

Enslaved Women, Race, and Criminality in the Late Medieval Mediterranean

This presentation pulls together the racialized views of non-Christian women to show the overlap between race and sexuality in the premodern Mediterranean. Medieval race-making created a link between enslavement and a wanton nature since enslaved women were presumed to have an uncontrollable sexual appetite. Muslim, Mongol ("Tartar", Turkic, or individuals from central Asia), and African women and their bodies were eroticized, depicted as lustier, and their sexuality perceived as fundamentally more carnal and thus prone to sexual vice and criminal behaviors. Enslaved and manumitted women were associated with prostitution and theft, and as servants in households they were seen as promoting libidinous activities and acting as go-betweens to facilitate adultery. Judicial sentences show that the punishment of enslaved women was tied to their bodies, to the branding of their flesh so that their enslaved status and carnal nature marked them for life and was visibly apparent to all. Enslavement, therefore, was imprinted on the body. The association of enslavement with religious alterity, which was linked in varying degrees to skin color, exposes that Europeans were using dermal pigmentation as a marker of difference. In fact, sources dealing with the enslaved and formerly enslaved flag how Europeans were starting to create a color-based slavery. In addressing the role of skin color in the slave trade, this talk encourages historians to use more flexible methodologies that allow us to recover the omissions in documents and reconstruct racial subjectivities in archival sources.