Wagner on Barker, 'That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260-1500'

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As research interest in slavery continues, there has been an increasing number of studies dealing with different regions. Recent publications have focused, for example, on parts of the Mediterranean or the Ottoman Empire.[1] The Black Sea region as well has always played an important role in slavery and the slave trade. Besides wax, honey, and grains, slaves were an essential import from the Black Sea region and were of great importance for the slave trade in the Mediterranean. In the thirteenth century, the maritime republics of Venice and Genoa established trading colonies along the Black Sea coast and Caffa on the Crimea was an important port where the slave trade was controlled from. Hannah Barker’s study starts at this point and examines the late medieval Mediterranean trade in Black Sea slavery. This study fits well into Barker’s field of research, which includes the history of Genoa, Venice, and the Mamluk Sultanate as well as of the slave trade and slavery. Barker draws on her expertise and uses a common lens to look at regions that were previously often considered separately.

In the compelling introduction to her book, Barker, who currently is an assistant professor at Arizona State University, discusses the two historical narratives that have shaped modern scholarship on slavery. On the one hand, there is the antislavery narrative of Christian amelioration, and on the other hand, the Marxist narrative of modes of production. According to Barker, medieval historians tried to respond with different approaches to these two narratives. She notes that both continue to shape the study of slavery and emphasizes that in contrast to the Christian perception, the study of slavery in the medieval Islamicate world belongs, however, to another historiographical tradition. Although the Christian amelioration narrative would seem to have little to do with the history of slavery in the Islamic world, an Islamic amelioration narrative has developed under its influence, which refers to the Muslim slave owners’ better treatment of their slaves. However, Barker criticizes the discussion about good and bad slavery for three reasons. First, the experience of each individual slave depended on the behavior of his or her owner and the legal and social structures. Second, Christian and Muslim societies were characterized by a common culture of slavery in the late medieval Mediterranean. Third, according to Barker’s argument, the slaves were acquired in the same way from the same sources in the Black Sea and thus experienced the same violence of capture, humiliation of sale, and vulnerability of status. Accordingly, Barker’s book, which could be an elaboration of her doctoral thesis, is based on these arguments.
Organized in two parts, That Most Precious Merchandise deals with the relationship between Genoese, Venetians, and the Mamluk Sultanate and their participation in the Mediterranean trade in Black Sea slaves. The first part discusses slavery as it was understood in the late medieval Mediterranean and presents some aspects of a common culture of slavery. The second part is devoted to the slave trade between the Black Sea region and the Mediterranean and sheds light on the various people involved in the trade.

Although Barker explains that her book is not a comparative history of slavery in medieval Italy and Egypt, the elaboration of a common culture of slavery between the Mamluks, Genoese, and Venetians inevitably leads to a juxtaposition of distinguishing features—which, in my opinion, is not a disadvantage for the study at hand.

In the first part of her book, which comprises chapters 1 to 4, the author deals with the common culture of slavery. In the beginning of this part, Barker refers to the rich vocabulary used for unfree persons in Latin and Arabic as opposed to the English language, which has only two terms: slave and serf. With this she addresses a difficulty that many slavery researchers are confronted with. Nevertheless, the question of an appropriate solution remains open.

In her first chapter but also throughout her whole study, Barker points out that a different understanding of slavery prevailed in the late medieval Mediterranean. Although freedom was the natural status of humanity, slavery was a legitimate aspect of human law and legally and socially accepted in those societies. Barker declares this acceptance as one aspect of the common culture of slavery in the Mediterranean. While Christianity and Islam accepted slavery, religion was taken as a criterion of distinction. However, the author proves in her study that “both Christians and Muslims enslaved their coreligionists from the Black Sea and were aware of what they were doing” (p. 24). This conflict, Barker explains, was justified with the desire to prevent slaves from converting to the “wrong” religion, since masters forced their slaves to convert.

Religious difference as the legal and ideological basis of slavery was an important aspect in the late medieval Mediterranean. Besides religion, Barker defines among others language and race as the two most relevant factors in determining slave status. Based on examples, the author shows that the use of the same terms to categorize slaves (such as “Turk”) might vary in different languages and according to text genres. However, linguistic diversity was interpreted as religious diversity within the Christian community. Language was also used to distinguish groups of people in law and in the courts. Barker points out that the imposition of new names also gave rise to certain associations, albeit sometimes wrongly, such as the assumption that Latin names always refer to baptism (p. 43). But even more interesting seems to be the aspect of race, which subsumes numerous differences under one category. The author shows that there were no clearly defined closed categories of race and argues that medieval people understood races as a spectrum rather than a black-white binary (p. 59). According to Barker, the complexity of the medieval framework of race was fundamental to the one of slavery (p. 41). She draws attention to the fact that race is culturally constructed and historically contingent, as is slavery and religion and color. Where religion does not work as a distinguishing criterion, race is used as differentiation. One aspect of Barker’s study is to show how the inhabitants of the late medieval Mediterranean understood difference in the context of slavery.

In the third chapter of her book, Barker stresses the importance of the role of the slave owners “as
social gateway,” as their personalities and social positions shaped the lives of their slaves (p. 62). After an illustration of services performed by slaves, such as social and financial assets, domestic and artisanal labor, and participation in trade, Barker concludes from her study of the societies of Genoa, Venice, and the Mamluk Sultanate that “in many respects, slave owners around the late medieval Mediterranean used their slaves in similar ways” (p. 91). While this provides evidence of a common culture of slavery, there were also significant differences. The author mentions the training of male slaves for military service and the role of eunuchs, which were specific to the Mamluks. Besides, Barker points out that the common culture of slavery also experienced changes—for example, in the way the children of slaves and slave owners were treated. This is an interesting aspect, as it provides information about the role and acceptance of slaves in society over time. Even if the life of each individual slave depended on its owner, Barker illustrates in her study that there were certain patterns that allow us to speak of a common culture of slavery.

The second part of the book is devoted to the slave trade, including the processes of enslavement and sale. Barker shows that next to regional and local circumstances that governed the slave trade, different relations such as the alliance between the Mamluks and the Golden Horde or the rivalry between Genoa and Venice shaped the conditions for Black Sea slavery. Barker examines individual merchants and the routes they took, the way they participated and competed with one another, and other aspects such as the role of states in constraining, directing, and taxing their activities. The author demonstrates that not only individual merchants but also the state intervened in the slave trade through regulations.

By analyzing the slave markets and the act of sale, Barker identifies in her fourth chapter more common patterns that indicate a shared culture of slavery. Although the operations were different, Genoese, Venetian, and Mamluk slave sale processes followed a common pattern, such as slave-buying advice manuals, physical inspections, collections of model contracts, and grouping slaves with animals. Interestingly, according to Barker, the treaties in particular were remarkably similar in structure and language. This particularity of her study deserves to be especially emphasized; she bases her research not only on different text genres but also on different languages. In this respect her study also differs from many others and therefore deserves special recognition.

Furthermore, Barker correctly criticizes the neglect of the enslavement process by historians. Since this can be regarded as the most decisive phase in being a slave, it should be given due consideration. The problem here is of course with the sources, namely their availability and accessibility. In her fifth chapter, besides the relationship between the local and long-distance slave trades, she focuses on the question of how free people in the Black Sea became enslaved. Most slaves exported from the Black Sea were captives taken in wars or raids. Their route to enslavement was either through violence or through sale. Most of the captives were sold as slaves at slave markets to long-distance slave traders. Tana and Caffa were the most important ports for trade in the late medieval Black Sea. Barker illustrates the shifting presence of the Genoese and Venetians in these two port cities and the changing balance of power in Black Sea trade. While Venice had enjoyed commercial privileges in the early thirteenth century, Genoa was excluded from the region. The situation changed, however, when Genoa supported Michael VIII Paleologus’s reestablishment of the Byzantine Empire at Constantinople in 1260. According to the subtitle of the book, this is the starting point of the investigation period for Barker’s study, which ends in 1500. This is due to the fact that in the 1470s, the Ottomans gained control over the Black Sea slave trade and excluded first the Italians.
and then the Mamluks.

Barker examines the impact of the Ottoman expansion on Genoa’s dominance over Black Sea shipping and slave trade in her sixth chapter. She also outlines the many natural and human constraints on the Black Sea slave trade and shows that it was a complex system consisting of a “web of constraints” that changed over time and influenced merchants differently (p. 183). Barker shows how traders had to cope with various limitations such as physical and political geography but also incentives and rewards, regulations concerning the transportation of slaves, and laws and treaties. Barker points out that despite the assumption that states might have tried to suppress the slave trade on moral grounds, on the contrary, states involved in the slave trade supported it. This is an essential point when it comes to interpretation and evaluation of slavery and the slave trade. Barker points out that it is important to understand that states and their regulations, besides the individual traders, played an essential role in the slave trade. She concludes that it was state policies that tied the Black Sea slave trade together as a system and that “they can only be understood by viewing that slave trade through a Mediterranean lens” (p. 185). She connects both regions and takes Genoa’s strategy of trading slaves through Caffa as an example that has to be seen in the context of its Mediterranean rivalries.

Chapter 7, on crusade, embargo, and the trade in Mamluk slaves, discusses the slave trade within the context of religious and political conflict in the Mediterranean. Through examining the Christian embargo against Egypt and renegade Mamluks who returned to Christianity and deserted from the Mamluk army using crusade strategy treatises and papal statements, Barker illustrates that a web of relations—diplomatic, political, and economic—structured the slave trade. Barker also questions the significance of crusade strategy treatises and points out that they can lead to wrong conclusions in the study of Mamluk trade. Once again she underlines the importance of drawing on different genres.

Focusing on Genoa, Venice, and the Mamluk Sultanate, Barker illustrates that slavery was legal and socially accepted throughout the late medieval Mediterranean. In addition to its place at the bottom of the human hierarchy, according to her, the three fundamental assumptions Christians and Muslims shared about slavery are as follows: “that it was legal, that it was based on religious difference, and that it was a universal threat” (p. 13). Her aim is to demonstrate that a common culture of slavery existed and was based on various aspects. Barker posits that the late medieval Mediterranean slave trade cannot be understood independently of its Black Sea context. She illustrates how disparate parts of the Mediterranean were tied together by a complex web of different aspects such as slavery, captivity, trade, and ransom.

Following her request in the introduction that “the Mediterranean trade in Black Sea slaves should be understood not only as an economic activity carried out by merchants but also as an area of state regulations with significant diplomatic and religious consequences” (p. 11), Barker demonstrates the importance of the states’ role in slavery and the slave trade. She also shows that not only the Mediterranean demand for slaves but also the Black Sea supply played an important role in determining the export of slaves from the Black Sea.

Barker points out in her introduction that the difficulty does not lie in finding appropriate sources for research in the Mediterranean trade in Black Sea slaves, as these are plentiful. The difficulty, she correctly states, lies “in bringing together disparate sources from different genres in a coherent way”
Barker takes up the challenge and bases her study not only on sources from different genres such as slave-buying manuals, notarial registers, tax registers, and so on, but also on both languages, Latin and Arabic. Through her study, which, by the way, is well written and readable, she convincingly illustrates how important it is to draw on different text genres and also in different languages.

_The Most Precious Merchandise_ succeeds in painting a compelling picture of the Mediterranean trade in Black Sea slaves and the interdependencies between the various parties. The book takes into account numerous source materials that are vividly presented.

To conclude, this book serves both to contribute to the field of slavery studies and to stimulate further research. It is a successful example of looking at the Mediterranean as one large, coherent area of study, as already requested by other researchers. This book is therefore highly recommended for scholars of slavery studies but also for those who are interested in the history of the late medieval Mediterranean and the Black Sea region. Additionally, it is recommended to those scholars seeking to broaden their perspectives on common features of regions and cultures that are often considered separately.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Reuven Amitai and Christoph Cluse, eds., *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1000-1500 CE)* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2018); and Stephan Conermann and Gül Şen, eds., *Slavery and Slave Agency in the Ottoman Empire* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020).


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