Book Reviews


Years ago, while sight-seeing in Toledo with a friend, we saw a number of rusty chains and manacles fastened high on the exterior walls of the cathedral. We speculated how they might have gotten there and why they remained, thinking that perhaps they were left over from some kind of gruesome episode of the Inquisition. Only some years later did I discover that they were left as thanksgiving offerings from former captives who had gained their freedom, they believed, through the intercession Saint Mary. This mute testimony of gratitude is a reminder of the involuntary servitude that unfortunates were subject to well into the modern era, the yearning for freedom that is common to those who fall into this state and the bargains that they make with supernatural forces to enlist their help.

William Phillips Jr., in this 2014 study of slavery in Iberia, attempts always to keep in mind that the subjects were individual people and not simply historical ciphers. The Romans may have called the slave a, “tool with a voice,” but Professor Phillips tries to remember that each one was a person with a life of his or her own. It is not always easy to find the person in the documents since in sources from the Middle Ages, slaves usually are nameless and voiceless. Studying the position of slaves in legal codes can only tell us so much about the institution and almost nothing about the human face and the human cost. Even in bills of sale, individuals are most often identified by their origins and perhaps by distinguishing physical characteristics or specific talents or skills that they possess, but rarely by name. When slaves were subsumed into a household, whether in the Christian or Islamic realms of Iberia, they normally assumed the name of their master and their own identities were suppressed.

Slavery in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia is a survey of literature on the subject rather than an offering of new, original research. Professor Phillips’s
sources, therefore, are mainly secondary, although he has made use of the Archivo General de Simancas and of R.I. Burns’ translation of the *Siete Partidas*. The author says in the introduction that the present work has taken much longer to complete than he anticipated when he embarked upon the project, and this is probably because the subject of slavery has received such scrutiny in the last several decades that keeping up with the tidal wave of publications about it could not have been easy. Slavery has long been an interest of Professor Phillips (Professor Emeritus, U. of Minnesota), having authored *Slavery From Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade* thirty years ago. The present work serves as a good embarkation point for someone studying the “peculiar institution,” particularly its manifestation in Iberia, and the comprehensive bibliography will serve as a valuable resource.

The work is organized thematically rather than chronologically. Following a brief overview of slavery from antiquity up to its extinction in the modern period, there are chapters on becoming a slave, the slave trade, living as a slave, working as a slave, and becoming free.

Applying Moses Finley’s standard that to be considered a “slave society” at least thirty percent of the population had to be slaves, Professor Phillips concludes that Iberia was never such a society, or, if it was, it was only so for a brief period in the late Roman Republic or early Empire. There was probably never the sort of gang slavery in Iberia that flourished in Italy, Sicily, and North Africa, where large latifundia that produced wheat for the metropolis were worked by gangs of captives. Certainly, by the third century CE gang slavery had largely disappeared from the peninsula. The era of territorial conquests that led to large numbers of slaves coming onto the market was over and city life began to contract, the urban gentry retreating to their villae, and these were self-sufficient with few or no slaves, and definitely none in large numbers. The only possible exception is Mallorca in the period after the Christian conquest of the early thirteenth century when large numbers of Muslim captives poured onto the market and the Christian authorities, uneasy at having so many “enemies” in their midst, forbade Muslims to live near the coast lest they collaborate with Muslim corsairs.

There were numbers of slaves who worked in the mines and, in the modern period, some were to be found as rowers in the galleys. Contrary to popular conception, however, in the Middle Ages galley rowers were normally free, paid workers. It was only during the reign of the Catholic Monarchs that convicted criminals, the *forzados*, could be condemned to galley service. In addition to these, Muslims or Jews convicted of capital crimes by their own legal systems became property of the Crown and could be sent to the galleys. The only circumstances in which those who were legally slaves would find themselves