

Teaching Note

Teaching Medieval Slavery and Captivity: An Online Pedagogical Resource

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Pulling together enough primary sources in translation to sustain an undergraduate course on slavery in the medieval period is difficult. If the students need to write research papers, it becomes even more difficult. After my first attempt at teaching such a class, I decided to create a permanent and easily accessible place to share the translations I had done for my own students and to enable colleagues to share theirs. A website, *Teaching Medieval Slavery and Captivity* (www.medievalslavery.org), turned out to be the best way to meet these twin goals of sharing resources and making it easier to teach about the long history of slavery and captivity, whether as the focus of an entire course or as the topic for a single day's discussion.

To make the website useful across disciplines, I decided that the geographical scope should be global and that the

medieval era should be interpreted broadly. I also used thematic categories to connect sources from disparate regions and time periods that might be interesting to teach in comparative perspective. Consulting with scholars in areas beyond my expertise was great fun (and valuable for incorporating slavery into my global history survey), but as a scholar of the Mamluks, I also wanted to have a robust collection of sources on slavery in a variety of Islamicate societies. If you access the website today, most of these have been gathered under regional headings (Middle East and North Africa, Africa, Europe, and Russia and Central Asia), but there are also some short passages formatted for the AP World History exam that could be adapted for other purposes.

For those of us teaching the medieval Middle East, I hope that this website will help address three pedagogical

challenges. First, I hope that it will add interdisciplinary richness to our classes. As a historian, I am used to working with written texts, but in teaching I want to include art, architecture, music, archaeology, and many other angles into the past. Enslaved and manumitted people were involved in so many aspects of cultural and artistic life in the medieval Middle East, as creators and patrons as well as objects of depiction or description, that it makes sense to use their status as the focus of an interdisciplinary discussion.

Second, given some of the lurid stories that circulate about practices of slavery in medieval Muslim societies, I hope that a comparative perspective will help undergraduates reexamine their assumptions in this area. For example, it is worth reminding students that slave ownership, including sexual exploitation and physical abuse, was normal among medieval Christians and Jews as well as Muslims, in the Middle East and elsewhere, and that tensions surrounding the treatment of slaves were connected to the policing of social boundaries. For this purpose, I might pair a source such as “The Slave Women of al-Manṣūr Ḥajjī,” in which political boundaries are at stake, with “A Legal Query to Moses Maimonides” and “Felix Fabri’s Wanderings in the Holy Land,” in which the boundaries between religious communities are threatened. For a

course with a global/comparative element, I also recommend the bioarchaeological work of Tiffany Tung¹ on Peru and Debra Martin² on the American Southwest. On a more mundane level, I also have students compare the contractual formulas used in sale documents for slaves, such as “A Deed of Sale of Yumn” and “Slave Sale Contracts from Genoa.” This helps them both compare practices of slavery and understand the distinction between the fixed and variable elements of a contract.

Finally, I hope that presenting a broad array of sources will enable students to have more nuanced discussions about the ways in which slavery intersected with religion, race, and gender within medieval Islamic societies. The complex positionality of eunuchs between power (“The Sabīl-Kuttāb of Yūsuf Āghā Dār al-Sa‘adāt) and vulnerability (“The Guide Book for Obtaining Divine Favors”) is one example; the contrast between the honored mother of a former mamluk and the domestic slave who killed her is another (“Execution of a Mamluk Slave Woman”).

I plan to continue adding materials to this website for the foreseeable future. If you would like to contribute a source to the collection, or if you use the website in your class and would like to write a teaching reflection about your experiences, please get in touch.

1. Tiffany Tung, “Violence against Women: Differential Treatment of Local and Foreign Females in the Heartland of the Wari Empire, Peru,” in *The Bioarchaeology of Violence*, ed. Debra Martin, Ryan Harrod, and Ventura Pérez, 180–98 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012).

2. Debra Martin, “Ripped Flesh and Torn Souls: Skeletal Evidence for Captivity and Slavery from the La Plata Valley, New Mexico, AD 1100–1300,” in *Invisible Citizens: Captives and Their Consequences*, ed. Catherine Cameron, 159–80 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008).