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# **SLAVERY IN EUROPE FROM THE END OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE**

By David Meager

As we saw in a previous *Cross†Way* article slavery seems to have been common in the ancient world. The Old Testament accepted slavery but regulated its practice. Likewise the New Testament does not outlaw slavery but does improve the relationship of slaves and masters and this is reflected in the understanding and practice of the early church. It is often said that Christians were in favour of slavery until the advent of the abolitionist movement in the late 18th Century. This article will examine the history of slavery and Christian reactions to it from the Roman Empire up to the beginning of the abolitionist movement.

## **Serfdom**

The conditions of slaves generally improved as Christian teaching spread through the Roman Empire. As Rome declined so slavery declined whilst serfdom became more prominent. There are a number of reasons for this including economic considerations (serfs were reckoned to be more productive than slaves) and also the lack of captives from conquered nations.

The main difference between serfdom and slavery was that serfdom was generally less binding. Serfs usually worked on the land, whereas a slave could be employed in almost any occupation. Serfs normally had more legal rights than slaves, were normally bound to the land, whereas a slave could be sold by his owner. Serfs normally owned their means of production (grain, livestock, equipment etc) and could be called upon to pay taxes, or be enlisted into the army or work on roads. Much of the western and central European peasantry from the time of the Roman Empire until the French Revolution were serfs.

## **Slavery in Europe**

In the earliest part of the middle ages, slaves could be found in many societies, among them the Cymry in Wales and the Anglo-Saxons in England. The Slavs of central Europe were often captured and sold into slavery, usually by rival Slavonic tribes.

There is clear evidence that Christians accepted the institution of slavery:

- When the Bishop of Le Mans transferred a large estate to the Abbey of St. Vincent in 572, ten slaves went with it.
- In the early ninth century, the Abbey of St. Germain des Prés listed 25 of their 278 householders as slaves.
- In 1488, King Ferdinand sent 100 Moorish slaves to Pope Innocent VIII, who presented them as gifts to his cardinals and other court notables.
- Women slaves taken after the fall of Capua in 1501 were put up for sale in Rome.

However, some Christians resisted slavery, for example St Elgius, Bishop of Noyon, redeemed large numbers of captive slaves from many different nations:

*Religious men from all parts came to him, foreigners also and monks, and in whatever way he could serve he would either give them the money or share the price of the captives; for he had the greatest enthusiasm for this kind of work. Indeed, whenever he understood that a slave was being offered for sale, he hastened with the utmost speed in his mercy and immediately gave the price and freed the captive. Occasionally he redeemed from captivity at the same time as many as twenty, thirty, or even fifty; sometimes even the whole body of slaves up to a hundred souls, coming from various peoples, and of both sexes, he would free as they left the ship; there were Romans, Gauls, and Britons also, and men of Marseilles, but they were chiefly men of Saxony, who at that time in large numbers like flocks were expelled from their own lands and scattered in different countries. (Source: Fordham University website)*

In the seventh century, the wealthy St Eloi bought British and Saxon slaves in batches of 50 and 100 so that he could set them free.

There is also evidence that in the tenth and twelfth centuries Christians were basing their views on slavery on how the Jews in the Old Testament were told to treat slaves, so that slavery was allowed, but Christians were not to treat each other as slaves. The Council of Koblenz (922) declared that if someone sold a Christian into slavery they would be guilty of murder. Whilst according to William the Conqueror, *'we forbid any one to sell a Christian into a foreign land and especially to heathens. For let great care be taken lest their souls for which Christ gave His life be sold into damnation'*.

## **Slavery in Britain**

Slavery in Britain had not disappeared with the fall of the Roman Empire in the West and it was still flourishing when William I conquered England in 1066. However following the Norman Conquest William sought to put a stop to it:

*As in Roman times much of the hardest work was done by slaves: ploughing by male slaves, grinding corn with hand mills by slave women. In a slave-owning society, such as Anglo-Saxon England, a master who killed his own slave was guilty of a sin, but not of a crime, Slaves were bought and sold at market – human flexibility meant that one healthy male might cost as much as a plough team of eight oxen. Captured slaves were among the most desirable profits of war. But William I came from Normandy, where slavery was already a thing of the past, and he disapproved. He put an end to the slave trade. Gradually slaves became more expensive to acquire. For centuries an occasional rich lord on his deathbed had been moved to free slaves as an act of Christian piety, but now – at long last – traditional notions of charity went hand in hand with the profit motive. In return for burden-some, often fulltime services as ploughmen and shepherds, slaves were freed and given small tenements. By the 1120s Englishmen looked upon slavery as a barbarous custom happily no longer practised in their modern and civilised society. A hundred years before Magna Carta granted rights to freemen, an even more fundamental kind of freedom had been established. (1250 The Year of Magna Carta, Danny Danziger & John Gillingham, Hodder & Stoughton, 2003. P40).*

Whilst William's treatment of his Anglo-Saxon foes was pretty barbaric it does seem that since the Norman Conquest slavery on British soil has been resisted. This can be evidenced from the following legislation and court rulings:

- In 1102 a national ecclesiastical council, held at Westminster, under Archbishop of Canterbury, Saint Anselm, prohibited the slave trade. They decreed: *'Let no one hereafter presume to engage in that nefarious trade in which hitherto in England men were usually*

*sold like brute animals.'*

- Later on in 1569, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, a lawsuit was brought against a man for beating another man he had bought as a slave overseas. The record states, *"That in the 11th [year] of Elizabeth [1569], one Cartwright brought a slave from Russia and would scourge him; for which he was questioned [charged with assault]; and it was resolved, that England was too pure an air for a slave to breathe in."* Therefore the court ruled that English law did not recognize slavery. [Matter of Cartwright, 11 Elizabeth; 2 Rushworth's Coll 468 (1569)].
- In 1772 Chief Justice Mansfield ruled that the captive fugitive slave James Somersett from Virginia could not be claimed by his owner and that furthermore any slave by the act of walking on English soil became free.

## **Conclusion**

Although serfdom was a prominent feature of European society it was not slavery as such and the serf, in theory, had much greater freedom. Therefore we see that slavery on European soil became increasingly scarce and eventually it was deemed unacceptable and even illegal in some parts of Europe.

In contrast this with the situation elsewhere, slaves were prominent in Scandinavia during the Viking era the practice in the Islamic world seems to have been much more akin to the Roman Empire. Although Muhammad urged his followers to treat their slaves well it does not seem to have declined in Islamic societies in the way that it did in Europe. Slavery seems to have been common in the far east, in Africa and in pre-conquest societies of south and central America. Slavery in Africa was prominent long before the beginnings of the trans-atlantic slave trade. Most slaves were acquired by raiding neighbouring peoples. It is estimated that eighteen million African slaves were transported throughout the Islamic world from the 7th century onwards in what is known as the Islamic Trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean slave trade.

As we saw above the reasons for the change in Europe are complicated. Economics and the decline of conquests seem to have been major factors. But so too were Christian concerns to treat slaves well and particularly the growth of the conviction that Christians should not be kept as slaves. The Norman Conquest of 1066 saw the end of slavery within Britain.

In the light of this change it is perhaps surprising that Europe and Britain in particular became so involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The next article will try to examine why Britain engaged in the slave trade when slavery was banished on its own shores and the growth of slavery in the New World. We will also look at the rise and success of the abolitionist movement, and the arguments that they used against slavery.

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