

CHAPTER 1

SLAVERY IN THE MEDIEVAL MILLENNIUM*

CRAIG PERRY, DAVID ELTIS, STANLEY L. ENGERMAN,
 AND DAVID RICHARDSON

The three preceding volumes of *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* (henceforth CWSH) already in print have had a major shaping influence on this final collection of essays and have served to underscore the importance of the present volume. Nonspecialists and the general public alike are acutely aware of the existence, indeed centrality, of slavery as an institution in the postcontact Americas and in ancient Greek and Roman societies. But general knowledge of the history of slavery between the fall of Rome and the rise of the transatlantic plantation complexes might be charitably described as lacking precision. Most readers would recognize that extreme social inequality developed in the larger and more complex polities in this millennium-long era and that some form of coerced labor emerged in just about every society. If pressed for an example, many would be more likely to mention not slavery, but serfdom, a practice closely associated with, though not confined to, medieval Europe. Yet the global perspective underpinning the essays below suggests that slavery continued to flourish in all parts of the world for which records and material objects have survived. In short, both the dismemberment of the Roman Empire and Columbian contact had large effects on who was enslaved but quite possibly not on the incidence of the institution across the globe. What also follows, given what is known of historical global population distributions, is that most enslaved persons in recorded history have not been African and male, much less of Slavic (from which the word “slave” is derived) origins, but rather could come from any number of regions and were most likely female.¹

The impression that the practice of slavery passed through a one-thousand-year hiatus is firmly rooted in the Western-language scholarship

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¹ Susan Mosher Stuard, “Ancillary Evidence for the Decline of Medieval Slavery,” *Past & Present*, 149 (1995): 3–28; Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller, “Women in Western Systems of Slavery: Introduction,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 26 (2005): 161.

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of the last two centuries. Few scholars explicitly made this argument, but a cursory survey of the now massive literature on slavery establishes the case beyond doubt. Even as enslavement, the slave trade, and the experiences of enslaved people moved from being fringe subjects to taking the historiographical center stage over the last sixty years, the idea of a hiatus remained implicit. The field of slavery studies is fortunate to have access to an annual bibliography that began in 1981 and in the 1990s attempted to incorporate all titles published since 1900.² During the twentieth century, no less than 95 percent of the listed items dealt with slavery during years that lie outside the span of the present volume. The geographical breakdown was similarly skewed, with fewer than 4 percent of titles concerned with societies in Asia, the Indian Ocean world, the Americas, and Oceania. In the twentieth century, slavery was thought and written about almost entirely in terms of the West or Western interaction with the rest of the world. When such interaction was presumed to be at its weakest – 450 to 1420 CE – so also was scholarly interest in coercion, dependency, and the other elements that collectively establish slave status in the minds of modern observers. Given that the current global historiography emphasizes the West's continuous connections with the rest of the world during the Middle Ages, these findings are somewhat counterintuitive. Perhaps they are a result of Western scholars in the twentieth century seeking antecedents for modern issues. For many of these writers, ancient slavery had bearing on democratic and republican ideals. Slavery from the Renaissance era onward helped shape modern legacies of racism and demographics in Africa and the Americas. However, as this volume collectively demonstrates, issues such as race and national identity are also at stake in histories of the medieval millennium. The gap in the literature also explains why many of the chapters below are based on original research rather than comprising syntheses of what has been published.

Has the situation improved in the present century? According to the *Slavery and Abolition* bibliography, only very slightly. In the ten years 2007–2016, coverage of Asia, the Indian Ocean world, Amerindian societies, and Oceania has increased significantly, along with interest in the topic in all geographic regions. Yet, relatively little has changed, and the non-West continues to account for no more than 4 percent of all titles found in the bibliography. The temporal hiatus, 450–1420, in the more recent literature also remains about the same, but here, at least, a few green shoots are appearing, with no fewer than one in twelve titles over the decade taking up subjects that fall within the time span of our volume.

² Joseph C. Miller, *Slavery and Slaving in World History: A Bibliography*, 2 vols. (Armonk, NY, 1993 and 1998). Data for other years taken from Thomas Thurston, "Slavery: Annual Bibliographical Supplement," published in the last issue of each year in *Slavery and Abolition*.

Given that this era included the rapid expansion of Islam, much of this new interest focuses on slavery in Muslim societies. While for those doing the spadework on medieval slavery it must appear that scholarly output has increased enormously – as indeed it has – the same is true for scholarship on the topic in the traditional Western regions. Thus, the overall pattern retains a heavy bias toward the most recent five centuries and, to a lesser extent, antiquity. If there were an equivalent to the annual *Slavery and Abolition* survey in Arabic, Persian, or one of the major East Asian languages, then perhaps the millennium-long hiatus would appear less striking, but at present we cannot be sure.

The most important consequence of Western scholars having largely ignored slavery in the precontact Americas and throughout most of Asia in this period is that prevailing generalizations about the institution may not always be especially helpful for describing global slavery during the medieval millennium. Plantation slavery was indeed associated with the expansion of European empires, but such expansion occurred mainly after 1450 and had few precedents. The assimilative model proposed for African slavery by Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff – for whom enslavement is a device to incorporate outsiders into kin groups – offers greater potential as a framework for understanding slavery in other parts of the world.³ Useful parallels in Amerindian and non-African Islamic societies are easy to identify. But the central point to emerge from an overview is that general explanations of slavery have only recently begun to emerge for the millennium that concerns us. We thus have the challenge of examining slavery and slave systems in this era without necessarily assuming the explanations derived from societies that came before and after.

Perhaps at the most basic level of interaction between peoples or polities, we can discern one common element of enslavement across the ages, in that until recent times slavery has been the largely inevitable outcome of extreme power imbalance, not so much between individuals as between polities. The most dramatic and disruptive phenomenon in our era, which had huge consequences for enslavement as well as, of course, for death and social upheaval, were the political conquests of the Islamic caliphates and those of the nomads of Central Asia – first the Mongols, the subsequent khanates, and later the Turks. These were to the Eurasia of the thirteenth to fifteenth century what western Europeans were to the Atlantic world from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In neither group were slaves an important component at the beginning of imperial expansion, but both cases generated an apotheosis of violence, the first transcontinental, the second, transoceanic. The military adventures of the Mongols under

³ Cf. Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*, trans. Alide Dasnois (Chicago, IL, 1991), esp. pp. 9–22.

Chinggis Khan (d. 1227) and Tamerlane (d. 1405) all involved high mortality. Chinggis Khan put countless populations of captured cities to the sword in the event of resistance and enslaved many more besides, while Tamerlane's subsequent geographic expansion in the late fourteenth century led to possibly the largest contiguous territorial empire in history. The later European disruption destroyed three-quarters of the population of the Americas and triggered violence and enslavement in Africa. Without claiming cause and effect, it is striking that arguably two of the most cataclysmic geopolitical occurrences in global history are in some senses antecedents of the two superpowers of the mid-twenty-first century – China in the East and the United States in the West.

Initially, Mongol slavery was, in Orlando Patterson's use of the term, predominantly intrusive (thus, slaves sourced from outside Mongol society) in the sense that, as in the rise of the Roman Empire, war captives from the borderlands of the empire comprised the overwhelming source of slaves. The three western khanate polities continued into the fifteenth century, but as khanate expansion came to an end, and supplies of both war prisoners and tribute slaves diminished somewhat, Patterson's distinction becomes less helpful for the historian. In the east, however, destitution and natural disasters ensued, and slavery thereupon became predominantly extrusive – or drew on people within society. The China that the Mongols helped shape, and of which they had become an integral part by the fifteenth century, relied on internal sources for their "base" people. Similar power imbalances elsewhere in Asia, Europe, and the Americas generated similar outcomes and rationales. For the Aztecs, the Viking raiders, the Ghaznavids in India as with (though beyond our period) the Europeans in the Americas, enslavement followed on from raids and conquest. If one polity had the ability to overcome another, then death or some form of social debasement and dependency for the defeated would surely follow.

But of course medieval slavery was not confined to raiders and conquerors. Nor is its study limited to the geopolitics that produced it. The essays that follow discuss the institution as it existed in nearly every major polity across the globe, but the scholarship, and more particularly the sources, do not permit our coverage to be comprehensive. It is likely that, in the millennium covered here, nowhere in the world was there a settled society (i.e. one based on agriculture) that lacked slaves. The enhanced social stratification that followed the adoption of agriculture appears to have generated an extreme dependency among those occupying the base. Many of the characteristics of this dependency would be recognized today as slave-like. In literate societies such populations were documented with written labels and descriptors that scholars have come to translate as slavery, most specifically in China, where base origin was often equated with slavery.

Many of the individual items in the cumulative *Slavery and Abolition* bibliography have incorporated attempts to define the institution of slavery, but a consensus has remained elusive. The range of dependencies and types of social abasement in human history is broad indeed, and we hope our survey of practices will bring closer a consensus on how they can be more rigorously historicized.

Variations in terminology across languages and over time within a given language notwithstanding, people in every society in this period recognized and accepted the status of individuals who lacked full membership within the society to which they belonged. They also recognized the status of those to whom such individuals owed obligation – for example their owners. In the medieval millennium the term “slave” or its equivalent was thus not reserved solely for instances in which an owner assumed title to *all* the individual rights of the enslaved. The term could also describe other forms of social dependency in which only some degrees of unfreedom were subject to transfer. The ubiquity of slave markets across the globe is striking, and many markets must have witnessed buyers and sellers involved, each of whom had a slightly different idea of what was being traded. Nevertheless, such markets could not have existed without both parties to a transaction sharing a common understanding that what was being traded was a commodified person.

Behind much of the above discussion and many of the chapters that follow, there lurks the largely unanswered question of the numerical incidence of these commodified persons in the medieval millennium. Given the lack of systematic evidence, it is not surprising that the recent literature largely avoids the issue. Global histories have estimated that Chinggis Khan killed 5 percent of the world’s population and enslaved many more, but such a ratio is without secure grounding in the sources. Specialists, by contrast, take refuge in suggestions that the numbers of slaves reported as captured by medieval chroniclers should be divided by ten, or even a hundred. Perhaps the most-cited author in the present volume, Orlando Patterson, has estimated that mid-tenth-century western Europe alone was home to 3.4 million slaves (15 percent of a total population of 22.5 million), the majority of whom were native western Europeans. It is worth noting that this was only slightly fewer than the number of African Americans liberated by the US Civil War, which at the time comprised by far the largest concentration of enslaved people that had lived anywhere in the Americas up to that point. The total US population in 1860 was 31.4 million, and the slave proportion of that population – at 12.5 percent – was thus below that of Patterson’s estimate for Europe.⁴

⁴ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2010), pp. 4, 93–115, 446; email from Michal Biran, September 15, 2019;

While our volume contains only three chapters devoted to the slave trade, almost every chapter has a section on the trading and movement of captives over long distances. This pattern points to the need in most societies for constant replenishment of supplies of enslaved persons. While some Western scholars might interpret this as a product of the failure of the enslaved to reproduce themselves, the enslaved in our period did have opportunities over their lifetime to obtain a degree or two of freedom for themselves or their children. For some women in Muslim societies, for example the *umm walads*, full manumission was possible. The hundred essays across the four volumes of *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* allow us glimpses of some very broad comparative trends in manumission. It is striking that opportunities for changing status were least in imperial China and in the massive systems of exploitation that developed in the postcontact English and Dutch Americas. They were greatest in the vast region that evolved over several millennia of global history between these defining poles of social debasement. We refer here to Europe, Africa, and central and South Asia.

In this essay we proffer generalizations on the various ways of becoming a slave; the slave-trading networks that spanned the land masses (and some large bodies of water) throughout the period; the relationship between slavery and empire; the spectrums of dependency that evolved; the central roles of gender, sexual relations, and childhood in sustaining enslavement; and, finally, the lives of the enslaved, especially the opportunities for social mobility.

ELIGIBILITY FOR ENSLAVEMENT

Long before our period began, the ubiquity and persistence of slavery around the globe was already such that every individual would have had both slaves and slaveholders among his or her descent group. Nevertheless, Aristotle's categorization of "natural slaves" or "slaves by nature" (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.5) found acceptance during the medieval millennium, although both Christian and Islamic jurists did recognize freedom as the original state of humankind. Such a position is not inconsistent with the modern perspective that specific groups such as Circassians, Slavic peoples, and eventually sub-Saharan Africans were enslavable because of social or geopolitical circumstances. Perceiving an individual or a group as eligible for enslavement is similar to socially constructing ethnicity, race, or class. Such constructions are as common today as they have ever been and are certainly observable in every society taken up in the essays below. Manuals

Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), p. 157. Patterson also estimated that 60,000 slaves a year were traded in Europe.

or guides to purchasing a slave became something of a genre in the Islamic world, and many have survived to the present. All such documents associate sets of improbable personal characteristics with the different target populations that prospective buyers might expect to find in the marketplace. Except for demonstrable skills and observable physical features, the listed characteristics could not be assessed at the point of purchase and were clearly spurious. Such stereotypes varied across the different slaveholding societies.

For heavily populated regions with robust state structures, the eligibility prerequisites remained largely unchanged over the centuries. China under the Tang dynasty (618–907) saw large increases in the foreign component of the slave population as the Tang absorbed tribute slaves, captured soldiers, and civilians from Korea, Central Asia, and as far afield as India, but across the millennium extrusive slavery (slaves sourced from within society) generally prevailed here. Along with Japanese and Korean rulers, Chinese dynasties throughout the period saw foreigners as barbarians and therefore always as potential slaves, although, throughout East Asia, Korean women had a reputation for beauty and were in demand as concubines.

Across the medieval globe, the strength of the state determined whose vision of slave eligibility prevailed. During the Mongol era, Chinese weakness meant that the Mongols invaded, enslaved, and exported many captives. However, the Mongols then speedily (at least in cultural terms) and, like some other outside groups that had overrun the Chinese state in earlier times, assumed the mantle of Chinese values – including Chinese attitudes to non-Chinese people. But if the territories beyond the imperial boundaries usually comprised the major source of slaves, the Chinese persistently enslaved others from within Chinese society – drawn invariably from the so-called base people – a pattern that might also be observed in parts of South Asia. The process was facilitated by occasional interludes of divisiveness and chaos during dynastic change. This group comprised families of condemned criminals, destitute self-enslaved, victims of kidnapping, and abandoned children.

Flexibility in enslavability criteria is most clearly demonstrated in the shifts over time that occurred within the same society, particularly those in the Muslim world and the Latin West. From late antiquity through to the early Islamic conquests, the origins of slaves in both these vast regions were extremely eclectic. Slave populations in the aftermath of military expansion would have reflected the mix of prisoners of war, much as they had in the Roman Empire. Arabic guides to slave purchasing and known networks of the slave trade both suggest that Islamic markets drew on a wide range of origins – the circum-Mediterranean littoral, Armenia, the Caucasus, Transoxania (modern Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan), and the Indian Ocean, as well as the East African coast. Regions at the periphery of the

Middle East sending slaves to the new Islamic states included Nubia. But shifting geopolitical power seems ultimately to have determined which ethnicities or religious groups would be preferred at a given time. In the West the ethnically neutral Latin term for slave, “*servus*,” began to be replaced by “*esclavus*” in the tenth century and came later to form the root word for slave in many European languages thereafter. The more important long-run trend in both Christendom and Islamic lands saw both religions gradually acknowledge somewhat porous barriers against the enslavement of their respective coreligionists – a phenomenon that some scholars see as “no-slaving zones.”⁵ For others, such barriers were recognized mainly in the breach, though less so over time. As both world religions took hold in previously pagan Eurasia, Christian and Muslim polities moved into a strategic balance of power by the end of the medieval era, a balance that raised the profile of Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa as major sources of enslaved persons for both.

Adherents of all three Abrahamic religions show increasing evidence of prejudice against black people over this millennium. The bizarre story of the Curse of Ham, whereby Abraham condemns the offspring of Canaan, the son of Ham, to be slaves in perpetuity for a trivial offense on the part of Ham, gained currency. A discourse on color symbolism begins in Christendom and Islam, in which black is equated with evil and white with good. But the black descendants of Cush, brother of Canaan, are deemed innocent in early rabbinic writings, and writers continue to see black skin as a function of climatic factors as did their classical-era predecessors. Turkic and Sudanic peoples formed the bulk of the elite *mamluks*, but other states that used elite enslaved military units in India and the Middle East drew on those of African descent. More important, none of the societies adhering to the Abrahamic faiths had legal systems based on somatic norms. The freed man, Bilal ibn Rabah, likely an Ethiopian, was the Prophet Muhammad’s close companion and is regarded as the first caller to prayer. In Christendom, one of the three kings attending the birth of Christ had become portrayed as black by the end of the period, and the well-known cult of St. Maurice, though minor, could scarcely have flourished in the face of such discrimination.⁶ But nothing in the medieval Eurasian written record in any way suggests that only blacks should be enslaved, a situation that quickly emerged in the Atlantic world in the century after 1420.

⁵ Jeffrey Fynn-Paul, “Empire, Monotheism and Slavery in the Greater Mediterranean Region from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era,” *Past & Present*, 205 (2009): 3–40; Jeff Fynn-Paul and Damian Alan Pargas (eds.), *Slaving Zones: Cultural Identities, Ideologies, and Institutions in the Evolution of Global Slavery* (Leiden, 2018).

⁶ See the discussion in David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 23–51. On the subject of race in the premodern era, see also the recent publication Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2018).

MECHANISMS OF ENSLAVEMENT

As already noted, reliable numbers simply do not exist for a census of medieval slavery, particularly for deciding the relative importance of different types of enslavement. Slaves in the great imperial courts and administrations and the raids associated with the emergence of these empires – the Tang dynasty, the Islamic imperium, and Mongol rule across Eurasia – very much commanded the attention of early chroniclers as well as later scholars. The already enslaved populations of the conquerors, for example the enslaved portion of the base people in China or the great mass of household slaves living in urban centers around the medieval globe – many of them cultural insiders – pass largely unnoticed. As argued above, most societies have acquired slaves via raids and conquest whenever they were powerful enough to do so – Orlando Patterson’s “intrusive mode” of becoming enslaved. But some of these captives would themselves have been slave owners, and many of the slaves they owned also became the booty of the raider – typically outnumbering their captive owners. Some of these re-captive slaves would have been born into slavery. Given that most slaves were female and that in most societies their offspring assumed the status of the mother, it is even possible that a majority of the global slave population in any given time was born into slavery rather than subsequently enslaved.⁷

For those who were not born unfree, we need to remember that famines and plagues associated with natural disasters and imperial collapse, or even the normal vagaries of agricultural production, occurred with great frequency around the globe before the modern era. Many systems were constructed so that starving or indebted persons had little choice but to sell themselves or their kin into slavery. Though illegal under the Romans, the Byzantines, and in the Islamic Middle East, almost every other society included in the present volume made provision for such an act. Legal codes rather than recorded instances of the practice comprise the historian’s chief source here, given that the hagiographies and official histories were unlikely to record such individual and apparently unexceptional acts. In northern India, the Mongol invasions and subsequent tax exactions resulted in free families’ selling off children into slavery or, less commonly, debt pledging of their offspring. Abandonment of the recently born (or infant exposure) was a source of slaves in China throughout the period and common in Latin Europe until the ninth century. For Byzantium, the effect of Justinian’s 529 law proclaiming the freeborn status of foundlings is as yet unclear. Penal servitude, by contrast, was close to universal. In China and Mesoamerica,

⁷ On enslaved birth rates in the Roman Empire, see Walter Scheidel’s chapter on the Roman slave supply in volume 1 of this series. The 1870 census in the United States shows that almost all the four million formerly enslaved people were born in the United States.

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for example, a varying range of a convicted person's relatives were also at risk of enslavement. All these mechanisms of enslavement fall within the rubric of Patterson's "extrusive mode."

Superior military force or wealth ensured access to slaves originating outside a given polity. The first of these is usually thought of in terms of prisoners of war and civilians treated as booty – the spoils of war. Slave prices tumbled in the aftermath of battles – as for example in Mahmud of Ghazni's conquests in northern India, Christendom's resurgence in Spain, and the string of Mongol victories to the east. Slaves acquired in this way dominate the sources. But they cannot have been the most important source of slave labor. All conquerors must think of the long-term usefulness of the newly occupied territory, a concern which is scarcely consistent with reducing its population to slavery in a foreign land. Thus, the early Arab invaders and the regimes that followed left local populations and their social organizations largely intact. They exacted tax revenue from them rather than make them a permanent source of coerced labor. Tribute slaves formed another intermittent source of captives in the long run, but these came from lands beyond or client states within the imperial border that were under threat of attack. Examples here are the Jurchen Jin exactions on the Song dynasty, Mongol interactions with Korea, and city-states in Mesoamerica negotiating terms with Aztecs and Mayas. But even taking into account tribute slaves, the major foreign-born component of the slaves in any empire must have arrived via quotidian trade rather than as a consequence of the intermittent disruption of wars, though of course their original enslavement may have been the result of war waged by other states or tribes on their birthland. Generally, foreign-born slaves ended up in the regions that were able to pay the highest prices. Imperial conquests by themselves did not guarantee a steady supply of slave labor. Societies with large concentrations of slaves, particularly in socially mobile ones as in the Islamic world, where enslaved people could eventually gain freedom or take on other forms of dependency over time, tended to draw on a slave trade to maintain their slave populations. To this we now turn.

SLAVE TRADING

The present volume covers a range of terms of labor that might variously be described as slavery, and most chapters provide a relative assessment of their importance. An interregional slave trade – and beyond this, a transcontinental traffic – could not have happened without a shared idea about what was being traded. All societies in Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas appear to have contained one or more vulnerable groups, whether *paraiyar* in south India, "base" people in China, prisoners of war, or pagans. Many of these were effectively eligible for slavery and