CONCLUSION

THE ENDURING LEGACY OF MEDIEVAL SLAVERY

Slavery was an institution that was of immense cultural significance to the societies of early medieval Britain. It was essential for defining both social hierarchy and community identity. Its existence reinforced traditional patriarchal order and contributed towards cultural constructions of power and gender. Only a fundamental shift in attitudes and norms could have diminished its social significance. Such a shift clearly occurred during the late-eleventh and twelfth centuries. By the end of the twelfth century the reform movement had instigated a reconfiguration of traditional patriarchal systems within the societies of England, Scotland and Wales. A similar reconfiguration was to occur within many Irish communities during the thirteenth century. Yet, the veneer of the reform ideology was extremely thin and traditional behavioural traits were never far from the surface. During periods of ethnic tension or when centralised authority broke down problems of youthful lawlessness, sexual violence and anti-clericalism would quickly resurface. Moreover, traditional practices of female accumulation and resource polygyny were never abandoned by the secular elite, although, they were continued in a more discreet and covert manner. In England and Scotland the ascendancy of the reformers’ ideals concerning monogamy and legitimacy limited the disruption caused by such sexual incontinence. However, internecine violence and political fragmentation continued to plague the societies of Ireland and Wales. We have already seen that whilst this was the case then the resurgence of slave raiding activity was always a possibility. Furthermore, it must be recognised that the twelfth-century ecclesiastical reformers did not strive to eradicate the institution of slavery from the shores of Britain, indeed this had never been one of their objectives. They certainly regarded slave raiding and trading to be barbarous and immoral enterprises associated with sinfulness. Nevertheless, they continued to view slavery as an indispensable institution that was essential for maintaining social order.

1 See chapter 5.
2 Ibid.
Without slavery how could sin be punished? How could disorder be suppressed and hierarchy reinforced? Such attitudes are clearly evident from the judgement of the Council of Westminster in 1127 that readily condoned the enslavement of clerical concubines for their sexual impropriety.\(^3\) This significant judgement also reveals that the forces of reform had radically intensified more traditional associations between feminine sexuality, moral corruption and powerlessness. This ancient association between slavery, femininity and sexual accessibility appears to have remained undiminished within the cultures of Western Europe throughout the Middle Ages.

There has been a consensus of opinion amongst modern historians that slavery disappeared from Western Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries primarily as a result of the growth of the market economy during this period.\(^4\) Indeed, there have been very few dissenters from this line of argument that appears to reinforce modern Western sensibilities regarding notions of freedom, the rise of capitalism and the development of European civilisation generally. Yet, if slavery did disappear from Western Europe during the medieval era then this would make the societies within that region and time frame extremely exceptional ones.\(^5\) Indeed, more exceptional than the modern economically sophisticated Western European societies in which slavery stubbornly persists despite the fact that it has been universally outlawed and is considered morally reprehensible.\(^6\) There have, of course, been a number of academics who have voiced concerns that the medieval records do not support such an optimistic view of the medieval past. Taylor has recently argued that an absence of evidence for slaves does not necessarily constitute an absence of slaves in any given society.\(^7\)

Even Marc Bloch, whose work shaped modern arguments for the disappearance of slavery through economic expediency, commented

\(^3\) See chapter 4.
\(^5\) Taylor has argued that “there are good reasons for supposing slavery to have been a major structural feature of the majority of human social formations at least since the advent of farming... it is not clear to me whether any society has yet been free of the phenomenon de facto” Taylor, “Ambushed by a Grotesque”, pp. 225, 232.
\(^7\) “In a daily newspaper there is very little that informs readers that water and electricity are being constantly delivered. Only if there is a problem is something recorded. Thus in accounts of society where slave labour is assumed, we rarely hear of slaves—for the most part, they are simply too obvious and too uninteresting” Taylor, “Ambushed by a Grotesque”, pp. 228–229.