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Barker, Hannah. *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260-1500*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. viii, 314. 2 maps, 16 figures, 5 tables. \$79.95 hardcover.

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The “precious merchandise” was enslaved persons, whom the German Dominican friar Felix Fabri saw in 1483/4 as he passed through Alexandria while on pilgrimage. As Hannah Barker observes in the conclusion to her remarkable book, Fabri decently pitied these people as fellow creatures of God, though they did not fall under his gaze while in Venice, another slaving port. Commodifying people made them precious cargo, but no more so than the cinnamon, cloves, cotton, sugar, and other valuable wares passing through the docks. Slaves were a unique item of commerce, and trading in them was always more complicated than any other commodity. Barker is fully aware of these nuances, and she has carefully teased out the most important historical thread of this commerce in the eastern Mediterranean, sort of a triangle trade in which Genoese and Venetian merchants, who controlled access to the Black Sea, “acquired” slaves there and brought them by sea to the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt. This state relied upon a slave army whose former members constituted the civil and military elites, and so a constant and reliable supply of male slaves was vital to the regime’s survival. Mamluk merchants sometimes attempted to cut out the middlemen by reaching the Black Sea by land routes, but most of these were controlled by hostile Ottoman or other Turks. This book begins in 1260, just at the time the Italians seized control of the Black Sea and its lucrative trade from regional powers, most notably what was left of the partly revived Byzantine Empire, and just after a revolt in Egypt had established Mamluk rule in Egypt.

The end date of this book, the nicely rounded 1500, is a little problematic because it marks nothing particular about the slave trade, Venice, Genoa, or the Mamluk Empire, which the Ottomans conquered and incorporated into their vast realm in 1517. But a historian must stop somewhere, so fine. This date, however, serves as a reminder that the Ottomans, like the Byzantines for a time, controlled access to the Black Sea, surely after 1453, and drove the Italians out by 1475 and the conquest of the main Genoese colony, Caffa in the Crimea. Turks and Greeks do not figure prominently in this study, though they surely had some say in what passed through their waters and the Ottomans were developing their own distinctive method of military recruitment for the Janissaries, the *devshirme* in the Balkans. This context might add something to Barker’s analysis. Similarly, Eliyahu Ashtor’s study, *The Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (1983 and included in Barker’s immensely useful bibliography) serves as a reminder about the entire range of commodities in the eastern trade, as well as other players like the Catalans. Nevertheless, the strengths of Barker’s book do not derive from the context but from concentrating on the most distinctive and important aspect of this trade.

This book consists of seven chapters, the first four concerning various aspects of trading in slaves. The last three chapters take up what can be uncovered about the reprehensible business of obtaining slaves in the Black Sea, often from the Tartars of the Golden Horde, the roles of states and laws in managing this trade, and finally the complicated, hypocritical, and largely unsuccessful attempts by Western powers, mainly the papacy, to embargo trade with Islamic powers in the East, ostensibly to foster the forlorn prospects of recovering the Holy Land, this the context of the later crusades. These chapters and a brief conclusion supply by my count 1,567 inconveniently placed endnotes, and no one will complain that this book is under-referenced. These notes demonstrate that Barker is superbly skilled at doing this research as at least half the notes refer to primary sources, almost all unpublished, in Arabic, Latin, and a few in Italian dialects. Barker did thorough research in Genoa, Venice, Paris, and studied in Cairo. I am qualified to evaluate only that part of these formidable labors done in Italy, and Barker's command of the riches of the Genoese archival sources is unparalleled and uniformly outstanding. Any reader, especially of chapter 3 in which the style of Genoese involvement in slavery appears, will come away with by far the most complete view of it in this period, as well as a lesson in how a competent historian reads one type of source against another. To pick one example of many, the Genoese, in their way, taxed possession and trading of slaves and put up for auction the business of collecting the revenues. Much work went into Barker's estimate that the contractors tended to put in bids worth about 70% of anticipated revenue, and so one can calculate a good enough estimate of the number of slaves through especially the head tax on them (p. 63 and Figure 1). Previous scholars have deployed these and other records of fifteenth-century slavery, principally Domenico Gioffrè, but no one has worked with these sources with such care and insight. Numerous tables and figures present the reader with easily assimilated information that masks a lot of drudgery in discovering and assembling it.

This is an argument-driven book, and Barker's main finding in my view is that Venice, Genoa, and the Mamluk state ended up sharing in a common slave culture, despite some distinctive features of one or another of these societies, most importantly the privileged status *umm walad* (a female slave having a child by a free Muslim) and more importantly the free status of this child, a result rejected in Christian Europe. (These states were not slave societies because the percentages of slaves within them did not rise to the level of places like the American antebellum South or the Roman Empire.) Islamic states experimented with slave armies in ways unknown to the Italians. Islamic authors produced a genre of buyers' guides helping customers in the slave markets, and no signs of these aids appear in Italy. This difference is inexplicable. Nonetheless, the common thread in the Eastern Mediterranean is that none of the parties to this trade seriously questioned its morality, or slavery in general. Although all the Abrahamic faiths thought that freeing slaves might please God and benefit the soul, this belief did not mean that they deprecated slavery or that there were any moral qualms about having slaves in the first place—Barker found that nearly every convent in Genoa owned slaves as domestic servants, presumably cheaper than free women. Given the peculiar role of slaves in Mamluk society, where in almost every case the sultan was a former slave, their status was higher than in Italy, where slaves were overwhelming in this period women, Petrarch's (and Iris Origo's) domestic enemies.

In a few instances Barker might have considered the broader context, as already mentioned concerning Ashtor's studies on trade, and perhaps also Fernand Braudel and his by now admittedly rather remote history of the Mediterranean, and the more recent and important survey of the Mediterranean by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*

(2000). What might one learn from Braudel in this late season? Well, the big picture, especially on trade, and how events intersect with longer term trends in commerce. Horden and Purcell understand the regionality of the Mediterranean, down to its microregions and microclimates, and their interconnectivity. If a person from Ukraine or Caucasus ends up a slave in Venice or Cairo, what boundaries (language, epidemiology, ecology, climate to name a few) have been crossed and do they matter? Some of these perspectives might complicate the image of a common slave culture. Barker takes up the vexed question of race in this period, and chose to read the Latin word “*natio*” in this period as “race,” hence becoming a splitter rather than a lumpner, seeing a lot of racial variety in the eastern Mediterranean, as is the case. A big question remains, was there racism in the premodern Mediterranean, and how did it work? Barker is aware of earlier work by Geraldine Heng but her big book on the subject, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (2018) appeared too late for this study. No doubt there will be more debate on this very timely subject.

Barker has suggested that a common slave culture encompassed the Black Sea, Genoa, Venice, and the Mamluk Sultanate and that this commonality is a key to the study of slavery in this period. From now on, this book will be the fundamental place to begin for students of this sorry trade and its sequels.

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Author’s Response:

The author was provided with an opportunity to respond to the review, but declined.