

African Slavery

Slavery existed from the earliest known history of Africa. The ancient Egyptians enslaved various groups of people—Semitic, Mediterranean, and Nubian blacks. Slavery also existed throughout sub-Saharan Africa and comprised a range of statuses and experiences, some of which were similar to chattel slavery, some to serfdom, and some to dependent family membership. Moreover, slave status could and often did change within one's lifetime. In the four centuries leading up to European contact with Africa, slavery differed little from slavery in the Muslim world. Slavery figured prominently in Islamic societies, where slaves were viewed as inhabiting a temporary state of legal exclusion and as having the same spiritual value as a freeborn person. Muslim slaves were allowed to marry, to have a family and independent income, and to purchase their freedom. This was the general view in Islam from about the eighth century, when the religion began to penetrate sub-Saharan Africa.

Slavery in European Communities Unfree status was not unique to Africa or unique to other peoples of color. European communities embraced forms of coerced labor, even chattel slavery, prior to and during the Medieval Period (fifth to fifteenth century C.E.). Before the rise of feudalism, slaves were predominantly drawn from the Slavic heartland of Eastern Europe (hence the word *slave*, related to *Slav*). It was not until the fall of Constantinople in 1453, when Europe was severed from the Balkans, that it turned its attention to Africa for slaves. David Pelteret's exhaustive study of early medieval England reveals the prevalence of slaves of European descent. Investigating late Anglo-Saxon and early Norman England between 875 and 1125, Pelteret has shown that slave status was defined by law as resulting from birth, war captivity, and various forms of punishment. Slaves represented more than 10 percent of the English population in 1086, although slavery declined throughout the eleventh century and ended altogether in the later decades of the twelfth century. Nonetheless, in sixteenth-century England it was common for vagrants and the poor to be rounded up, imprisoned, and bound to forced labor. Slavery never went away in Medieval Iberia (Spain and Portugal). Before the fifteenth century the slaves were primarily Muslims from Iberia or Orthodox Christians transported from Eastern Europe, although some black Africans had already trickled in through the Muslim trans-Saharan route. Black slaves came to Italy via North African merchants involved in the Sahara trade. Urban and domestic slavery existed in Mediterranean port cities such as Venice, Genoa, Barcelona, and Valencia in the fifteenth century, with varying degrees of access to freedom. In her study of the kingdom of Valencia, historian Debra Blumenthal found for the early decades of the 1400s governmental and court records that attest to a slave population of diverse ethnic, racial, and religious identities.