

The Economics of Slavery and Unfreedom in the Middle Ages

Saturday, March 26th, 2022 • Kibble Suite, Glasgow Grosvenor Hotel

‘Economics and the structure of the slave trade’

Adam Sands (Volterra)

The structure of the slave trade changed over time, for example from small-scale raiders to states organising the distribution and selling of slaves. The structure of industries and why they change is an important part of economics. Three Nobel prizes have been awarded for work in this area (Coase, Hart, Williamson). In the jargon of economics, the key is “transactions costs”, which can be thought of as the costs of doing business. For example, do you carry out a raid to collect slaves yourself, or do you contract with a third party to do it for you? This paper introduces the concept of transactions costs and gives examples.

‘The elasticity of slave supply in early medieval Europe’

Janel Fontaine (University of Glasgow/Institute of Historical Research)

Early medieval societies deployed a range of methods for enslaving others, both licit and illicit, and in times of peace or war. In large-scale slaving operations, similar methods were capable of reacting flexibly to surges and drops in the demand for slaves, creating an elastic slave supply. This paper will explore elasticity in an early medieval context, with particular attention to the growth of slave trading in the ninth and tenth centuries in northern and east central Europe.

‘From Shestovytsya to Cherson: markets from pop-ups to fixed points’

Jonathan Shepard (University of Oxford)

In the Early Middle Ages, trading in the Viking world and beyond went on between far-flung emporia. A sine qua non was assurance of a variety of deluxe, high-value commodities on offer, along with dealers of sufficient purchasing-power. Fixed points were likeliest to provide these conditions. However, such exchanges could also take place at temporary or seasonal markets. To the former category – of fixed points – belongs Cherson on the Crimea, engaging in long-distance trade from Antiquity onwards. In the latter category one may place Shestovytsya, near modern Chernihiv. Recent research suggests that at first – in the early tenth century – trading was essentially seasonal. The location was on the River Desna, on routes leading east and south-east to the Middle Volga or the Khazar and Islamic worlds; or west to the Baltic Rim and Central Europe. Shestovytsya also lay on the edge of the steppes, frequented by nomads with their own produce to exchange: they had long been trading with Cherson in northern goods. Slave-trading may have been the ‘vital spark’ behind commercial exchanges at Shestovytsya in the early tenth century, the ‘movers-and-shakers’ being the Rus. Archaeological data from there seems to match what one might expect, judging by Ibn Fadlan’s report on the itinerant Rus slave-traders on the Middle Volga in 922. Rus traders on the Desna could have conducted exchanges with traders from Volga Bulgaria but also with steppe-nomads. Of relevance is earlier and later literary evidence of nomads acquiring slaves

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from north of the steppes for sale in Cherson's markets. Unlike many pop-ups, Shestovytsya became a fixed point, even a powerbase for the Rus, judging from its mention by the mid-tenth-century Byzantine emperor, Constantine VII. Towards the century's end, following Prince Vladimir's Conversion, the site shifted slightly, and the newly-built Christian town of Chernihiv became a major princely seat.

'The rise of Mediaeval Slavery in the East-Central Europe: between war captives, traded slaves and *mancipia*. An archaeological view'

Jiří Macháček (Masaryk University)

Central European archaeology provides numerous, but only indirect evidence of the existence of early medieval slavery. Part of this material will be presented and critically evaluated in the conference paper. We will try to estimate what importance slavery may have had for the economic development of eastern Central Europe between the 6th and 10th centuries. We will look at the transformation of this phenomenon over time. However, the emphasis will be placed on the evaluation of relevant archaeological finds associated with Great Moravia, as we label the complex society that was formed in the territory of today's Czech Republic and Slovakia in the 9th century. Its disappeared centres have been intensively excavated for the last 70 years. This research has yielded many knowledge about the structure and development of early medieval society in this part of Europe. We will discuss whether slaves were more of a tradable commodity for local elites to exchange for valuable goods or more of an important manpower.

'Tainted Midas touch? The curious case of Viking-Age Gotland'

Jacek Gruszczynski (PCA Heritage)

The paucity of contemporary written sources about Gotland may imply it was of little importance in the early medieval economic dynamics of the Baltic Zone. This stands in stark contrast with the unparalleled abundance of Viking Age precious metal finds on the island, principally hoards. The island is also strategically located in the centre of the Baltic. Its position offered excellent links between the emerging Scandinavian states, the Holy Roman Empire, Sami hunters, Slavs and Balts. The latter provided a gateway to the lands of the Rus and beyond to the Caliphate. Yet the island had few resources of its own. How then were its inhabitants able to obtain and accumulate the highest volume and concentration of silver known from the Viking Age?

By considering silver flows and depositional patterns of hoards, their archaeological context, and consulting written sources and law codes, I will examine the Gotlanders' relationship with silver and arguably one of the most profitable early-medieval occupations: slave trading.