SLAVERY AND SOLIDARITY: MUDEJARS AND FOREIGN MUSLIM CAPTIVES IN THE KINGDOM OF VALENCIA

MARK D. MEYERSON

The history of medieval Spain lends itself particularly well to an analysis of the role of the institution of slavery in the evolution of Christian-Muslim relations. During the centuries of conflict between Iberia’s Christian kingdoms and the sultanates of Islamic Spain and North Africa, armies, raiding parties, and seaborne corsairs from both sides returned home with human booty for their respective slave markets. Scholars have shed much light on the lot of Christian captives in Islamic lands and on the development of procedures, institutions, and religious orders, such as the Mercedarians, for the ransom of these captives. This assertion can be made more strongly with respect to the early modern period, since the plight of Spanish Christians captured by the “Barbary corsairs” or the Ottoman Turks has especially kindled the scholarly and popular imagination.¹

Comparatively less is known about the fortunes of Muslim captives in the Spanish Christian kingdoms, even though they comprised throughout the Middle Ages the majority of their slave populations. The Christians of the realms of Castile and the Crown of Aragon (composed of the principality of Catalonia, the kingdom of Aragon, the kingdom of Valencia, and the Bales-

aric islands) obtained Muslim slaves through frontier raiding and the conquest of expanses of Muslim-held territory. By the end of the thirteenth century the Christian kingdoms had conquered all of the Iberian peninsula from the Muslims, with the important exception of the Nasrid sultanate of Granada. This military success and the subsequent stabilization of borders between the Christian kingdoms and the Nasrid sultanate curtailed considerably the flow of Muslim slaves into Christian hands. Henceforth, the supply of slaves to Castile was limited mainly to the relatively few Muslims who happened to be captured along the Granadan frontier. Since after 1304 the territories of the Crown of Aragon no longer bordered on Islamic states, its Christian subjects increasingly turned to privateering and piracy in Granadan and North African waters in order to procure Muslims slaves. Also, Catalan merchants, through their participation in the Mediterranean slave trade, added Sards, Greeks, Russians, Armenians, and other peoples to the hitherto entirely Muslim slave population. Only in the latter half of the fifteenth century did the influx of black slaves from Portuguese factories in west Africa begin to alter significantly the ethnic and religious composition of Christian Iberia’s slave populations.

The late medieval kingdom of Valencia is, for a number of reasons, an especially appropriate setting for exploring the fortune of Muslim captives in Christian Spain. A frontier region occupying much of the Iberian peninsula’s eastern seaboard, it saw the coming and going of both peaceful Maghriban merchants and Maghriban corsairs intent on enslaving Christians and plundering. Also, although Valencia was separated from Nasrid Granada by the Castilian kingdom of Murcia, it nonetheless suffered from the depredations of Granadan raiders (almugaveers) and profited from trade with Granadan merchants. Valencian Christians thus approached foreign Muslims with a mixture of religious hostility, fear, and profit motive. They were prepared to conduct commerce with Granadan and Maghriban Muslims as well as aggressively to seek Muslim captives on land and sea. The propensity of their own kings to establish truces and commercial arrangements with Muslim princes, and then, after a few years of pacific interaction, to make war against them accentuated this rough-and-ready quality of Valencian frontier life.