Human Trafficking in Medieval Europe
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Conclusion

To conclude this study of the history of human trafficking, I consolidate here the numerous arguments put forth. First, human trafficking networks have historically been adaptable, and this adaptability has made them remarkably resilient in the face of ever-changing socioeconomic and political conditions. Second, because of this adaptability, centralized authority committed to the sustained suppression of human trafficking activities has been, and continues to be, necessary to combat traffickers. Third, human trafficking patterns changed dramatically in Western Europe, north of the Pyrenees and Alps, over the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As agricultural slavery faded and the commercial sex industry grew, traffickers turned from supplying agriculture with legally enslaved labor to supplying the sex industry with legally unenslaved labor. Fourth, this change represented a pivot and not a break from the early medieval slave trade and late medieval sex trafficking, because the experiences of women and children linked the two patterns. Although their legal status differed in the slave trade of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages and the sex trafficking networks of the late Middle Ages, their physical, lived experiences of human trafficking nevertheless remained the same. For women and children, the slave trade has always included the constant, looming threat of sex trafficking.

The roles of slaves changed to suit the transactional needs of the moment. Their bodies and labor were the goods and services for barter and the objects of sale on beaches or in slave markets. They were currency for other goods, services, and benefices, and the gifts exchanged between parties in order to establish and maintain the social relationships of elites. Even as the roles of slaves mutated to conform to the patterns of exchange in the moment, traffickers themselves also adapted to suit their immediate circumstances. Traffickers were opportunists who abducted when the moments presented themselves, and they were raiders who abducted as part of larger slaving expeditions. Traffickers sometimes specialized in slave trading, but they could just as easily be merchants who sold human beings along with other wares. Their networks adapted as needs changed and opportunities arose. Networks interlinked to create long-distance networks across the North Atlantic, North, and Baltic Seas, or across the Mediterranean and Black Seas, and broke apart and operated independently of each other as circumstances dictated. In Western Europe, agricultural slavery disappeared by the end of the twelfth century, which caused the Northern Arc to fracture and regionalize. Yet even as agricultural slavery faded, the commercial sex industry
grew and provided human traffickers with a new source of demand, and thus trafficking networks survived, albeit in attenuated form, by adapting to the new realities of late medieval urban Europe.

The Western European sex industry could never match the labor needs of agriculture, because it represented a much smaller sector of the medieval economy and was much more selective in its labor requirements: young women and children. Men and older boys were in general no longer commercially viable merchandise for traffickers, and thus late medieval Western European sex trafficking tended to be smaller scale operations involving local and regional networks, rather than the far-flung long-distance slaving networks of the Southern Arc. Moreover, late medieval sex trafficking networks were precarious, if lucrative, enterprises. The fact that trafficking victims were no longer legally enslaved meant that traffickers could face punishment, and where prohibitions were actively enforced trafficking activities were driven underground.

The conditions of human trafficking were gendered. All victims experienced violence and abuse, but for men the slave trade and sex trafficking were not necessarily experienced simultaneously; for women and children the slave trade meant the constant danger of sex trafficking. Sexual exploitation and abuse were the expected and presumed consequences of abduction, regardless of whether those women and children were legally enslaved or legally unenslaved, and violence compelled from them labor that profited their owners, masters, and pimps. Whether in sixth-century Constantinople or fifteenth-century Dijon, poverty and limited economic opportunities for women led to vulnerability and to victimization. Traffickers, noble and common, male and female, understood these constraints and used them to deceive, manipulate, and exploit their victims in order to fuel the slave trade and sex trafficking networks that spanned medieval Europe, oftentimes with the knowledge or participation of local authorities.

Because human trafficking adapts so readily to the socioeconomic and political environments in which it takes place, secular and ecclesiastical efforts to suppress or regulate human trafficking activities were often hampered by the socioeconomic and political realities of their day. At times, authorities such as the Merovingian King Theuderic or those in Byzantium in general actively engaged in human trafficking. At other times, those authorities actively encouraged human trafficking through legal and religious sanction, or through financial support, as we find in Rome and Byzantium. Conversely, in some instances, authorities encouraged human trafficking through passive acceptance, legislative inaction, and bureaucratic corruption or incompetence. However, without strong political centralization, the
fragmentation of society created numerous ‘others’ who were considered legitimate targets for abduction and enslavement by opposing groups. The attempts of secular and religious authorities to regulate and limit the slave trade were hamstrung without the cooperation, coordination, and sustained commitment of neighboring polities and authorities.

Today, poverty and corruption are often cited as major underlying causes for the re-emergence of slavery, the modern slave trade, and labor trafficking and sex trafficking, but neither they nor the human trafficking activities they encourage are products of modern society, modern values, or of any modern ‘sexual revolution.’ No, indeed: they are instead socioeconomic conditions with deep historical roots that transcend borders, cultures, and economic systems, whose effects are concrete, immediate, and personal. As survivors, Anne, Joy, and Kris have since dedicated their lives to advocating for those still in bondage. As Joy sat across the table from me and reflected so poignantly upon her experiences, she said quietly, ‘My life was stolen from me, and that was not fair.’