to explain the dwindling recruitment of prisoners, but this factor appears less and less crucial. To explain the reduction in the number of slaves, it is rather the growing demand from the Muslim world (which meant that slaves captured in raids on the frontiers of the Carolingian world simply crossed the Empire to be sold in Islamic countries) which is emphasised.¹⁵ Or else reference is made to the very low birth rate which must have prevailed amongst slaves, and which rendered problematic the reproduction of the herds of slaves working on the big estates.¹⁶ It is economic explanations, in fact, which seem most plausible to contemporary historians and they continue to be formulated – in line with the writings of Marc Bloch – in terms of the costs of production. The basic idea is that gang slavery (or direct exploitation based on the maintenance of large slave *familiae*) was no longer profitable. The master of a large Carolingian estate had no interest in maintaining an abundant labour force that he could not employ all year round, but that he had nevertheless to feed throughout the dead seasons. His natural tendency was therefore to install his slaves on tenures, the well-known servile manses. For many authors, this process (visible as early as the Merovingian period, very common from then on)¹⁷ constituted an essential stage in the withering away of ancient slavery. All this is in line with Marc Bloch.

Much newer are the ideas which are appearing with regard to

¹³ R. Fossier, *Histoire sociale de l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1970), p. 65.

¹⁴ R. Fossier, *Enfance de l'Europe*, vol 1, *L'homme et son espace* (Paris, 1982), p. 571.

¹⁵ Duby, *Early Growth*, p. 40.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 183–4. Similarly, on the basis of a rigorous analysis of the demographic information in the polyptique of Saint-Victor of Marseilles, J.-P. Poly, ‘Régime domanial et rapports de production “féodalistes” dans le Midi de la France (VIIIe–Xe siècles)’ in *Structures féodales et féodalisme dans l'Occident méditerranéen*, Colloque de Rome, 1978 (Rome, 1980), pp. 57–84, especially pp. 67ff.

¹⁷ See A. Verhulst, ‘La genèse du système domanial classique’, *Settimane*, 13 (1965), 135–60.

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the modalities and the chronology of the extinction of the slave regime. On both these points, the revisions are due to Georges Duby. For him, it was not in the Merovingian, nor even in the Carolingian, period that ancient slavery ended, but later, in the eleventh century. 'Like Roman Gaul, like early Germany, France in the year 1000 was a slave society', he wrote in 1958.¹⁸ He has since continued to reaffirm this position, supporting it with ever more rigorous proof. For him, in essence, the phenomenon of the disappearance of the old slavery has to be related to the emergence of a new structure, the *seigneurie banale*, which extended its grasp to all of the peasantry, without distinctions of juridical status. Under the iron heel of the lords possessed of the *ban*, the descendants of the old slaves of the early Middle Ages, were joined in a new form of dependence by a mass of free peasants who had fallen, in their turn, under the subjection of a master. In the tumult of the feudal revolution, the last *servi* were assimilated into the mass of the peasantry.¹⁹

These ideas of Georges Duby have continued and, indeed, still continue to gain ground. Nevertheless, though they have won complete acceptance amongst some historians,²⁰ they continue to provoke a certain unease amongst others. This is revealed by the difficulty that many of them experience in giving a name to the unfree of the Carolingian and post-Carolingian period: were they still slaves or already serfs? In his last work, Robert Boutruche, whilst aligning himself with Georges Duby, faltered when it came to the crunch, and was at a loss how to translate *servus* in the famous text of Adalbero of Laon.²¹ Robert Fossier, for his part, has slaves and serfs in rather bizarre coexistence in the ninth and tenth centuries.²² Jean-Pierre Poly and Eric Bournazel, finally,

¹⁸ G. Duby and R. Mandrou, *Histoire de la civilisation française*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1958), p. 15.

¹⁹ See, most recently, *Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme* (Paris, 1978), pp. 183ff., translated by Arthur Goldhammer as *The Three Orders, Feudal Society Imagined* (Chicago, 1980). See also, among the same author's numerous writings on this subject, the article on 'Servage' in the *Encyclopaedia universalis*.

²⁰ For example, Renée Doehaerd, *Le haut moyen âge occidental: économies et sociétés* (Paris, 1971), p. 188; 'Everything seems to show that slavery remained alive in the West throughout the whole of the early Middle Ages: it only gradually disappeared in the following centuries, in a new demographic and economic environment.'

²¹ R. Boutruche, *Seigneurie et féodalité*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1959), pp. 126–35, 371.

²² Fossier, *Histoire sociale*, pp. 62–7. For the later period, his classification is clearer (*Enfance de l'Europe*, vol. 1, pp. 571–82).

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whilst bravely posing the question ('Can one talk of slaves in the Carolingian period?'), dodge answering it, and use the word *servus* without translation.²³ This almost universal indecision on the part of medievalists with regard to a crucial problem for the period they are studying is, indeed, a curious phenomenon.

THE MARXISTS

Is enlightenment perhaps to be found elsewhere, that is, amongst those historians who invoke Marx? Their contribution deserves careful consideration because it is important and poses the question in very different terms from those examined so far. It is, in any case, natural for Marxists to take a particular interest in this question because it lies at the heart of the problematic developed by historical materialism. It concerns no less a matter than determining the causes and modalities of the passage from one mode of production (slavery) to another (feudalism). What is at issue is the whole problem of the models of transition (from feudalism to capitalism, from capitalism to socialism).²⁴ That said, it cannot be denied that it is rather artificial to oppose *en masse* Marxist and non-Marxist historians; while differences amongst the latter are considerable, they are even greater amongst the former, to the point where they have given rise to furious polemics. The Marxist historians can, in practice, be divided into two groups, those who are doggedly faithful to the letter of what Marx and Engels wrote on this subject (not, in fact, very much)²⁵ and those

²³ J.-P. Poly and E. Bournazel, *La mutation féodale, Xe–XIIe s.* (Paris, 1980), pp. 195–8, in particular p. 196, note 3. Poly had already, in his 'Régime domanial et rapports de production', entitled one section, 'When did ancient slavery end?' (p. 59). A good title, but the following pages, valuable though they are in other respects, tell us very little; yes, the Provençal *mancipium* of the ninth century was a *massip*, but what was a *massip*?

²⁴ The problem of the 'transition' or the '*voies de passage*' has given rise to many studies but mostly for later periods; see, in particular, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, ed. R. H. Hilton (London, 1976); P. Vilar, 'La transition du féodalisme au capitalisme' in *Sur le féodalisme* (Paris, 1974), pp. 35–48; A. Soboul, 'Du féodalisme au capitalisme: la Révolution française et le problème des voies de passage', *La Pensée*, 196 (Nov.–Dec., 1977), 61–78. More generally, M. Godelier, 'D'un mode de production à un autre: théorie de la transition', *Recherches sociologiques*, 12 (1981), 161–93.

²⁵ The most important statements by Marx on this subject are found in *The German Ideology* and *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. His ideas were later developed and refined by Engels. These (and many other) texts have been collected by Maurice Godelier in *Sur les sociétés précapitalistes: textes*

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who, without excessive reliance on these particular texts, apply to the problem the general schemas of the Marxist historical method.

The former attitude is found particularly among Soviet historians,²⁶ but also in certain German,²⁷ English,²⁸ and Spanish²⁹ writers. The basic idea, taken from Marx, is that the feudal mode of production is born of the synthesis of the pre- or proto-feudal elements which are found in previous modes of production, that is, the Roman slave mode of production and the Germanic mode of production, called 'primitive' or 'tribal'. The Germanic invasions engendered a process of interaction and fusion (of 'synthesis') which resulted in the birth of an economico-social formation which was radically new (feudalism), entailing at the same time the disappearance of the earlier social systems (and, in particular, slavery). On the basis of these premisses, the literal Marxists have concentrated their attention on the study of the famous process of synthesis (their discussions focussing on the degree of 'balance' of this synthesis according to region)³⁰ and on the period during which it is considered to have happened, that is Late Antiquity, the period of the invasions and of the barbarian kingdoms. They tend, as a result, to minimise, even pass over in silence, the survival of slavery in early medieval Europe.³¹

choisis de Marx, Engels, Lénine (Paris, 1973) (with a long and valuable introduction).

²⁶ E. M. Staerman, 'La chute du régime esclavagiste' in *Recherches internationales à la lumière du marxisme* (Paris, 1957); Z. V. Oudaltsova and E. V. Goutnova, 'La genèse du féodalisme et ses voies en Europe', *La Pensée*, 196 (Nov.–Dec., 1977), 43–67. These articles, with other studies (generally of Marxist inspiration), appear in the collection edited by A. Prieto, *Del esclavismo al feudalismo* (Madrid, 1975, 4th edn 1980); not reading Russian, I have been able to consult only those works translated into a western language, which explains, obviously, the incomplete – and possibly unjust – nature of my references.

²⁷ E. Werner, 'De l'esclavage à la féodalité', *Annales: ESC*, 17 (1962), 930–9.

²⁸ P. Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London, 1974).

²⁹ A. Barbero and M. Vigil, *La formación del feudalismo en la Península ibérica* (Barcelona, 1978).

³⁰ A 'balanced' synthesis in most of western Europe, because it integrates in equal parts the proto-feudal elements existing in the late Roman and the Germanic world; a synthesis with a predominance of 'Roman antique' elements in the Byzantine world; direct engendering ('almost without synthesis') by the Germanic-type societies in northern Europe (England, Germany, Scandinavia).

³¹ For E. M. Staerman, the crisis of the slave system began in the second half of the second century; the third century saw 'the defeat of the old slave-owning groups', and, in the fourth century, 'the slave estate suffered a total collapse'. The fourth and fifth centuries, therefore, were the period of the transition to feudalism: after which, no more slavery (A. Prieto, *Del esclavismo al*

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Other Marxist historians, especially in France, have adopted a different perspective. Choosing to disregard to some extent the famous pages of Marx on the 'synthesis' (pages which merely reflect the state of historiography at the time when Marx wrote), they have sought, and seek, to explain both the end of slavery and the appearance of feudalism by means of proper Marxist concepts, that is the development of the forces of production and the phenomenon of the class struggle.

The explanation of the extinction of the slave system by the development of the forces of production is essentially the work of Charles Parain. In a series of articles published between 1961 and 1977, he aimed to show that it was the improvement in the techniques of production (especially agricultural techniques) which rendered recourse to slavery less and less necessary, and eventually led to the disappearance of the slave mode of production.³² The importance of technical innovations had not, in fact, escaped Marc Bloch (see, among others, his work on the water mill),³³ but he saw them as a consequence rather than as a cause of the reduction in the number of slaves. Parain altered the problematic: for him, it was the many improvements visible at the level of the rural economy (improvements to tools, in particular to scythes and sickles, diffusion of the flail, introduction of the wheeled plough and, above all, the conquest of water power) which, by saving on human labour, doomed slavery to disappear. But, faithful at this point to the chronology proposed by Marx, he dated these

feudalismo, pp. 103, 106–7). See also S. I. Kovalov, 'El vuelco social del siglo III al V en el Imperio romano de Occidente' in Prieto, *Del esclavismo*, pp. 109–29: the 'social revolution' of the third to fifth centuries finished off the slave system. Nor is the survival of slavery mentioned in the work of Anderson or Barbero and Vigil.

³² 'De l'Antiquité esclavagiste au féodalisme' in *Quel avenir attend l'homme?*, *Rencontres internationales de Royaumont, May 1961* (Paris, 1961), pp. 36ff.; 'Le développement des forces productives en Gaule du Nord et les débuts de la féodalité' in *Sur le féodalisme, Recherches internationales à la lumière de marxisme*, 37 (1963), 37ff.; 'Le développement des forces productives dans l'ouest du Bas-Empire', *La Pensée*, 196 (Dec. 1977), 28–42. Most of Parain's articles have been republished in *Outils, ethnies et développement historique* (Paris, 1979).

³³ Especially, 'Avènement et conquête du moulin à eau', *Annales* (1935), 538–63, reprinted in *Mélanges historiques*, vol. 2, pp. 800–21. Also translated by J. E. Anderson in *Land and Work in Medieval Europe* (London, 1967), pp. 143–6. Discussed critically by Parain in 'Rapports de production et développement des forces productives: l'exemple du moulin à eau', *La Pensée*, 119 (Feb. 1965), reprinted in *Outils, ethnies et développement historique*, pp. 305–27.