

# SLAVES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

17th-18th Century

العبودية في حوض المتوسط  
في القرن السابع عشر والثامن عشر

VISITOR GUIDE

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## INTRODUCTION

Today little known compared to the phenomenon of transatlantic slavery, Mediterranean slavery was born in Antiquity and did not begin to disappear until the 19th century. Primarily justified by religious differences rather than racial ones in the early modern period, it led to the capture of more than two million people by Christian and Muslim corsairs and their sale on slave markets around the Mediterranean.

Most captives were men, forced to row on galleys and perform other types of forced labor. This slavery also affected women, exploited for domestic and sexual purposes. Many among these slaves were ransomed, meaning their slavery was temporary. Many suffered violent treatment and had to find means of subsistence.

This exhibition presents several documents and works testifying to the slavery of Christian captives in North Africa, particularly in Algiers. However, it emphasizes Maghrebi slaves and certain West Africans in the ports of Marseille, Genoa, Livorno, and Malta. Primarily Muslim, these slaves were designated in Europe under the name of "Turks" or "Moors." Their forgotten or obscured histories are reconstructed here through a set of remarkable manuscripts, archives, and works of art enriched with writings in which they request better treatment and their liberation.

## **QUATTRO MORI (FOUR MOORS)**

The monument of the Quattro Mori—installed in the port of Livorno—is certainly the best-known artwork representing slaves.

At its center, it depicts Grand Duke Ferdinand I de' Medici (r. 1587-1609)—sculpted by Giovanni Bandini—leader of the Knights of Saint Stephen, a Catholic order based in the Tuscan port, involved in corsair activities.

At the four corners of the base, four chained bronze captives are realized by sculptor Pietro Tacca, who drew inspiration for at least two of them from real models from the city's slave prison, or "bagnio": a young black man nicknamed Morgiano and an older Turk originally from Salé in Morocco, named Alì Salettino.

For three centuries, copies of these motifs circulated throughout Europe in various forms—porcelain, wood, even sugar sculptures—demonstrating that slavery in the Mediterranean was then widely visible, even if it has now almost fallen into oblivion.

## **A WORLD OF GALLEYS**

Galleys are rowed ships used to imprison criminals, wage war, conduct commerce, and raid in the Mediterranean. Ideal for navigating shallow and calm waters and for close combat, they have narrow prows that allow ramming targets and close-range sword attacks of enemy crews by officers. Despite the horrors perpetrated there, galleys are richly decorated and carved to better establish the power of modern sovereigns, heirs to ancient glory.

# 1. A SLAVE'S LIFE

The enslaved persons presented in this exhibition were, for the most part, captured or sold as slaves. They were sometimes targeted for specific reasons. On markets, some buyers, Algerians for example, sought Christians with shipbuilding skills. Others tried to select members of elites likely to bring high ransoms. Agents of Christian galleys preferred Muslims, particularly Maghrebis aged 20 to 40, whose supposed strength and capacity to embody victory over infidels are represented in numerous works of art.

However, they also attempted to enslave West Africans, as well as Native Americans kidnapped from English and French colonies. All these men rowed alongside convicts sentenced for various crimes, ranging from theft and murder to Protestant heresy. If, in principle, healthy Muslim slaves could be exchanged, ransomed, or liberated under peace treaties, many were forced to serve until disability or death.

## **DISEMBARKING**

Visitors first discover a disturbing painting by Alessandro Magnasco representing the arrival of slaves in Genoa, then archives relating to slave auction sales and naval registers, which constitute among the only existing documents indicating the names, places of origin, and physical characteristics of slaves.

Some slaves could also be imprisoned in prisons such as the "bagnio" of Livorno, whose plan we present, and which had been modeled on the "bagni" of Christian captives in the Maghreb until its closure in the mid-18th century.

## **WORKING**

Once enrolled, registered, incarcerated, the exhibition shows these slaves at labor. Galley slaves generally spent only a few months per year rowing at sea. On land, they were forced to perform many types of work such as ship construction and unloading goods, as evidenced by the extraordinary album of the Tuscan knight Fabroni.

Other slaves were assigned to more terrible tasks such as removing corpses of plague victims during the great epidemic that struck Marseille in 1720, as depicted by painter Michel Serre.

Some of these slaves, and especially captive women, were employed as servants in homes where they could also be sexually exploited: a painting by the knight Favray hints at a black maid behind "Maltese ladies visiting each other."

## **SURVIVING**

Beyond even these forced labors, to survive, feed themselves, ransom their freedom, or help fellow sufferers, these slaves exercised all sorts of additional activities, notably the art of knitting as shown in a drawing of a French slave in Algiers.

In Europe, some Muslim slaves were authorized to install temporary stalls or shacks next to ports. There they offered their services as barbers, tooth pullers, and coffee suppliers. Artist Cornelis de Wael depicted these port scenes of slave lives in the Genoa dockyard.

## 2. RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL LIFE

In the Mediterranean, slaves were authorized to practice their religion. They also faced pressure to change it, although in Europe, conversion did not guarantee regaining freedom. Muslim rowers on Catholic galleys generally did not attend mass, celebrated with a portable altar aboard or under a tent on land before embarkation.

Slaves produced writings, works of art, and music under constraint. Many wrote letters to their loved ones. A minority among the literate had an activity as copyists and illuminators of religious manuscripts or grammar. Others carved graffiti and inscriptions, witnesses to their presence in Maltese jails.

Among the Turkish slaves of Louis XIV's galleys, some served as models for artists such as Pierre Puget, others participated in the construction and decoration of galleys or in the realization of marble sculptures destined for Versailles. Slaves played instruments to give nautical signals and to entertain galley officers at sea. On land, they also formed street bands that played to obtain tips.

## **BELIEVING**

Slaves formed religious communities. In the Maghreb, priests—captives or not—organized the religious life of their co-religionists while Protestants distinguished themselves from it. Local authorities authorized the holding of worship in chapels built in penal colonies and European consulates.

In Europe, Muslims designated kadis (Islamic judicial authorities) and imams to guide prayers and oversee funerals. Muslim slaves organized money collection to build mosques for their worship. They emphasized a principle of reciprocity to obtain the same rights of worship on both sides of the Mediterranean.

These men and women maintained however diverse relationships with religion. They sometimes engaged in acts judged "blasphemous" such as sorcery. Finally, the phenomenon of conversion was frequent in both communities, and this, several times for the same individual.

## **ARTISTS, MODELS, AND LITERATE PERSONS**

In 1668, artist Pierre Puget (1620-1694) came to Paris with two Turkish slaves, probably named "Candie" and "Mustapha" to make them nude models for artists members of the Royal Academy of the Louvre. These men probably served as models to represent captives surrounding Louis XIV on the drawing of his flagship realized by Charles Le Brun.

Slaves were sometimes themselves artists, working in workshops near the port. Others, sometimes after their conversion, became copyists, translators, illuminators of manuscripts.

## **SLAVE WRITINGS**

Many slaves transmitted letters. In these missives often written by literate co-religionists, they gave news to their families or to their sovereigns. They requested financial aid to regain their freedom. In the case of Muslims, these writings are the rare personal testimonies of their condition as slaves. On both shores, some letters were intercepted and never transmitted to their recipients because they contained information prejudicial to dominant powers.

Some slaves also had notarial deeds written such as debt acknowledgments for their ransoms. Muslims and Christians paid notaries to write petitions in their name requesting authorities improve their lot.

### **3. FINDING ONE'S FREEDOM AGAIN**

Many slaves attempted to flee with great difficulty. Taking a land route to a friendly port indeed required linguistic and geographical knowledge, as well as disguise. Fleeing by sea implied stealing or building a boat, organizing a mutiny, slipping onto another ship, or swimming to shore during a naval battle.

Liberations by force, exchange, or ransom were more frequent. At the end of the 17th century, bombardments of North African cities led to the liberation of hundreds of Christians and the signing of peace treaties, which protected certain European subjects. Skillful diplomacy also resulted in the liberation of hundreds of Muslim captives in Europe, as shown by the intervention of the Moroccan embassy in Vienna in 1783.

At the end of the 18th century, revolutionary wars inaugurated a new era around the idea of universal "liberty", not without contradictions: French armies liberated slaves while conquering territories from Italy to Algiers; Napoleon reestablished a form of slavery in the Caribbean while wanting to suppress another in the Mediterranean.

## **REVOLTING**

Among the revolts and mutinies led by Christians and Muslims reduced to slavery, the largest and most famous insurrection took place in 1748-1749 in Malta, while most Catholic powers were reducing the number of their galleys and, consequently, the number of enslaved rowers. This important conspiracy of slaves gave rise to multiple published accounts and a series of nineteen anonymous watercolors—three of which are presented here: they relate in detail the seizure of an Ottoman galley from Rhodes and the tortures inflicted by Maltese authorities to discover the plot and punish presumed conspirators.

## **ENDING SLAVERY**

In the 18th century, peace treaties between European and North African powers multiplied, leading to efforts to end captivities on both shores of the Mediterranean. From 1777, the Sultan of Morocco proposed to Europeans to no longer enslave women and men over 70 years old. With this intention, he mandated embassies to conduct this negotiation, as shown by the engraving representing "The Entry of the Moroccan Ambassador" in Vienna in 1783. His appeal remained however a dead letter.

Around 1798, French revolutionary armies also attempted to eradicate slavery in the Mediterranean, by pushing—in vain—for the destruction of the Quattro Mori monument in Livorno and by liberating hundreds of Muslims in Malta. European naval campaigns were mainly responsible for ending slavery after 1815, though slavery was already in decline. By the time the French captured Algiers in 1830, they found only a few European captives there—contrary to what the French press had claimed.

# GLOSSARY

- In the world of galleys, "Turkish slaves" or simply "Turks" designate a category of rowers—for the most part Muslim, but sometimes Orthodox Christians or Jews—that one distinguishes from "convicts" serving sentences for various crimes.
- So-called "Moorish" slaves can originate from the Maghreb, be Muslims, or dark-skinned Africans.
- In Maghrebi sources written in Arabic, Muslims enslaved in Europe, like Christians enslaved in the Maghreb, are qualified as captives or prisoners of war (asrâ').
- "Corsairs" are pirates authorized by the state. Many of them were knights, including knights of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem (Knights of Malta or Hospitallers) and the Order of Saint Stephen, who maintained a fleet of galleys in Livorno.

# PRACTICAL INFORMATION

## *Access*

Institut du monde arabe  
1, rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard  
Place Mohammed V – 75005 Paris  
+ 33 (0)1 40 51 38 38 / [www.imarabe.org](http://www.imarabe.org)  
Salles d'expositions (niveaux -1 et -2)

Metro access: Jussieu, Cardinal-Lemoine, Sully-Morland

Bus : 63, 67, 86, 87, 89

Parking available

## *Tarifs*

Free access, reservation recommended

Ticket office closes 45 minutes before the museum closes.

## *Opening hours*

Tuesday to Friday from 10 AM to 6 PM

Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays from 10 AM to 7 PM

Closed on Mondays

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