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Slavery

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Slavery in medieval Iberia was primarily an Andalusian phenomenon. The early Christian states could not afford to buy slaves. Captured Moors, like new world Indians later, made poor slaves, and most Moorish prisoners were more profitably traded for ransom. Andalusian conquests created an impoverished class of landless peasants, eager to work on any terms. In the late medieval period Moors captured at sea were used as slaves in Valencia and Mallorca, and Portuguese navigation provided access to a source of black slaves.

Even in al-Andalus, information on such a wide-spread institution is skimpy. Seldom do we know the names of slaves, and record of their voices is rare. There was little if any discussion of slavery as an institution; it is in the sixteenth century, with Las Casas, that its legitimacy was first questioned. Existing sources are legislation regarding slaves, Muslim historical or literary works in which slaves appear, inferences backwards from the (by comparison) abundant documentation on the fifteenth century and later, both within the Iberian peninsula and in North Africa, and fragmentary information from Christian sources about Christian slaves.

Slavery in al-Andalus was quite different from the modern stereotype of the institution. While there was undoubtedly abuse and slaves were of course not free, they were on the whole better treated, and had more rights, than did slaves in the American South. Many lived nearly as well as their masters and mistresses. Affection between slave and owner was not unusual. Slaves of the wealthy were sometimes pampered household pets.

Slave women often led a better life than did free women. The concubine had freedom to go about the town, more access to education, and a richer emotional and sexual life, however deficient by today's standards. Slave concubines could manipulate their masters

into rich gifts. Marriage between master and slave was also not uncommon.

Manumission, especially upon the owner's death, was frequent. The children of a free man with a slave woman were free, and the mother who bore a free man a son became free as well, contributing to the close bond between mother and son typical of later Hispanic culture. Slaves could own property and some were able to purchase their liberty. Some slaves and freed slaves achieved influence and political power.

Freed slaves found little racial discrimination and were easily absorbed into the society as a whole. As is often observed, this contributed to the reduced racial tensions in the Hispanic world today.

There was no prohibition of education of slaves. As educated slaves were more valuable, an owner might educate a promising slave. A male might do office work, letter-writing and accounting. Women could be entertainers: musicians, dancers, and poetesses (a few names and works have been preserved). Mostly, however, slaves did the hard and dirty jobs: kitchen work, animal care, manual labor, sometimes soldiering and prostitution. Slaves customarily were found in urban, household settings, rather than rural plantations. Ownership of slaves gave the owner prestige; ownership of expensive slaves (eunuchs, educated, or white) even more so.

Slaves constituted some 10 to 20% of the population of al-Andalus. They were customarily imported rather than bred locally. A free man's offspring were free, and slave men, whose commercial value was low, were much less common than women. Those men there were had little interest in producing slave offspring, and the reproduction rate was low. Slaves, therefore, were not just a significant demographic element but a source of continued ethnic and cultural mixing. Especially talented slaves were imported from Baghdad. The bulk of them were obtained through raids, tribute from conquered kingdoms, or purchase in groups from native suppliers. Their origin changed considerably with changing external circumstances. In the first centuries of Islamic rule, most slaves came from eastern Europe; it was at this time that the word "slave" was split off from "Slav." The well-developed industry was in the hands of the Jews, who brought caravans of slaves westward to the Andalusian slave markets, the largest of any contemporary Mediterranean country. Jewish doctors produced eunuchs, some of which were exported.

When access to Slavic slaves was cut off by Christian development in France and Germany, black slaves came to replace them. These were transported by land across the Sahara. Mixture with them produced the dark skin color of the Moors.

Finally, there were Christian captives from northern Iberia. These were primarily women and children, the men having died in defending them. These scarce slaves were especially prized. Even if illiterate, they were better educated than blacks fresh from Africa. Also, their appearance was considered more attractive. They were favored as sexual partners, and were the mothers of nobles and rulers.

News of the sexual use of Christian women and children reached their homelands. The boy-martyr San Pelagio was a hero for resisting the amorous intentions of Abd ar-Rahman III, and the "Tribute of the Hundred Virgins" was an important *reconquista* myth. The need to free Christian captives was frequently part of the call to arms. The existence of the captives was indeed convenient for Christian monarchs, and the issue was surely manipulated, just as in the sixteenth century the danger of Moorish pirates was used by the Castilian rulers to distract subjects from internal problems. All the same, the use of Christian women and children for sexual purposes, and the castration of Christian boys, were significant factors in solidifying Christian public opinion against Islam.

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