Slaves, Women, and Children

Exploitation and Commodification of *H. sapiens*



Labor, Warfighting, Housekeeping, Administration, Sex

‘With the exception of marriage, the family and religion, slavery is perhaps the most ubiquitous social institution in human history.’

https://silkroaddigressions.com/2018/06/18/slaves-on-the-silk-road/

The Slave Roads

Who? War captives, raid victims, sex slaves, debtors, criminals, children of poverty, children of slaves, eunuchs

What? Caravan and manual labor, military service, domestic duties, concubinage — "**social death**"

When? Neolithic period — 1870s CE

Where? China and Korea, Central Asia, Mediterranean, Scandanavia, Black & Caspian seas, Volga river basin, Muslim caliphates, Turkic and Mongol khanates

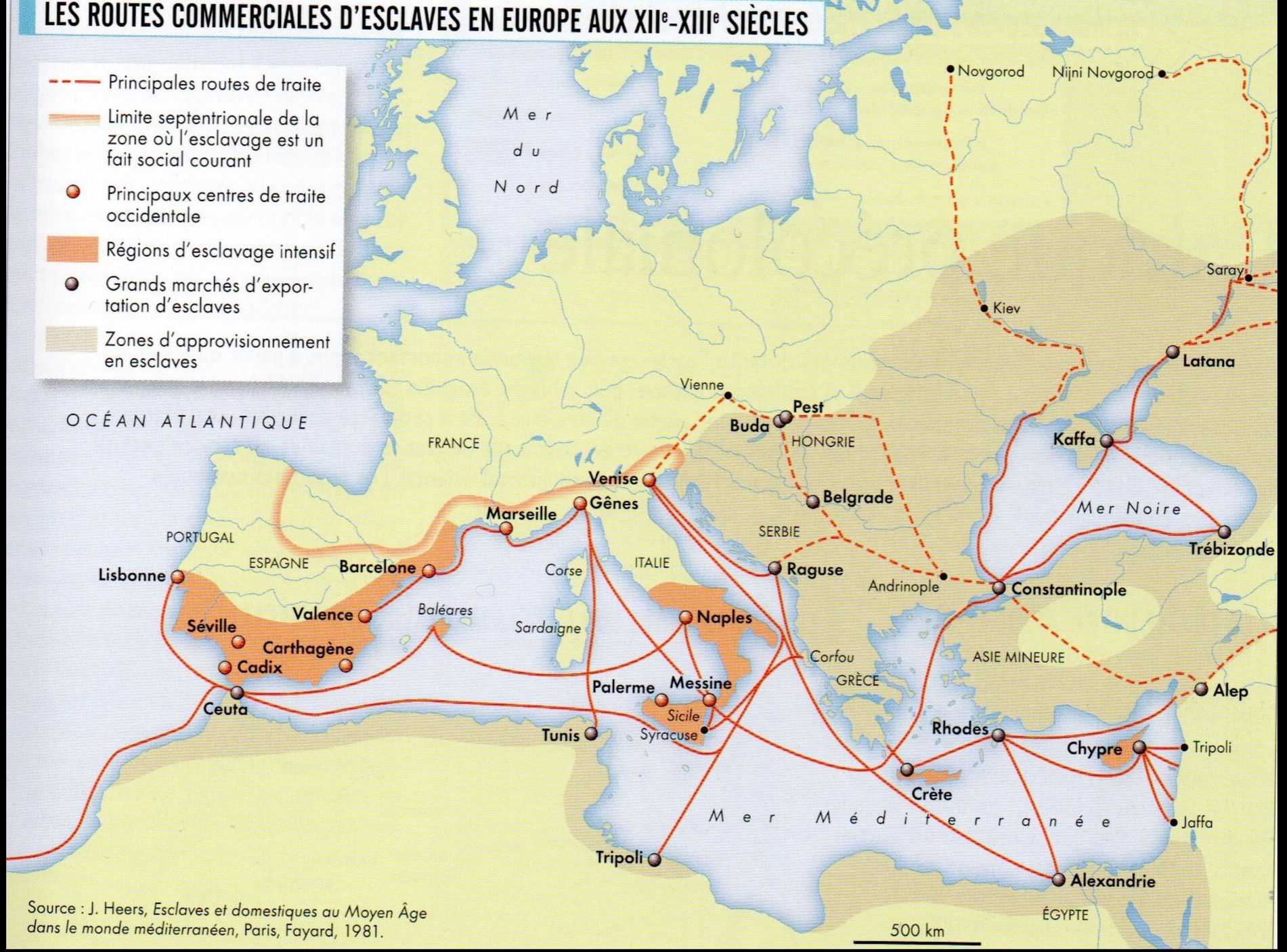
Why? Social and political tradition, gift-giving, religious injunction, military necessity, mercantile profit, debt management, prestige, labor shortage, poverty, sexism

Major Systems: Imperial Chinese, Byzantine, Persian, Sogdian, Abbasid, Rūs, Rhadanite, Turkic, Mongol

Viking Raids and Trade Routes



https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/ge2c4o/map_of_viking_expeditions_raids_and_trade_routes



Source : J. Heers, *Esclaves et domestiques au Moyen Âge dans le monde méditerranéen*, Paris, Fayard, 1981.

https://www.projectmanifest.eu/europeans-trafficking-and-the-trade-of-enslaved-peoples-en-fr/

Primary Sources: Silk Road Slave Trade

The **Turfan Documents** (Tulufan chutu wenshu): Excavated from cemetery and settlement sites in the Taklamakan Desert oasis of Turfan, these documents include official Tang dynasty and local contracts, household registers, and judicial court cases. They frequently record market transactions, prices, and disputes involving enslaved individuals and child laborers.

The **Sogdian "Ancient Letters"**: Discovered by Sir Aurel Stein in an abandoned watchtower near Dunhuang, these 4th-century CE correspondence records penned in the Sogdian language detail the realities of the eastern diaspora, debt, personal destitution, and the social precarity of abandoned dependents in oasis commercial hubs.

Tang Dynasty Legal Codes (Tang律疏议): Formal legal codes and administrative records from China that outline the strict regulations, state limitations, and legal penalties surrounding private slave ownership, manumission, and the illegal abduction of free citizens along trade corridors.

Islamic and Arabic Geographer Accounts: Later medieval texts (such as those by Ibn Khurdadhbeh or al-Mas'udi) detailing the trans-Eurasian trade networks of Radhanite Jewish merchants and Central Asian slave routes moving captives between Sogdiana, the Caliphate, and neighboring regions.

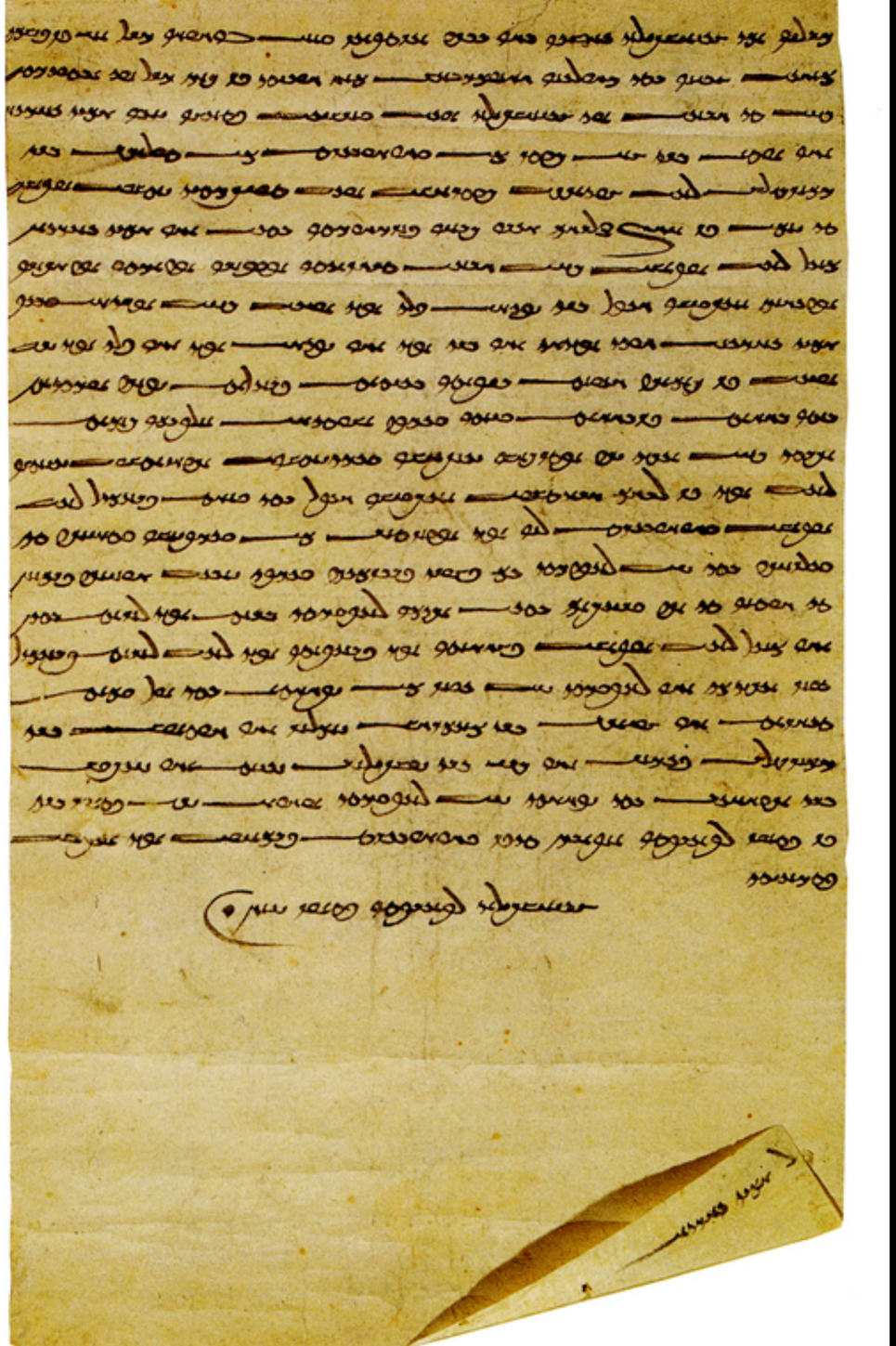
Documentation of Human Trafficking

“Purchase contracts of slaves written on paper have come to light in several tombs in the Turfan region. Recycled as hats and shoes, the documents were buried along with the corpses and other grave goods. The standard information recorded in such contracts comprised the gender and places of origins of the slaves as well as the names of their sellers and buyers.

“**Sogdians** were most active in the slave trade. Eighty percent of the caravans dealt with slaves, who accounted for up to 38.5 percent of all travellers.

“The **Tang Empire** exerted enormous influence on the economics of slave trade. The legal, military, administrative and transportation systems of the Tang Empire facilitated human trafficking by guaranteeing road transportation and enforcing the contracts. There was no age limit for slaves and most of them were kids from poor families.”

https://shanghai.nyu.edu/news/exploring-silk-road-slave-trade-turfan



Sogdian Contract for a Slave
639, Tomb 135, Astana, Turfan.
Ink on paper, 46.5 cm x 28.4 cm.
Xinjiang Provincial Museum, Urumqi, XB9219

https://silkroaddigressions.com/2018/06/18/slaves-on-the-silk-road/

Western Eurasian Slave Routes, Dominated by the Rūs (8th - 11th c.)



https://www.odysseytraveller.com/articles/the-viking-rus/

“**Crimea** itself created a vast **international market for Christian slaves**—Muslims were prohibited from enslaving coreligionists—who came to play a central role in the empire’s economy, military, and bureaucracy. The slave trade became a “cornerstone” of the Crimean economy with some contemporaries estimating that **slaves outnumbered natives by more than 2:1.**

“**Raiding parties**, ranging in size from several hundred to tens of thousands, typically followed one of four trails stretching from **the northern edge of the Crimean peninsula deep into the Black Sea steppe**. By following these routes, raiders “always traveled between two major rivers, staying on the highest ground” and thus avoiding natural barriers and detection by enemy settlements on river banks. Raiders would approach their target area furtively, often traveling on moonless nights and switching between trails to confuse enemy watchmen, while undertaking continuous reconnaissance patrols.

“A **fortified field camp** would then be constructed, from which r**aiders fanned outward as far as 140 kilometers, setting buildings alight and conducting demonstrative executions to arouse panic and fear.** Renowned for their speed and mobility, Tatar cavalrymen commanded multiple horses each and deployed a combination of bows and arrows, sabers, spears, and rope to **seize captives (up to 7 per soldier)**. Finally, the raiding party would reconvene and return to camp to divide up the spoils.

“Captives were marched to Crimea in chains, with **the ill and wounded frequently killed to avoid slowing down progress.** […] Male slaves usually ended up working in agriculture, construction, small craft production, or the military; **female slaves** were used mainly in domestic service, either as **concubines** of their owner or as **servants of his legal wives.**

https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/consequences-of-the-black-sea-slave-trade-longrun-development-in-eastern-europe/E6074298B3135E3B858CF9E64BE45F99

While no slaves from this time survive to tell their story they have left traces in art, archaeology and texts.

Slavery's importance to the Silk Road economy probably rivalled that of the silk, horses or other goods.

Slave markets were found across the whole of the Silk Road, from Dublin on the shores of the Atlantic to Shandong on the Pacific.

> I saw the Rusiya, when they came hither on their trading voyages and had encamped by the river Itil. With them, there are fair maidens who are destined for sale to the merchant, and they may have intercourse with their girl while their comrades look on. When their boats come to this anchorage, each one of them goes ashore and prostrates himself before [the great image]. Then he says: "Oh my lord, I have come from a far country and have with me so many slave girls for such a price, and so many sable skins. . . . I wish that thou shouldst provide me with a merchant who has many dinars and dirhams and who would buy from me at the price I desire.'
>
> — Ibn Fadlān

https://silkroaddigressions.com/2018/06/18/slaves-on-the-silk-road/

“The selling and buying of human beings as slaves were highly sensitive, controversial, and profitable businesses on the trading networks along the Silk Road. Manuscripts excavated from Cave 17 in Dunhuang (敦煌) and tombs in the Astana graveyard in Turfan contain records documenting how Buddhist institutions and individual monks and nuns were involved in the slave trade as buyers, owners, sellers, and transaction witnesses between the 7th and 10th centuries.”

— Cuilan Liu

Sogdian-language contract for the purchase of a slave girl, 639 CE

Monk Yansyan is to buy the female slave Upach thus as an unredeemable slave who is without debt and without possessions, and who is an unpersecutable and irreproachable permanent possession of his sons, grandsons, family, and descendants as well.

Accordingly, the Monk Yansyan himself and his sons, grandsons, family, and descendants may at will hit her, abuse her, bind her, sell her off, pledge her, give and offer her as a gift, and do whatsoever they may wish to do to her. They may treat her […] as permanent property purchased with drachm silver coins.

Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road* (p. 181)

“Despite disapproval of slave ownership in Buddhist canon law and strict legal regulations on slave trade in the Tang Dynasty (618–907, 唐), Buddhist monks and nuns showed little concern over these restrictions when participating in the trading of slaves in the local markets in Dunhuang and Turfan. Whenever others challenged their possessions of slaves, these monks and nuns showed no reluctance in seeking legal intervention in the state court.

“In these practices, such Buddhist monks and nuns received evident support from the lay legal system. On one occasion, the local government ruled in favor of a Buddhist nun to protect her rights as the adoptive mother whilst ignoring her enslavement of a free commoner’s daughter, a severe crime against Tang law.”

https://d-nb.info/1273054253/34

Transportation of Merchants, Laborers, Slaves, and Cattle

“Each time a merchant caravan crossed through a pass, local officials were required to check the caravan’s travel pass, called a guosuo 過所, in order to certify that each member of the caravan, whether human or animal, belonged to person whose name appeared on the pass. Family members could travel together, and several of the documents give the reason for travel as bringing family members to Chang’an.

“Some of the travelers are classed as zuoren 作人, a dependent laborer whose status was higher than that of a slave because zuoren could not be bought and sold.

“Slaves, both male or female, required a market certificate showing that they had been bought legally – unless they were born to a slave already belonging to the family – as did all draft animals like cattle and horses that could be used by the military. In one case the travel documentlisted the age and color of eight different horses.”

https://history.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/hansen-silk-road-trade.pdf

Slave Girl Resting on a Camel

(Xi’an, 8th c.)

https://silkroaddigressions.com/2018/06/18/slaves-on-the-silk-road/









Viking shackles

Shackles from the Viking town of Birka, Sweden (top left);

Neu Nieköhr, Germany (bottom left);

and Trelleborg, Slagelse, Denmark (right)

Christer Åhlin / Swedish Historical Museum / Ben Raffield

https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/little-known-role-slavery-viking-society-180975597/

“These merchants [Radhanites*] speak Arabic, Persian, Greek, Latin, Frankish, Andalusian and Slavic. They journey from west to east, from east to west, traveling by land and by sea. From the west they export eunuchs, young girls and boys, brocade, beaver pelts, marten and other furs and also swords.

“All the Saqaliba** eunuchs in the world come from Andalusia. . . . They are castrated near this country. The operation is performed by Jewish merchants.”

* A guild of multilingual, international Jewish merchants who dominated long-distance trade between Western Europe, the Islamic world, India, and China from roughly the 8th to 11th centuries

** Slavic

https://shanghai.nyu.edu/news/exploring-silk-road-slave-trade-turfan



YouTube video >

Tang Law on Slaves and Slave Trade

Tang Code
Article 375
Wrongfully Claiming A Commoner to be a Slave

"All cases of wrongly claiming a commoner to be a salve…are punished for kidnapping reduced one degree. Wrongly claiming a slave or goods or articles is punished for robbery reduced one degree."

Wallace Johnson, *The T'ang Code, Volume II, Specific Articles* (Princeton University Press 1997) : 441.

Liu, Cuilan, “Law and Slavery on the Silk Roads: How did Buddhist Monks and Nuns Participate in the Slave Trade?”

BuddhistRoad Paper 3.2 (2022)

https://d-nb.info/1273054253/34

The monotheistic faiths did not condemn slavery. The Bible spoke of kindness to slaves but not an end to slavery, and medieval Church leaders themselves had slaves. Mohammad and his followers owned and traded slaves. But Christians, Jews, and Muslims were **forbidden in law to enslave or sell a co-religionist**.

Qur’anic law of slavery

“The enslavement of war captives is regulated, along with the purchase and sale of slaves. While it is not permissible to enslave other Muslims, the jurists clarify that if a non-Muslim converts to Islam after enslavement, he or she remains a slave and may be lawfully purchased and sold like any other slave. (This rule closes a potential loophole allowing for slaves to gain their freedom by the simple fact of conversion.) The law also prescribes penalties for slave owners who maltreat or abuse their slaves; these penalties can include forced manumission of the slave without compensation to the owner.

“Female slaves do not have the right to grant or deny sexual access to themselves. Instead, the Qur’an permits men to have sexual access to “what their right hands possess,” meaning female captives or slaves. This was widely accepted and practiced among early Muslims; the Prophet Muhammad, for example, kept a slave-concubine (Mariya the Copt) who was given to him as a gift by the Roman governor of Alexandria.”

— Kecia Ali

https://www.brandeis.edu/projects/fse/muslim/slavery.html

The expansion of Afro-Eurasian slave commerce

"The Black Sea connected merchants of Scandinavia, the North Sea, and Russia with the Mediterranean basin, and thereby Iberia, sub-Saharan Africa, and above all, the Islamic World, and more indirectly with Asia. Indeed, although the "silk roads" invokes East–West movement, the new North–South routes were more direct and dynamic than in the earlier medieval period."

"Slaves were most typically deployed in domestic contexts rather than in plantation-style or gang labour. Indeed, the reader should arguably picture a young woman as indicative of the 'owned person'."

"Claire Taylor, "Slavery and human trafficking along the medieval Silk Roads, c.800 to c.1350 CE"

from the Kharoshthi Documents, Xinjiang (c. 300) CE

"[The merchant] arose and sold a **woman** called Lyipaae to the scribe Ramshotsa […] for **one *viyala* camel**, and **a second *amkla* camel**, **one carpet** twelve hands long, and a **second carpet** eleven hands long."

"To him [a commoner] a daughter was born. **They wanted to expose her on the ground**. Kacana took her up from the ground. Kacana gave the "milk-fee" to Priyapata. It was settled as one horse. That girl is not to be sold, nor mortgaged, nor removed from Kacana's house, and she is not to be mistreated in the house."

V. Hansen, *The Silk Road*, pp. 88, 92

A tenth-century document found in the Dunhuang caves

(A Khotanese rmerchant reports expenditures on a sales trip;

the currency is bolts of silk.)

“**And one roll for the bughruqs, one for the Rukyam, four rolls for the woman, eight for the horse**.”

V. Hansen, *The Silk Road*, p. 388

from John of Plano Carpini's *Description of the Mongols* (1246)

"Their women are chaste, nor does one hear any mention among them of shameful behavior on their part; some of them, however, in jest make use of vile and disgusting language. Discord among them seems to arise rarely or never, and although they may get very drunk, yet in their intoxication they never come to words or blows.

"**The men do not make anything at all**, with the exception of arrows […] but they hunt and practice archery. [….] **Their women make averything**, leather garments, shoes, […] and everything made of leather; they also drive carts and repair them, they load the camels, and in all their tasks they are very swift and energetic.

All the women wear breeches and some of them shoot like the men."

V. Hansen, p. 424

Slaves in Abbasid Literature: *The Arabian Nights*

[The sight in the royal courtyard that triggers King Shahryār]

“Suddenly, a gigantic negro ran towards the King’s wife, embraced her and turning her upon her back, enjoyed her. At this signal, all the other men slaves did the same with the women and they continued thus a long while, not ceasing their kisses and embraces and goings in and the like until the approach of dawn.”

[they also play other roles: go-be

Powys Mathers translation (1972), vol. 1