

Slave Trading in the Early Middle Ages. Long-distance Connections in Northern and East Central Europe.

By Janel M. Fontaine.

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The history of slavery in the early Middle Ages has undergone vigorous investigation since the publication of Michael McCormick's *Origins of the European Economy* in 2001, with scholars puzzling over the many shades of unfreedom. There has also been a flood of publications on the Viking diaspora and the trade-routes it stimulated. Meanwhile, historians of the Abbasid caliphate have uncovered the workings of the “single market” between the Atlantic, the Persian Gulf and the Aral Sea, which the Abbasid authorities fostered from the mid-eighth century onwards. One important underpinning of the single market was a stable currency—in the form of dirhams of fairly stable weight and silver content. That many thousands of dirhams reached the Baltic region has long been known. But recent lead-isotope analysis of silver artefacts like arm-rings suggests that dirhams began to reach Baltic markets in substantial quantities in the early ninth century, considerably earlier than previously supposed.

The question arises as to how far our written sources register this. Torrents of fresh numismatic and archaeological data surge in, whereas the corpus of written evidence is static and, even when plentiful, inclined to consist of prescriptive texts. Even functional texts such as wills and charters are not shortcuts to firm conclusions, given the ambiguousness of terms like *servus*. Our one firm basis for defining a slave comes from those at the bottom of the heap, lacking any kinsmen or other connections, and thus chattels at their owner's disposal. In such conditions, Janel Fontaine writes, “of a flexible and pervasive slavery [...] legal or juridical status did not necessarily dictate the types of labour performed”; one may learn more “by focusing on the demand for slave labour within areas of intensive slaving”, assessing “where we find demand for slave labour and why” (p. 20). Her book sets out to

investigate two regions where such conditions seem to obtain, regions far apart with different geopolitics, yet susceptible to similar transregional developments.

The regions Fontaine investigates are the Czech lands straddling the Morava and Vltava Rivers, with the Upper Elbe to the north and the Danube to the south; and the British Isles. The period covered runs from the seventh century to the earlier twelfth. These constitute “case studies,” areas whose every scrap of written evidence is examined along with a mass of archaeological data, viewed against the broader Eurasian background. The advantage of focusing on two regions and sets of societies is that one may gauge change over time more precisely: the extent to which slaves’ activities remained much the same, along with the extent to which demand varied over *la longue durée*—internal demand within those regions but also external demand from far away. What Fontaine’s case studies reveal is that internal demand remained substantial and fairly steady from the seventh to the eleventh centuries, if one allows for the sparseness of sources for the seventh to ninth centuries; but that the marked upswing in demand of the later ninth and, above all, the tenth and eleventh centuries is due to *external* demand. Fontaine points to the commercial networks linking Iceland to the British Isles and Baltic emporia, along with the plethora of routes along the Russian riverways as far as the Caspian and the Black Sea. And she traces the upsurge in demand for slaves in all these peripheral regions: Iceland (where slaves, especially women, were needed to populate the island); the courts of the Abbasid caliphs and their emirs, who paraded ranks of male and female slaves as marks of wealth and power; the Umayyad caliphs of al-Andalus, whose armed forces included many *Saqāliba* from Eastern Europe; and Byzantium, where slaves were much in demand. All this is the Bigger Picture of vast, ever-fluctuating, external demand. This is the background to changing patterns of slave-taking and slave-trading, which the Czech and British Isles case studies reveal.

What Fontaine has done is to take in the torrents of new data mentioned earlier, and channel them into providing an explanation for the changes in slave-trading seen over time in her chosen regions. Or, as she puts it, “integrat[ing] case study and network perspectives” (p. 7). Her choice of the Czech lands and the British Isles was made with care. There are similarities in that in neither does one find tightly-knit polities before the tenth century and, even then, the ruler’s writ did not run smoothly or unchallenged: recent research has shown how the unification of England under the West Saxon kings is exaggerated by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, whose writers worked under their aegis. English written records are markedly fuller than their Czech counterparts, but the categories of laws, churchmen’s *Lives* and homilies and so forth are broadly similar. And, most strikingly, in both regions there is a falling-off in mentions of slave-making or -trading from the late eleventh century onwards: Czech examples peter out after the first quarter of the twelfth century,

and the same goes for lowland England, even if slave-taking and -trading carried on around the Irish Sea and Britain's northern shores. This is not to deny the differences between the Czechs' location and the British Isles, or the distortions caused by our heavy dependence on Frankish sources featuring the Slavs as captives or casual raiders rather than as engaging in any more systematic activity. But, as Fontaine notes, we are not wholly dependent on Frankish sources, especially once Bohemian rulers began issuing charters and laying down rules from the late tenth century onwards.

If slave-trading in the Czech lands has not received the attention it deserves, this owes something to the Marxist dogma dominating Czech historiography in the middle and later twentieth century. Slaves have received much more attention in the British Isles, but one should not underestimate the unwillingness to acknowledge the persistence of everyday violence and honour-killing among English historians, or the reluctance of some Irish historians to acknowledge Dublin's role as, in effect, a hub for the slave-trade. Influential English historians have seen in the spread of Christian teaching and the writings of figures like Archbishop Wulfstan of York an explanation for an apparent decline in slave-trading in Britain in the eleventh century. Fontaine questions this view of Christian churchmen as unequivocally hostile to slave-trading, pointing out that Wulfstan—not unlike the Bohemian duke Břetislav I reportedly banning penal enslavement, or Adalbert of Prague—were condemning particular aspects, rather than the practice of slavery itself. Thus, Adalbert's principal objection was to the sale of Christians to Jews, not all slave-trading. By combing through all available sources for the British Isles and the Czech lands, Fontaine casts serious doubt on the view that the Christian Church was through its very expansion responsible for putting an end to slaving.

One must highlight the sheer range of written sources underpinning this important conclusion: not only Frankish chronicles but also prescriptive texts in Welsh and Irish alongside Saints' *Lives* and annals. The Slavic sources are scantier, but sharp-eyed *Quellenkritik* can extract nuggets from the *Lives* of Cyril and Methodios, Přemyslid charters and the *Zakon Sudniy Liudem*, nearly half of whose clauses mention slavery. A couple of examples are worth noting. The *Někotoraja Zapověd* is a penitential probably originating in Bohemia between the ninth and eleventh centuries. One clause bans castration of a boy by force or by parents for purposes of sale. Selling one's children into slavery is not banned outright, but the clause tries to stop sale for obvious profit or when the child would probably end up in non-Christian hands. This canon is unique among Western and Eastern European penitentials. Noting the demand for enslaved eunuchs in the Islamic world, Fontaine detects a clue as to the importance of Islamic markets to Bohemian slave-trading, thus a network spanning Prague, Byzantium and the Middle East. Careful *Quellenkritik* also sheds light on the uses of slaves for monastic land-management in Ireland, England,

Bohemia and Moravia. The charters of Olomouc and Kladruby suggest the new foundations' need for agricultural labour, stimulating demand for slaves in eleventh- and twelfth-century markets. This bolsters scepticism as to whether Christianity's spread was inimical to slavery—while also showing what scanty Central European sources can divulge.

Besides offering such nuggets, this book aims to demonstrate how slavery was engrained in the fabric of the societies of the British Isles already in the seventh century; likewise in the Czech lands from when source-materials increase in the ninth century. Fontaine reviews the various modes of making slaves—selling one's children, penal enslavement, kidnapping and capture in war. And, undeniably, slave-trading was going on. But this was often fairly short-distance and is what she terms “opportunistic,” carrying on in this manner in later centuries. There was, however, a step-change in the ninth century, when evidence abounds in the British Isles of slave-taking *en masse*, with preference shown for young women and children. Irish annals tell of raids mounted by Vikings but also by Irish warlords specifically to take slaves in their hundreds. And the ninth-century *Life* of Findan has its hero being taken captive, sold and resold, escaping just before transportation across the North Sea. These goings-on, Fontaine observes, match with the evidence of massive demand for exotic slaves among Abbasid and Central Asian elites. They also fit with the aforementioned evidence of Eastern silver flowing into the Baltic Rim—and still further west—around this time. Fontaine does not discount demand for other commodities, notably furs. Nonetheless, the pattern of evidence points towards an upsurge in demand for slaves from far-flung regions triggering slave-taking and -trading on an almost “industrial” scale.

If external demand set off the rise of organised slave-trading across the British Isles and the Czech lands alike, one might suppose that slackening in external demand would have a negative effect. And that, in broad terms, is what happened. The purchasing-power of the Abbasids and Samanids waned in the late tenth century, along with the rationale for displays of slave-girls and -warriors. And the same goes for the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus by the 1030s. This does not mean that all external demand evaporated. Byzantine markets were buoyant, as were Fatimid Egypt's. And Fontaine highlights evidence for the robustness of slave-trading across the Czech lands, justifying one of her chapters' subheads, “All roads lead to Prague.” There are hints of Prague's trade links fanning out in all directions—to Hungarians, Rus and Byzantium. And judging by an eleventh-century rabbinic text, someone living in Przemyśl knew that he could easily sell a boy in Prague's markets. Through such examples, Fontaine demonstrates Prague's unique position astride several riverways and land-routes. She also suggests why slave-owning and -trading persisted long after the coming of Christianity. Even if not slave-taking himself,

a ruler could greatly profit from the tolls and market-dues generated by the trade. In England and Prague alike, this probably dampened their enthusiasm for banning slave-trading outright. The same goes for senior churchmen like Wulfstan presiding over the market in York and those managing Bohemian monastic foundations like Olomouc.

This remarkable book seems to succeed in addressing Big Questions by investigating finite bodies of evidence—using the “micro” to resolve issues in the “macro.” Minor queries arise, of course. Firstly, the forcefulness and rigour of Reformist churchmen from the later eleventh century on will have curbed royal appetites for slave-trading. Archbishop Lanfranc of Canterbury finally got his way with William the Conqueror, overcoming William’s objection to losing revenue from ports like Bristol. Churchmen like Lanfranc could offer to underpin the administrative framework in non-monetary ways, and what holds for Anglo-Norman England might apply to the Přemyslid polity in the twelfth century, too. Secondly, shackles deserve rather more weight as potential “footprints” of slaves and slave-trading. After all, six iron shackles have been found at Hedeby, most by the harbour, and this was certainly an emporium for the slave-trade.

These, though, are quibbles, in no way detracting from this major reassessment of the chronology and significance of slavery and slave-trading not only in the Czech lands and the British Isles but across Eastern Europe and far beyond. This book has much to offer students of the early medieval economy and state-formation in general. Comprising little more than 250 sides, it is a classic case of “Less is More.”

