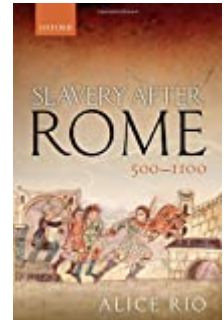




Alice Rio. *Slavery After Rome, 500-1100.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xi + 285 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-870405-8.



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Alice Rio's *Slavery After Rome* aims to challenge a wide range of scholarly consensus about the nature of "unfreedom" in the centuries between 500 and 1100 CE. The book's overarching argument lies in its refusal to identify easy patterns of unfreedom in the early Middle Ages. Particularly, Rio rejects a linear model that would neatly explain the transition from Roman slavery to high medieval "serfdom." She also undermines any notion that one can simply dichotomize unfree people in this period as "slave" or "serf." Diversity is the book's watchword. The range of ways in which a person could experience being (and become, or stop being) unfree was extremely wide during this period. Unfreedom existed in diverse economic contexts, characterized by a wide variety of ambiguous and changing terminology, and upheld (or not) by a great diversity of implementations of legal approaches.

This is not to say there are no patterns in Rio's narrative, and she certainly sees trends not only within regions but also across western Europe. A key claim is that Roman legal precedent, the lan-

guage of which continues to appear in many early medieval codes, is a red herring; Roman law did not actually shape the practices of unfreedom in the medieval West.

Rio spends considerable ink offering critiques of key scholarship on medieval slavery. I used this book in a reading group I facilitated for graduate student women, and these extended analyses were extremely useful in thinking through the scholarly landscape on medieval slavery and, for a wider audience, modes of scholarly criticism.[1] Fundamentally, however, this is a book aimed at other early medieval scholars, one that nonspecialists may find challenging and perhaps unsatisfying. Nevertheless, if the lack of satisfaction comes from Rio's repeating claim that patterns in the definition and implementation of unfreedom are few and far between, then, I suspect, the author would be content with such a reaction.

Rio organizes her book into six chapters, an introduction, and conclusion. The first three chapters deal with modes of entering and exiting un-

freedom: (1) slavery reached through capture and sale across borders, (2) slavery and tenant dependency reached through self-sale, debt, and penal slavery, and (3) freedom and semi-freedom reached through a variety of tools of manumission. Chapters 4 and 5 break down the often-assumed binary of domestic slave and tenant serf. Chapter 6 considers legislation about enslavement, using as a case study laws about marriage between unfree or mixed-status people. Working comparatively across western Europe with some forays into Byzantium, Rio usually looks at each region in turn (albeit with “Francia” and Carolingian lands getting heavier coverage). Despite this emphasis, her work on Irish unfreedom, and her comparisons between Byzantium and the West, are particularly exciting.

Scholars dealing with the period that used to be thought of as the “Dark Ages” have long attempted to explain how Roman slavery (characterized by quantitatively and economically significant direct ownership of slaves under a set and accepted legal rubric) evolved into the new model of unfree tenant farmers living on large estates while owing various sorts of labor and goods or moneys to the landlord—that is, the “manor system” and its “serfs.” This new system is visible in legal codes by the 1100s. But scholars have long debated how and when Roman slavery ended, and how and when serfdom began. Many schools of thought have read into the sources a neat, sometimes surprisingly fast, transition. For example, the famed “feudal mutationism” model (identified with Marc Bloch) sees the eleventh century—in the wake of a post-Carolingian power vacuum—as the key moment. In this century, such theories posit, predatory castellans grabbed control over the countryside from hilltop castles. They compelled free peasants to accept unfree legal status and labor duties as a way to build the castellans’ own authority and wealth. They simultaneously raised the status of slaves. Here, according to this scholarly narrative, was the inflection point in the creation of an unfree dependent class of “serfs”—tied to the land

and their lords. Other dominant historiographic models see the change as happening much earlier, or in gradual, albeit often linear, increments.

In contrast to these clean narratives, Rio rejects all attempts at linearity and reframes most apparent patterns of early medieval unfreedom as post-facto interjection by, say, thirteenth-century jurists, or twentieth-century scholars. Instead, she sees elite landowners during the period from 500 to 1100 experimenting with methods of control over their dependents, including testing out ways of creating and reproducing statuses of unfreedom. This experimentation involved a wide variety of legal statuses, obligations, limitations, and opportunities faced by those who were unfree. The kinds of unfreedom that existed in early medieval Europe were almost infinitely malleable and met widely divergent needs faced by elite landowners. These elite “lords” are the main agents in much of the book, though peasants negotiating their legal statuses also play a significant role here. Institutions like “church” and “state” are, for Rio, proxies for the will of lords (and often, in the case of monasteries, *are* the lords). Their goals did not fundamentally differ from those of the lords. To be sure, some types and relationships of unfreedom even met the needs of some of those became unfree, a topic Rio addresses throughout the book, and especially in chapter 2.

Despite the title, classical models of “slavery”—at least, as many non-early-medievalist readers would understand the term—make up a very limited part of the book’s focus. Ever careful about the complexity of changing terms used in this period to describe unfreedom, Rio uses the term “slavery” only when she is describing the unfree circumstances of social outsiders who tend to lose their freedom via raid and capture. Chapter 1 addresses this type of slave, and it may be the most accessible chapter for a broader audience interested in slavery. It is here that we meet Viking slave traders, Frankish clerics, Slavic (and other) captives, and Muslim buyers. We learn in this chapter

of Rio's understanding of "real" slaves in this period being those who are deemed outsiders, and whose real and rhetorical existence helped early medieval societies define their insiders.

One area of particular interest to scholars of slavery may lie in Rio's attention to language—both the terms used to describe and identify the unfree, and the rhetorical valences of slavery. Rio is extremely attentive to both of these. In one famous example, the Latin term "servus" meant "slave" (in the classical sense) in Roman texts, and at some point, began to mean "serf"—with the term "sclavus" (literally, Slav) becoming the go-to word to indicate a slave. Rio considers the complexity of this terminological shift, as well as the variety of terms that were used for unfree dependent tenant farmers, and also the multiple meanings of the term "equality." Rio notes the ways in which new terms were used to describe unfreedom over the course of the early Middle Ages, but importantly insists, "New words ... do not automatically mean new things" (p. 240). Beyond the words themselves, the author also thinks about the rhetorical power of using these terms for the lords, in various contexts helping them display their power, piety, and insider-ness.

A second area that may be most appealing to a non-medievalist audience is Rio's attention to gender, particularly in chapters 1, 3, and 4. She considers women as outsider captive slaves, freedwomen following manumission, and as domestic slaves, with the concomitant, nearly expected, sexual exploitation. She also addresses the historiographic and linguistic components of gendered unfreedom, focusing on (and critiquing) the work of Susan Mosher Stuard and Jean-Pierre Devroey. Scholars of gender may find that Rio is not as attentive to the complexities of female enslavement as she could have been. Perhaps because Rio is often guided by historiographic trends, this fact may direct early medievalist to areas that merit more research.

One of Rio's punchlines may be particularly fruitful for legal and social historians alike. Instead of beginning with laws, rules, and institutional approaches to unfreedom, she waits until the last chapter to consider the place of law. Her point is this: It is not just that legal statements were malleable and could be manipulated; they were and could be. More importantly, laws and rules that are understood to define the institution of unfreedom were not what shaped the behaviors of lords and peasants. Actually, these laws were the result of the experimental practices of unfreedom taking place in the early Middle Ages. Law could be used in negotiations as a "hard-line starting point" (p. 236) instead of any sort of definite prescription. It is a good reminder, useful to scholars and students alike: law is not static, not in its formation or its implementation, and instead of reading law as something that shapes human behavior, we must recognize the ways in which human behavior shapes law's creation and utilization.

Note

[1]. On that note, I thank Sarah Christensen, Jennifer Meissner, Elizabeth Nielsen, and Valerie Piro for their fruitful discussions of this book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-slavery>

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