Corsairs and Captivity: Slavery and Race During the Early Modern Period

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Introduction

Slavery has a long and complex history, with the racialization of this institution becoming apparent during the course of European colonization and the transatlantic slave trade. The dynamics of race in relation to the British people are complex, as they both suffered from slavery in the Mediterranean and practiced enslavement in the Americas. In the 17th and 18th centuries, British mariners made frequent contact with the Islamic world. During this period, Barbary corsairs from Morocco and the Ottoman-influenced provinces of Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunisia captured at least 20,000 Britons.[1] This raises questions about the role of race in the Muslim and British conceptualizations of slavery. Muslim rationalizations for enslaving Britons were based on financial recompense and religious differences as opposed to the inherence of slave status based on race. While Britons initially did not view slavery as racially restricted, their sense of racial superiority grew in tandem with their imperial expansion in the eighteenth century, causing them to struggle with the idea of their own enslavement. In contrast, the British people considered sub-Saharan Africans as natural slaves due to their race.

Barbary Slavery: A Lack of Racial Rationalizations

Ransoms: The Temporal Limit of Slavery

First, Barbary corsairs did not conceptualize British captives as innate slaves due to their race, and their bondage was often limited in time due to the possibility of being ransomed. The ubiquity of ransoming in the Mediterranean highlights the redemptive possibilities of British enslavement. Barbary corsairs had a specific aim in mind, for they "routinely took captives for the express purpose of generating revenue from ransoms."[2] In the slave markets, captives with "enough wealth and connections at home to buy themselves out of captivity" were commodities with lucrative potential.[3] Thus, the financial motive behind the corsairs' actions is displayed by the fact that captives with resources had a chance to regain their freedom. Corsairs saw these detainees as assets with the potential for emancipation through payment. In this sense, British slaves were not destined to serve their masters for life due to the perceived inferiority of their race. The liberatory possibility of British enslavement demonstrates the mutability of their condition.

Furthermore, the temporal limit to captivity, in the context of ransoming, is exhibited through the circumstances of Britons who were afforded hostage status. This is illustrated through the account of Elizabeth Marsh, an Englishwoman who was briefly held captive in Morocco in 1756 and subsequently wrote a narrative about her experiences. Elizabeth and the crew of her ship possessed wealth and connections, allowing them to participate in high-level discussions with the Sultan of Morocco, Siddi Muhammad. During their conversations, Muhammad assured Elizabeth and her companions that they were "not after all to be enslaved."[4] Rather, they would "be detained as hostages until Britain [agreed] to establish a proper Consul in Morocco."[5] Ultimately, Muhammad bargained with the British Governor of Gibraltar and granted their return.[6] The semantic distinction between detention and enslavement is a critical nuance that is explicitly articulated by Muhammad, indicating a recognition of the different degrees of captivity. The hostage status of these captives created a precarious limbo state between freedom and subjugation. Ultimately, the fact that Elizabeth was granted hostage status indicates that her captivity had a finite duration. Thus, Elizabeth did not experience the same level of permanent bondage

1 Linda Colley, Captives (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 73, 89.

2 Michael Guasco, Slaves and Englishmen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 124.

3 Robert Davis, Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 70.

4 Linda Colley, The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 119.

5 Colley, The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh, 119.

6 Colley, The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh, 139.

as chattel slavery. The primary function of their detention was to serve the political goals of the Sultan. Accordingly, their captivity was not based on inherent racial traits but rather political purposes.

Although many British captives endured the harsh realities of enslavement and never managed to return home, ransoming was still a common occurrence in the early modern period. While some slaves were assigned to household work, the majority of captives had "no particular skills or obvious signs of wealth or rank," and thus they were "swept up into galley service." [7] This labor was considered to be "a real, living hell" and the men were chained to their oars in tight conditions, provided with meager rations, and deprived of sleep.[8] In this regard, conditions were extremely unpleasant and degrading for many British slaves. However, individuals without wealth or status could still be ransomed in certain circumstances. Linda Colley, a specialist on British imperial history, argues that after 1650, "English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish male captives of Barbary," in addition to affluent women, "could usually look forward to being ransomed at some point," even if it took decades.[9] The British government routinely made diplomatic agreements with the Barbary powers to secure ransoms. For example, a British envoy was sent to Morocco in 1734 to bargain for the release of 150 captives that came from "twelve different ships." [10] The efforts on behalf of the British state to secure the repatriation of their sailors demonstrate that even individuals without extensive connections had a possibility of returning home. Ultimately, captives could often experience a more amorphous form of slavery. In this sense, their bondage was not an inevitable fate prescribed by their race.

Religion: Infidels and Conversion

Additionally, Muslim captors rationalized the enslavement of Britons based on their Christian faith as opposed to their race. During this period, Islamic societies were generally "prepared to enslave anyone, of any color or race, as long as they were initially infidel."[11] The widespread existence of slavery in Islamic societies was not predominantly justified by racial distinctions, but rather by religious identity. More specifically, "infidels taken in war" could be enslaved "under Islamic law."[12] In turn, "North African corsair attacks [...] were rarely indiscriminate" and "it was Christian shipping that these corsair fleets targeted."[13] Muslims viewed the enslavement of Christians as permissible, and the targeted nature of the attacks demonstrates that Islamic law was manifested in practice. Ultimately, "prejudice against unbelievers," was the "'single great prejudice of Muslim peoples.'"[14] This highlights that existing Muslim attitudes towards Christians played a pivotal role in shaping the conditions surrounding enslavement. In this regard, religious affiliation was paramount in determining the treatment of individuals within Islamic societies.

Furthermore, Barbary captors expressed repugnance toward their captives due to their religious faith. Muslims believed that infidels were unclean, and their bigotry concerning Christian, British slaves was exhibited by their behavior. James Irving, who was held captive in Morocco for a year in 1789, noted that Muslims "'would never use any vessel that had touched [their] lips: so great was their detestation & contempt for'" the Britons.[15] Thus, Muslims held a distinct distaste for their captives which stemmed from their immoral nature as infidels. In the account of Elizabeth Marsh, she stated that a Moroccan woman was "'extremely inquisitive, curious in examining [her] dress.'"[16] The European style in which clothes were "close to the crotch and legs for men, and to the waist for women" could be considered "immoral and obscene" from a Muslim perspective.[17] Thus, British clothing could offend the religious values and customs of their captors. The ensuing phenotypically

7 Davis, Christian Slaves, 74.

8 Davis, Christian Slaves, 75-76.

9 Colley, Captives, 94.

10 Colley, Captives, 82-83.

11 Robin Blackburn, "The Old World Background to European Colonial Slavery." The William and Mary Quarterly 54, no. 1 (1997): 99.

12 Colley, Captives, 92.

13 Colley, Captives, 74.

14 Colley, Captives, 168.

15 Colley, Captives, 168.

16 Colley, The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh, 104.

17 Colley, Captives, 168.

based discrimination was on account of their Western, Christian attire as opposed to their race. Ultimately, the enslavement of Britons was legitimated by their Christian beliefs and lack of accordance with sacred Islamic practices.

Moreover, due to the relationship between religion and enslavement, conversion and assimilation to Islam had a tangible impact on the well-being of white slaves. In 1638, the English sailor Vincent Jukes was captured by Algerian corsairs and sold into slavery in Algiers. After he "converted to Islam, submitted to circumcision, and adopted local dress," Jukes gained "greater mobility and choice of occupation."[18] He was allowed to continue to be a sailor, which would later provide him with an opportunity to escape captivity.[19] These enhanced rights were a direct consequence of his conversion and integration into Islamic culture. Although Jukes was not freed as a function of his conversion, his improved mobility highlights the flexible status of slavery and its uniquely religious dimensions. An additional example of this phenomenon can be observed through the case of Joseph Pitts, a fifteen-year-old who was captured and sold into slavery in Algiers in 1678. He was enslaved for over a decade and converted to Islam. [20] Upon returning to England, he reflected that he had a "strong temptation to 'continue a Mussulman'" because he was "'in a much fairer way for honour and preferment in Algiers, than [he] could expect ever to have been in England.'" [21] He stated that his last Algerian master "promised to leave him money on his death."[22] This is a striking illustration of the ways in which converted English slaves could join Islamic society and improve their well-being. By readjusting to this new way of life, Pitts developed an intimate relationship with his master and was treated as a son, reinforcing the notion that the status of white slavery was elastic and tied to religion.

While these narratives illustrate that white slaves could be treated well, the coercive nature of conversion is a theme in British literature on captivity. In 1597, English cleric Giles Fletcher wrote in The Policie of the Turkish Empire that Muslims wished to do "'nothing more then . . . drawe both Christians and other to embrace their religion and to turn Turke.'"[23] Although this statement might be seen as a dramatic portrayal, this piece of literature reflects the perception among some Britons that forcible conversion to Islam and enslavement were inextricably linked. However, captivity was not monolithic, and Britons experienced a range of fates. There was a considerable nuance to the degree to which conversion was coercive. In Elizabeth Marsh's tale, she was propositioned by Sidi Muhammad to join his harem. She rejected his advances by deceptively maintaining that she was married.[24] As they continued to speak through an interpreter later in the narrative, Muhammad asked her, "'Will you become a Muslim? Will you properly consider the advantages resulting from doing as I desire?'"[25] This underscores that although conversion was not always forced, there were still significant power dynamics at play; decisions made in this context were not purely driven by free will. However, it is notable that Muhammad explicitly acknowledged that there were advantages to conversion. This bolsters the notion that slave status was mutable depending on religious factors. Thus, religion was the primary lens through which Muslims conceptualized the enslavement of Britons.

Race and Slavery: The British Perspective

The Normalization of White Slavery

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Englishmen did not view slavery as racially restricted. However, as the imperial power of Britain increased during the eighteenth century, Britons began to develop a greater sense of racial superiority, which brought about a challenging confrontation with the potentiality of their own enslavement. In the first half of the early modern period, "slavery was never something securely and invariably external" to the English due to the threat of Barbary slavers.[26] Thousands of Englishmen were captured in this period, and it was "not at all unusual for English mariners to be waylaid in the

18 Colley, Captives, 124.

19 Colley, Captives, 124.

20 Colley, Captives, 172.

21 Colley, Captives, 172.

22 Colley, Captives, 172.

23 Guasco, Slaves and Englishmen, 138.

24 Colley, The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh, 131.

25 Colley, The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh, 133.

26 Colley, Captives, 99.

Mediterranean."[27] Thus, enslavement was not an abstract concept to these sailors, but rather a legitimate and predictable danger.

Further, Barbary slavery was normalized because the people of the British Isles learned about the institution through media, entertainment, and official decrees. During the period "before 1730," the inhabitants of Britain and Ireland were "exposed to far more information about white Barbary slavery than about any other variety of slavery." [28] Notably, many captives came from London, which was "the centre of Britain's print culture, as well as of its shipping and its trade."[29] This is an important dynamic because the dissemination of information on white slavery reinforced the notion that Britons could be slaves – this was the reality. Ultimately, British captivity prompted "extensive newspaper, pamphlet, and ballad coverage," in addition to "church sermons and appeals for ransom money on a nationwide basis."[30] This broad and diverse base of media coverage suggests that white slavery was a topic of significant public interest and concern. Slavery was not just a personal tragedy for individuals and families, but a matter of national importance. Further, the themes of "piracy, slavery, and forced conversion" were very common in "theatrical productions [...] during the late Tudor and early Stuart eras." [31] These were popular and resonant cultural tropes that captured the imagination of audiences. The fact that these themes were prominent in popular entertainment indicates that they were widely recognized and understood by the public, further reinforcing the idea that the captivity of British citizens was a real and present threat.

Additionally, official documents even made mention of white slavery. For example, a royal proclamation from the late 17th century stated that many British sailors had become "slaves in cruel and inhumane bondage." [32] This language does not necessarily criticize the institution of white slavery itself, but rather condemns the mistreatment of slaves. In this sense, the British crown acknowledged the reality of white slavery during the period. Thus, discourse that normalized the enslavement of white Britons was prevalent during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Struggling to Conceptualize White Slavery and Imperial Success

However, Britons developed a more distinguished sense of racial superiority in the 18th century due to their imperial success, and this led to a difficult reckoning with the existence of white slavery. British racial identity gradually began to strengthen in the 18th century due to the growth of the empire, which bolstered their self-perception as a civilized and advanced race. Before the late 16th century, few Englishmen "displayed much interest in the world beyond their own continent."[33] However, by the early 1700s, Britain and its trading companies "claimed authority over more than half a million white settlers, as well as hundreds of thousands of free and enslaved non-whites scattered over four of the five continents of the world."[34] Britain's prosperity as a maritime force became constitutive of its identity. Sea power was vital to their "cherished and totemic commerce" and "mythologies of empire."[35] Ultimately, the nation's mastery over the sea signified "freedom, power and proud British identity."[36] In this regard, Britain's imperial might and emphasis on freedom distinguished them as a flourishing, civilized group of people. Since this status of supremacy was distinct to Britons, their sense of superiority was racial in nature. However, Britons struggled to reconcile enslavement with their self-perception as a dominant, civilized racial group. This sentiment is displayed through 'Rule, Britannia!', a popular British patriotic poem written by James Johnson in 1740.[37] He wrote, "Rule, Britannia! rule the waves: Britons never will be slaves."[38] The notion that they "rule the waves" connotes the idea that Britons are the masters, not the slaves. Further, the assertion that "Britons will never be slaves" conveys that British

27 Guasco, Slaves and Englishmen, 124.

28 Colley, Captives, 99.

29 Colley, Captives, 99.

30 Colley, Captives, 99.

31 Guasco, Slaves and Englishmen, 138.

32 Colley, Captives, 100.

33 Colley, Captives, 23.

34 Colley, Captives, 24.

35 Colley, Captives, 77.

36 Colley, Captives, 78.

37 Colley, Captives, 77.

38 Colley, Captives, 77.

racial identity was antithetical to enslavement.

Furthermore, Britons experienced difficulties in coming to terms with their own enslavement as a result of their sense of racial superiority and advanced civility. When a British sailor was enslaved in Algiers in 1789, he wrote that he was "a poor slave [...] in the hands of barbarians."[39] He went on to state that it was "contrary to the laws of Great Briton to have a true Briton a Barberish slave."[40] The idea that a "true Briton" could not be a slave indicates the trend that individuals began to equate British racial identity with freedom and civility—the opposite end of the spectrum from slavery. Moreover,the reference to the "laws of Great Briton" emphasizes the sophisticated nature of the British people. Notably, the use of "barbarians" reaffirms this emphasis on civility, as the sailor demeans his captors as racially inferior. Thus, the enslavement of Britons ran counter to their self-perceptions as racially advanced.

Moreover, there was reluctance among some Britons to acknowledge the possibility that they could be enslaved by a phenotypically darker person in this period. When James Irving, a Protestant Scot slave trader, was captured and enslaved by Moroccans in 1789, he expressed contempt at his captors and described them as "'black cattle.'"[41] Irving experienced an "inversion quite beyond his bearing" when he was enslaved by "black-skinned" individuals.[42] In this respect, he could not comprehend the possibility of enslavement at the hands of a phenotypically dark-skinned person. Irving was drawing upon the phenotypical characterization of race, and he viewed his captors as inferior due to the color of their skin. This relates to ideas of British racial status, which was synonymous with white identity. After the mid-eighteenth century, it became less acceptable for British writers to portray their own people "in anything approaching the fashion of black slaves."[43] This highlights a critical change in societal attitudes and perceptions toward the representation of white people in comparison to black slaves. In the preceding period, depictions of white slavery were ubiquitous. However, the idea that white people could be treated similarly to black slaves had become inconceivable to some Britons.

The Enslavement and Racialization of Sub-Saharan Africans

The enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans in the Americas was distinct from the Muslim enslavement of Britons in the Mediterranean because it was rationalized through a racial lens. Britons conceptualized sub-Saharan Africans as innate slaves due to their skin color and barbaric nature. First, it is important to note that the English were familiar with the practice of enslaving sub-Saharan Africans prior to the 16th century. North Africans had "facilitated the trade in sub-Saharan Africans into the Mediterranean and southern European worlds for several centuries" before the rise of the transatlantic slave trade.[44] In this regard, there was a foundation for viewing sub-Saharan Africans as a population that was suitable for slavery. Moreover, the slave status of black individuals was underscored by the idea that dark skin was inferior. For example, this is demonstrated through the biblical "Curse of Ham" theory, which explains that Ham and his descendants were cursed for eternity because he uncovered "his drunken father's naked body" and incurred "the wrath of God".[45] Proponents of the theory argued that "Africans' skin color was a fixed marker originating in this curse and that they were destined by the curse to be slaves."[46] As well, blackness was used to represent evil and abnormality in English literature, theater, and woodcuts during the Tudor and Stuart periods.[47] In 1584, Reginald Scot described the devil as having "clawes like a beare, a skin like a Niger, and a voice roring like a lion."[48] Thus, these perspectives on dark skin bolstered the notion that sub-Saharan Africans were racially inferior. In turn, this phenotypical aspect of racialization cemented that black individuals were inherent slaves, as they could

39 Colley, Captives, 101.

40 Colley, Captives, 101.

41 Colley, Captives, 170.

42 Colley, Captives, 101.

43 Colley, Captives, 170.

44 Guasco, Slaves and Englishmen, 66.

45 Justin Roberts, "Race and the Origins of Plantation Slavery." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History, (March 2016)

46 Roberts, "Race and the Origins of Plantation Slavery."

47 Guasco, Slaves and Englishmen, 106.

48 Guasco, Slaves and Englishmen, 106.

not change the color of their skin.

Furthermore, the enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans was racialized because they were construed as barbarians. In the Barbados Slave Act of 1661, Africans were described as a "'heathenish brutish and an uncertain dangerous pride of people' who required harsher 'punishionary Laws for the benefit and good' of the colony."[49] The use of the word "pride" equates sub-Saharan Africans to lions, which is an explicit animalization of these individuals. These views manifested in the mistreatment of black slaves, which included "severe whippings, the slitting of noses, the slicing off of ears, and ultimately gelding."[50] In this regard, these slaves were treated as if they were cattle and experienced incredibly degrading punishment and disfigurement. This bestialization was instrumental in distinguishing black people as part of an inferior racial category. Thus, the dehumanizing treatment and enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans were considered permissible because they were viewed on a similar level to animals.

In turn, this process of racialization led to the perception among Britons that sub-Saharan Africans were inherent slaves. In 1680, the Anglican minister Morgan Godwyn remarked that "[t]hese two words, Negro and Slave' had 'by Custom grown Homogenous and Convertible."[51] Thus, the racial category of sub-Saharan Africans, or "negro", was explicitly equated with slavery. The synonymous nature of these two words was also codified into law. For example, the Barbados Slave Act of 1661 "employed Negro interchangeably with slave."[52] The fact that the terms "Negro" and "slave" were used to connote the same meanings suggests a reduction of sub-Saharan Africans to a single, monolithic identity. This essentializing of black identity served to justify the enslavement of an entire group of people based on their perceived racial characteristics.

In contrast to the enslavement of Britons in the Mediterranean, the racial dimension of black slavery meant that bondage was permanent and could not be influenced by religious conversion. First, the eternal and hereditary quality of the enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans signified their inherent status as slaves. In 1654, the author Henry Whistler commented on the "miserabell Negors borne to perpetuall slavery thay and thayer seed," which relates to the adoption of hereditary enslavement in Barbados.[53] While white slaves in the Mediterranean may have looked forward to the possibility of ransoming, sub-Saharan Africans in the Americas were rootless and trapped in a generational cycle of bondage. The idea that black children would be enslaved denotes the view that these individuals were innate slaves based on their genealogy. Moreover, religious conversion did not impact the standing of sub-Saharan African slaves. The Jamaica Slave Act of 1684 stipulated that "if a slave were to become a Christian, conversion would in no way alter his or her status as a slave." [54] Even if a black slave changed their pagan condition, they would still be treated in accordance with their race. The quality of life for white slaves in North Africa significantly improved when they converted to Islam; however, conversion to Christianity had no impact on the well-being of an African slave. Thus, race shaped the rationalization and conditions for the enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans to an extent that was not seen in the Mediterranean.

Conclusion

Muslim rationalizations for the enslavement of Britons stemmed from the prospect of financial gain in addition to religious differences as opposed to race. At first, Britons did not conceive of slavery as racially restricted, yet they began to doubt the validity of their own enslavement in the context of the growth of their empire and racial superiority. Conversely, sub-Saharan Africans were demeaned as inherent slaves due to their race. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize the enduring legacy of slavery and its profound effects on contemporary society. Millions of individuals remain trapped in various forms of enslavement in the status quo, and this institution is closely intertwined with

49 Edward Rugemer, "The Development of Mastery and Race in the Comprehensive Slave Codes of the Greater Caribbean during the Seventeenth Century." The William and Mary Quarterly 70, no. 3 (2013): 438.

50 Rugemer, "The Development of Mastery and Race," 457.

51 Guasco, Slaves and Englishmen, 171.

52 Rugemer. "The Development of Mastery and Race," 438.

53 Rugemer. "The Development of Mastery and Race," 434.

54 Rugemer, "The Development of Mastery and Race," 450.

racial dynamics.[55] The majority of "people in debt bondage in South Asia belong to minority groups" and are targeted due to this status, and "indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected" by forced labor in Latin America.[56] In Lebanon, dark-skinned individuals are at a higher risk of enslavement than their light-skinned counterparts.[57] These examples highlight the inseparable link between race and slavery that has persisted for centuries. Race has been exploited as a means to create artificial divisions between groups, with oppressors utilizing skin color and notions of barbarism to perpetuate subjugation. Ultimately, recognizing the historical legacy of racial slavery is crucial to understanding the lasting impact of this practice around the globe.

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