

*Slavery in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia.* William D. Phillips.  
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Scholars of Spain, Portugal, slavery, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic world will welcome the appearance of this much anticipated book. In an impressive synthesis of the large and growing body of studies of medieval and early modern Iberia, Professor Phillips has given the specialist and general reader alike a cogent treatment of slavery, slave trades, and the means of achieving freedom in societies in which servile labor was deeply rooted. Those interested in slavery and the law, gender, labor, and the European origins of New World slavery will also benefit from this clearly written and tightly organized study.

The author has structured the work thematically rather than chronologically, though the reader will get the big picture from the introduction and the opening chapter, “The History of Slavery in Iberia.” Thereafter, four chapters and the epilogue treat the process of enslavement, slave trafficking to and within Iberia, the lives of enslaved people, slaves’ work, means of achieving — or receiving — freedom, and the spread of Iberian slavery to

the Atlantic islands and the Americas. Throughout, Phillips acknowledges the temporal, political, and religious diversity of the Iberian Peninsula, addressing the many kingdoms, both Christian and Muslim, as well as the Roman and Visigothic patterns and legacies of slavery and freedom. However, the richest discussions focus on the medieval and early modern Christian kingdoms.

The study successfully throws the particularities of Iberian slavery into relief, while also conveying a strong sense of the ways in which the Iberian background would shape slavery in the New World. Phillips is at pains to explain that Iberian slavery was far from benevolent, a common image that linked the institution to domestic service. In contrast, Phillips favors the thesis of Iris Origo that conceives of medieval European master-slave relations as contentious: masters and slaves were “domestic enemies” (146–47). That approach leads Phillips to seriously explore the actions of the enslaved to free themselves and to challenge the prerogatives of their masters, while also recognizing that “enslaved people lived subjected to the dictates of their owners, who legally had extensive leeway in how they treated and employed their slaves, in the punishments they could inflict upon them, and in the ways they could sell or otherwise transfer their ownership” (147).

Slaves worked in many branches of the Iberian economies, not only as domestics, but also as skilled artisans, soldiers, agricultural laborers, and, in some cases in Islamic Spain, as high court officials, though it is possible to generalize that slavery “was predominantly an urban pursuit” (113). Slaves were born into that condition or were captives taken in Iberian warfare, Mediterranean and Atlantic raiding, and far-flung networks of trafficking that shifted over time and ranged from Slavs taken in the Black Sea trade to sub-Saharan Africans caught up in both Muslim and Christian commercial circuits. Phillips has an interesting discussion of race and slavery (72–77), arguing that a series of physical traits might be used to describe individual slaves (skin color, marks such as tattoos or brands), but that slavery was not closely correlated with color or geographic origin as it would be in the Americas. Flight was common though there were no maroon communities like those that would quickly take shape in the American colonies. Runaways tried to secure their freedom by crossing religious borders where their co-religionists might give them shelter. Rebellions, a familiar feature of many slave societies, “were rare after the Roman period” (101).

Historians of Latin American slave societies will find many familiar echoes in Phillips’s rich descriptions of labor, forms of association such as religious brotherhoods, the role of the law, the monarchy and the church as mediating institutions in the master-slave relation (and as masters in their own right), and the dynamics of manumission. However, as Phillips argues in the epilogue, building on the insights of Philip Curtin and Robin Blackburn: “what emerged in the Americas relied on Old World roots but developed distinctive American features” (154). American slavery came to differ significantly from its Iberian predecessor because of the crucial links that joined slavery to the traffic from Africa, the Caribbean and Brazilian plantations, and merchant capital.

CHRISTOPHER SCHMIDT-NOWARA, *Tufts University*