CHAPTER ONE

SLAVERY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Medieval Slavery, Modern Sensibilities

Modern preconceptions and sensibilities have profoundly affected historical interpretations of the medieval institution of slavery. Paradoxically, these same preconceptions and sensibilities have been moulded and shaped by the discourse on slavery in the modern era. The nineteenth-century struggle to abolish slavery lies at the very heart of this paradox. Abolitionism has been widely regarded by historians as a defining watershed in British civilisation. Modern sensibilities concerning freedom, democracy, individualism, and the superiority of western civilisation would all appear to have stemmed from that “unweary, unostentatious and inglorious crusade.”¹ The abolitionist’s triumph thereby severed one of the final links between modern industrial Britain and the less savoury aspects of its more barbarous medieval past. The disturbing nature of New World slavery and the way in which it was eradicated gave rise to a powerful and emotive cultural antipathy towards the institution of slavery. This antipathy has helped to obscure memories of Britain’s involvement in the establishment and perpetuation of the New World slave trade. Indeed, it has resulted in a kind of collective historical amnesia concerning the fact that Britain’s industrial revolution was financed primarily by the profits from that trade. The events and debates surrounding the 2007 bicentennial of the abolition of the British slave trade have shed some light on these issues. Nevertheless, the bicentennial commemorations generally served to reinforce longstanding perceptions associating Britain with abolitionism and progress rather than with tainted slave-trade profits and the horrors of the Middle Passage. Yet, even the apparently noble cause of abolition had certain less pleasant side effects that have been overlooked by the nation’s historians. The success of the abolition movement contributed significantly towards the construction of a ‘superior’

and ‘civilising’ ideology that was subsequently employed as an excuse for aggressive imperial expansionism and colonial domination. This in turn intensified racist attitudes towards the indigenous populations of Britain’s colonies and created a legacy of inequality that continues to plague us to this day. The moral outrage that accompanies the modern antipathy towards slavery would have been harder to discern in any British community prior to the eighteenth century. Moreover, within the societies of medieval Britain slavery was regarded as a necessary institution; essential for the perpetuation social and cultural order.

This chapter will attempt to improve our understanding of the significance of slavery in medieval Britain by first seeking to understand how modern attitudes and sensibilities have distorted our view of that institution. It is important that we recognise how medievalists have constructed the institution of slavery and acknowledge the effect that abolitionist ideology has had on these constructions. Modern ideological perspectives and economic rationales have immeasurably distorted our view of medieval slavery. A critique of these economic approaches will, therefore, be provided using Anglo-Saxon society as a case study. This critique will then be related to some suggestions regarding the alternative and, perhaps, more fruitful lines of enquiry that will be pursued during the course of this study.

Until recently scholars of medieval history have rarely discussed slavery. Indeed, many medieval historians have chosen to ignore the subject altogether. Those historians who have dealt with slavery have attempted to sanitise our view of the institution. One consequence of this has been a tendency to depict the enslaved as being either in need of or deserving of this servile status. The nineteenth century English historian E.A. Freeman portrayed enslavement as a kind of medieval

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