Slavery in Late Medieval Europe

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In the later Middle Ages, from the twelfth century through the fifteenth, Europe’s internal economy continued to develop and strengthen. Slavery was still present, although agriculture throughout most of Europe was the concern of serfs or free peasants. Domestic and artisan slavery persisted, particularly in Italy and the Iberian Peninsula. In this chapter we shall examine late medieval European slavery, both as an important segment of slavery’s long history and as a prelude to the development of American slavery. Such an examination is especially important, because slavery in the New World would owe its origins to several late medieval traditions. First, the Crusades greatly expanded the activities of the Italian merchants, the most active European slave traders of the period, and, as an additional result of the Crusades, Europeans vastly expanded their knowledge of sugar, whose history in the Americas is impossible to disentangle from that of slavery. The Spanish and Portuguese reconquests kept slavery alive and flourishing in the Iberian Peninsula. The revival of Roman law and its influence on European legal development was also crucial, because the rules regulating slavery occupied such an important place in the Roman legal system. As a consequence of that revival, Spain and Portugal both had fully developed laws regulating servile status even before they began to expand overseas. We also shall consider the consequences of the Black Death in creating a heightened demand for slaves.

The Crusades and Sugar

As we have seen, slavery was constantly present in the Mediterranean lands from ancient to modern times. In the society of Christian Europe, slavery persisted around the shores of the inland sea even as it was declining in continental Europe. When western Europeans embarked on the Crusades, the Middle Ages’ energetic though abortive movement of territorial expansion, the participants of all ranks and callings knew slavery as an unquestioned aspect of their society, although the numbers of slaves were small everywhere in Europe.
