

Conference Report

Sessions on Slavery The International Medieval Congress (Leeds, 4-7 July 2016)

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Over the past few years, the International Medieval Congress (IMC), held at Leeds University each July, has grown immensely. Those of us interested in regions outside of Western Europe have found an ever-increasing range of sessions and scholars, coming from the rest of the world, and delving into subjects of Islamic and other non-western fields. The trend is positive, of course, allowing as it does opportunities for useful dialogue and cross-fertilization. It reflects a steady broadening of the range of scholarship being done on medieval topics.

The past few years have seen, specifically, a rapid and profound increase in scholarship surrounding questions of slavery in the medieval world. At the 2015 IMC, the number of papers treating slavery directly seemed to have reached a peak but, as usual in such a large conference, some conflicted directly with each other. Four of us, all scholars of medieval slavery, thought to organize an over-arching series of panels the following year.

The response to the call for papers was unprecedented: the effort resulted in the organization of ten panels on the study of slavery in the medieval world. The sessions took up the greater part of three days, with audiences of between thirty and sixty. One of the benefits of having so many people working on questions of slavery in the same place was that discussions were highly productive with many informed questions and comments in all the sessions.

The first day began with a panel on domestic slavery across time. It featured papers examining the metaphoric use of God as slaveholder in the sermons of Augustine of Hippo (Cassandra Casias, Emory); advice on relations between freeborn and enslaved youths in John Chrysostom (John Martens, St. Thomas); the appearance of slaves in the hagiographic writings of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (Sarah Bogue, Emory); and questions of paternity of children born to slave women in late medieval Florence

(Lynn Laufenberg, Sweet Briar).

The second panel looked at Scandinavian slave-trading. The first speaker (Matthew Delvaux, Boston College) argued that slavery and the slave trade were of greater significance than is usually thought in the Carolingian construction of power, and that external Viking attack as well as internal social instability subverted Carolingian control of these institutions. The second paper (Daniel Melleno, Denver) discussed the role of the Viking slave trade in cross-cultural contact across northern Europe. The third (Michael Kræmmer, Museum Sydøstdanmark) turned to post-Viking Scandinavia and examined literary sources for slave-taking during the Baltic crusades.

The final panel of the day looked at manumission with papers on Anglo-Saxon processes of manumission at a crossroads (David A. E. Pelteret); the freeing of captives, slaves, and prisoners in the Crusade-era Levant (Aysu Dinçer, University of Warwick); and what it meant to be a slave in the Kingdom of Mallorca in the Thirteenth Century, (Larry J. Simon, Department of History, Western Michigan University). It was an impressive first day. The discussions inspired by the papers made clear that the field of medieval slavery studies has begun to collapse many long-held notions, including the idea that slavery was of only anecdotal importance in post-Roman Christian Europe.

A persistent view, even among scholars, is that slavery in the pre-modern world had a particular association with Islam. The second day of sessions (Wednesday) offered papers looking at slavery in the Medieval Islamic World. The question remains open as to whether the papers succeeded in challenging such a view.

Certainly, though, the papers moved the topic substantially forward. The first paper extended Michael McCormick's arguments on the early medieval slave trade by examining Arabic sources that compliment his thesis (Matthew S. Gordon, Miami University); the second paper looked at the religious imperative behind the act of manumission in Islamic law (Cristina de la Puente, Departamento de Estudios Judíos e Islámicos, Instituto de Lenguas y Culturas del Mediterráneo (CSIC).

The papers of the second session looked at questions regarding the role of slaves in medieval Islamic households. The first paper considered accounts of slaves (especially elite *ghilmān*) to determine the well-being of even the most privileged of slaves, using violence and peril to life, limb, and physical soundness as a standard of measurement (Deborah Tor, University of Notre Dame). The next paper also looked at elite slaves by focussing on Rasūlid and Najāhid Yemen and the roles of eunuchs and others and their conflicts with high-status women (Magdalena Kloss, Austrian Academy of Sciences).

The third session of the day extended several of these themes. The first paper provided a look at domestic slavery in thirteenth and fourteenth-century Damascus by analysing names contained in reading certificates (*samā'āt*) to show that the majority were themselves the first generation of slaves and that the rate of manumission was high (Jan Hagedorn, University of St. Andrews). A second paper took on the famously itinerant household of Ibn Battuta as a case-study in how the lives of slaves might be viewed more broadly (Marina Tolmacheva, Washington State University).

The final session, perhaps the most

focused, looked at concubinage and slavery. The first paper re-examined assumptions regarding the musical performances of enslaved women (Karen Moukheiber, Orient Institut Beirut), the second looked through the prism of medieval erotic literature (Pernilla Myrne, Göteborgs Universitet), and the final paper examined issues of gender, ethnicity, and slavery in the study of music in the medieval Muslim regions (Lisa Nielson, Case Western Reserve University).

Panels on the final day (Thursday) contained quite interesting papers that challenged long-held assumptions regarding medieval slavery. A first paper looked at length at Hungarian historiography on slavery under the Árpád kings (Cameron Sutt, Austin Peay State University). This was followed by a newly developed but extremely innovative discussion of the ethnonym “Slav” and the manner in which it replaced Latin terms inherited from antiquity in West European languages (Marek Jankowiak, University of Oxford). The paper that followed discussed the medieval Russian slave trade and (Russian) exploitation of neighbouring regions (Jukka Korpela, University of Eastern Finland). This was followed by a paper that challenged the ‘Whig model’ of the history of slavery and questioned whether reading medieval Europe as being free of slavery was mistaking exceptional cases for the normative (Thomas J.

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The final panel concerned the changing role of the unfree in the post-Roman west. A first paper considered the life of Eligius of Noyon and its depictions of the movement of the unfree (Courtney Luckhardt, University of Southern Mississippi). The paper that followed revisited arguments made by economists since the 1970s on the decisions underlying the use of unfree rather than free labour; the suggestion was made that while economic factors were significant, more weight should be given to the variables that acted to render individuals unfree (Judith Spicksley, University of York). The final paper focussed on Bavaria in the high medieval period, arguing that a large slave population remained present there throughout the medieval period (Samuel S. Sutherland, Department of History, Ohio State University).

The strong sense is that the study of slavery in the medieval world – long viewed either as of secondary importance or as largely settled – has taken on new life. Many of the presenters suggested that, in their own particular sub-specialties, the evidence base has barely been scratched and analysis only begun. The origins of this new ferment in the field of slavery studies is not as evident but it is obvious that interest is growing and scholarship expanding.