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Review of the book "Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World," by Michael Guasco

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Michael Guasco

Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 327 pp. (Cloth US\$ 45.00)

Much ink has been spilled in the quest to understand the origins of slavery in the English colonies of the Americas. While it is true that villeinage was still present in the sixteenth century, the institution of slavery had largely disappeared in England. Thus, the challenge has been to determine what factors led Englishmen, who were largely unfamiliar with chattel slavery, to embrace it in the plantation colonies. Many have noted, for example, the role of Biblical justifications, the model that indentured servitude offered for chattel property laborers, the English revulsion at West Africans' skin color, and the fact that Englishmen had become accustomed to seeing Africans in servile positions at home and abroad. Moreover, it has become ever clearer that Englishmen saw slavery essentially as a condition reserved for outsiders or those who had become captives. Still, it was not a given that English settlers would enslave Africans. Notably, until the last quarter of the seventeenth century in Virginia some in the small black population enjoyed not only freedom, but also prosperity. This was particularly true for men like Anthony Johnson and Emanuel Driggins on the eastern shore of the colony.

Michael Guasco brings a fresh perspective to this puzzle, a perspective based on truly impressive research. He seems not to have missed any relevant work from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries dealing with captivity, bondage, and slavery. Moreover, he has been diligent in drawing on the pertinent secondary sources to provide the proper context for his analysis of English attitudes about slavery when the English began to establish colonies in the Western Hemisphere.

Guasco leads readers on an illuminating journey through the books and pamphlets written by Englishmen on Biblical strictures concerning slavery, as well as the classical discussions on captivity, bondage, and captivity in English history, penal slavery, galley slavery, the experiences of the few hundred West Africans in late sixteenth-century England, and the sixteenth-century African slaving voyages conducted by Englishmen. He stresses, however, that the specter of Englishmen being enslaved in the Mediterranean and the consequent loss of their prized freedom were the most important factors in shaping English attitudes about slavery. There was widespread dissemination of the stories of men who not only lost their freedom, but also were forced (or chose) to convert to the Muslim faith, as well as sermons, pamphlets, plays, royal proclamations, simple daily conversation, and narratives of the enslaved.

Guasco's reading of the sources convinced him that "when Englishmen thought and wrote about slavery during this period, they were typically much more concerned about the possibility of their own enslavement than they were with the condition of African or Indian peoples" (p. 9). This is critical because he also contends that "Tudor Englishmen were increasingly inclined to insist that they were unique in both a global and European context in their commitment to liberty" (p. 25).

That latter assertion was important as Englishmen thought about enslaving other peoples, whether West Africans or natives of the Americas. They understood that slavery was commonplace around the world and felt that there were justifications for it particularly for captives in "just" wars. Yet they had reservations about establishing a slave system in their colonies, a pause that led to some ambivalence. Guasco argues, for example, that the English saw, at least for a time, manumission as a natural part of slavery and for a time tolerated the growth of a mulatto population and the arming of slaves. Ultimately, however, economic need trumped their reservations and by the late seventeenth century the English had fully embraced a chattel slave system.

This is a rich, complex, and rewarding account—a true tour de force. Still, there are a couple of shortcomings. While Guasco often notes that his description of English beliefs applies only to the well educated, he equally often refers simply to Englishmen. This is important given the limits of literacy and access to the publications he references. Also, because Guasco drew on so many varied sources a bibliographic essay would have helped.

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