

From Muslim Slave to Catholic Surgeon: A Case of Manumission in the Galleys of Spain

📅 April 15, 2024 (<https://trasisblog.unibe.ch/?P=302>) 👤 Teresa Peláez-Domínguez (<https://trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Author=6>)

In Summer 2023, the TraSIS project organised a joint conference (<https://trasisblog.unibe.ch/?p=254>) with the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) in the picturesque Swiss lakeside town of Murtensee. Some of our guests generously agreed to contribute a blog post in which they discuss one of the sources they presented on at the conference. In the first post of this series, Teresa Peláez-Domínguez, a doctoral researcher at the University of Valencia, introduces us to the world of galley slavery in the Early Modern Mediterranean.

We recommend that readers explore our other blog contributions which are linked here (<https://trasisblog.unibe.ch/?p=125>).

Introduction

In the Early Modern period, the Mediterranean was a frontier zone between mutually hostile Christian and Muslim powers. This frontier witnessed trade and diplomatic exchange as well as conflict and violence. In this conflict, capturing and enslaving the “infidel” enemy was regarded as entirely legitimate,[1] and provided the Hispanic Monarchy with the opportunity to replenish its rowing galley benches with newly enslaved enemies. Galley squadrons relied on coerced labour. In the galleys of Spain, in particular, rowing crews were comprised of both enslaved rowers and Iberian convicts sentenced to serve for periods of varying length. By the mid-sixteenth century, Charles V (r. in the Hispanic Monarchy 1515–1556) claimed exclusive ownership of all enemies captured by his galley squadrons in corsair warfare against Muslim pirates, who were then kept as slaves on the king’s galleys. Thus, Muslim slaves lived together with the ships’ Christian rowers and crews on these vessels, and mixed with the multiethnic populations of Iberian ports.

It therefore comes as no surprise to hear that religion played a significant role in the social dynamics of Spanish fleets. Indeed, we know of the presence of Muslim religious practices in the Catholic galleys.[2] In a broader context marked by the Hispanic Monarchy’s project of imposing ethno-religious homogeneity among its subjects, ecclesiastical authorities in the sixteenth century were concerned about religious orthodoxy among galley crews and made efforts to proselytise their enslaved non-Christian members.[3]

This is the context for the source I analyse in this blog post: a manumission petition by a galley slave addressed to Philip II (r. in the Hispanic Monarchy 1556–1598) in February 1587.[4] Documents like this provide rare glimpses into the social and cultural realities lived by enslaved people and help us to hear their otherwise often marginalised voices.[5]

Slave Labour in the Galleys: From the Oar to Medicine

Every formal petition addressed to the king begins with an introduction from the petitioner:

Maestre Luis, a surgeon of the ‘Captain’ galley of Spain, states that he has been Your Majesty’s slave for 20 years. It has been nearly a year since God, in His grace, illuminated him, allowing him to embrace His holy faith.[6]

Maestre Luis, whose Muslim name remains unknown to us, introduces himself as a galley surgeon. The know-how of enslaved rowers was commonly utilised in the galleys. These persons’ duties were not confined to rowing, but also encompassed other activities when needed, including work as blacksmiths, carpenters, and painters. They even served as surgeons, as in the case of our protagonist. Healthcare was an important issue in the galleys: apothecaries, physicians, barbers, and surgeons often served within the squadrons. There, they treated sick rowers, assessed their capability to work, and were responsible for maintaining order and discipline.[7] Maestre Luis was not just an ordinary surgeon: he had, in his own words, served the king as an enslaved person for two decades. Furthermore, Maestre Luis converted to Christianity one year prior to his petition.

Service Record: A Devout Catholic and Loyal Subject of the Hispanic Monarch

Maestre Luis’ conversion to Catholicism itself was a service to the king. In the context of a monarchy that sought ethno-religious homogenisation and defined itself in opposition to Islam, the conversion of Muslim subjects to Christianity was presented as a religious and political victory—not only because it represented a diminution of the enemy, but because it counterbalanced the anxieties caused by the conversion of free or enslaved Christians to Islam.[8]

However, conversion was merely one of many services to the crown mentioned by Maestre Luis:

Afterward [i.e. following his conversion], he rendered service on every occasion that arose this past summer, both at sea and on land. During a campaign led by the Adelantado of Castile, he engaged in a duel, killing a Moor in hand-to-hand combat; he fought bravely until he beheaded his opponent. Additionally, in Barbary, amidst a precarious situation where four soldiers were carrying a wounded Moor and hesitated to leave the slave behind due to greed, the petitioner intervened. He examined the wound and, though not fatal, convinced them it was, and to kill him. This clever stratagem allowed their escape, a feat they could not have accomplished without Maestre Luis’ resourcefulness. Considering these actions, he humbly requests Your Majesty to grant him freedom and a respectable position in the galleys to practice his profession as a surgeon—an art in which he is as qualified and efficient as Your Majesty will attest, given his long-standing expertise. Furthermore, apart from the kindness extended to him, it will encourage others to embrace Christianity upon witnessing Your Majesty’s honourable recognition of his services. Madrid, 27 February, 1587.[9]

Luis sheds light on the role of galley squadrons in the monarchy's naval and military might. In the raid mentioned to have taken place in North Africa, this recent convert actively fought against his former co-religionists. This "enemy" was, moreover, the main Other against which the Hispanic Monarchy defined itself. Through his commitment to this conflict, Luis sought to portray himself as a zealous Catholic who not only underwent conversion but also directly engaged in combat and even killed a member of his former religious community. This serves to demonstrate, to the eyes of the king, his commitment to his new religious community and opposition to his former faith. Luis skillfully aligns his request for manumission with the political discourse of the Catholic monarchy, presenting himself as a true Catholic. Luis' narrative also permits us to appreciate the economic dimension of the Hispanic Monarchy's war against Muslim powers. He mentions that the galley marines were reluctant to leave any captured enemy on land, blinded by greed. This conflict was indeed a source of financial enrichment to galley crews, who could sell their newly enslaved enemies to the king. As one sees in the source, Luis describes himself as opposing the greed of his fellow Catholics, thereby saving their lives, and thus proving his fealty to the king.

However, there remains one final service Luis holds out to the monarch: if the king manumits him, it will encourage other Muslim galley slaves to embrace Catholicism. His account of his service is thus deeply shaped by the proselytising discourse so prominent in discussions of Muslim galley slaves.

The Manumitted Slave: Baptism and Freedom?

The king's reply to Luis' petition first solicits the opinion of the fleet's captain-general. The captain-general confirmed the veracity of the slave's story and recommended fulfilling the request and appointing Luis as a surgeon. The king's official response concludes, "If he substitutes a slave [to serve] in his place, he can be manumitted. For now, hire him as a surgeon."^[10] The idea here is that an enslaved person provides their former master with a substitute, so that they do not lose too much from the manumission.

We do not really know if Luis purchased the requested slave, though we do know from the financial records of the galley that he solicited alms from the galley crew to raise the money to buy one. We can reasonably assume that he did this to secure his own release from slavery, which in any case he did eventually obtain. We know that Maestre Luis continued to serve as a galley surgeon until the early 17th century. We also know that Maestre Luis' complete Christian name was Luis Manrique. Interestingly, Luisa Manrique was the name of the wife of the fleet's captain-general; this is best explained as a function of the patronage of the captain-general's family in the baptism of Luis.^[11] Once manumitted, he continued to serve in the galley fleet and presumably remained indebted to the influence of the captain-general, probably establishing new forms of dependency with him.^[12]

Conclusion

The analysis of a single document can present challenges to the drawing of more general conclusions. Most of the enslaved Muslims serving in the Hispanic galleys perished there, remaining both enslaved and Muslim. Religion nonetheless influenced their status in the Christian galley fleets' society in certain instances. Rather than establishing a direct correlation between conversion and freedom—a connection already dismissed in various studies on Early Modern Mediterranean slavery^[13]—this petition for manumission reveals the strategies employed by a converted surgeon hoping to be freed from slavery. He evoked the Catholic monarchy's anti-Islamic and proselytising discourses, presenting himself as a devout believer and loyal servant of the king who deserved manumission. This particular case

highlights the agency and potential range of action, even for persons as severely constrained as galley slaves. Despite this obviously highly coercive context, galley slaves could, as in this case, position themselves in such a way in their frontier context in order to achieve manumission. Notwithstanding Luis' manumission, he remained within the galley squadron, demonstrating how the diverse forms of asymmetrical dependency in the Early Modern Mediterranean both often transcended slavery while remaining intrinsically connected to it.

[1] In the medieval Iberian Peninsula, the enslavement of Muslim captives in frontier warfare by Christians was justified as an exchange for their lives. This was justified in legislation such as the *Siete Partidas* (ca. 14th century), an idea that continued to circulate in the Early Modern period. In warfare against Muslim powers, the enslavement of the captured Muslim enemy was legitimised by reference to the concept that it occurred in the context of a “buena guerra” (good or just war). The religious aspect of the justification is important because, in theory, enemies who were Christians were not to be enslaved: they were taken captive and became prisoners of war but could not be sold as slaves. It was therefore only the “infidel,” the non-Christian, who could be enslaved. The literature on this subject is vast. See, for example: Giovanna Fiume, *Schiavitù mediterranea. Corsari, rinnegati e santi di età moderna* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2009); Daniel Hershenzon, “Towards a connected history of bondage in the Mediterranean: Recent trends in the field,” *History Compass* 15 (2017), 1–13; Wolfgang Kaiser ed., *Le commerce de captifs. Les intermédiaires dans l'échange et le rachat des prisonniers en Méditerranée, XVe-XVIIIe siècle* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2008); José Antonio Martínez Torres, *Prisioneros de los infieles. Vida y rescate de los cautivos cristianos en el Mediterráneo musulmán (siglos XVI–XVII)* (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2004); Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Cecilia Tarruell, “Prisoners of War, Captives or Slaves? The Christian Prisoners of Tunis and La Goleta in 1574,” in *Micro-Spatial Histories of Global Labour*, ed. C.G. De Vito and A. Gerritsen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 95–122; Bernard Vincent, “La esclavitud en el Mediterráneo Occidental (siglos XVI–XVIII),” in *Circulación de personas e intercambios comerciales en el Mediterráneo y en el Atlántico (siglos XVI, XVII, XVIII)*, ed. José Antonio Martínez Torres (Madrid: CSIC, 2008), 39–64.

[2] Some works have analysed it through the lense of inquisitorial processes: e.g. Rafael Benítez, “Esclavos moriscos y renegados en las galeras del rey ante la inquisición a principios del siglo XVII,” in *Identità e frontiere: Politica, economia e società nel Mediterraneo (secc. XIV–XVIII)*, ed. Lluís J. Guàrdia Marín, Maria Grazia Rosaria Mele and Gianfranco Tore (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2014), 77–92; Valentina Oldrati, “Los renegados entre la primera y la segunda etapa de la Inquisición de la mar: Cambios y permanencias (1571–1624),” *Hespéris-Tamuda* 53 (2018), 117–144; Thomas Glesener and Daniel Hershenzon, “The Maghrib in Europe: Royal Slaves and Islamic Institutions in Eighteenth-Century Spain,” *Past & Present* 259 (2023), 77–116.

[3] The adornment of the galleys was intended to enhance the dominance of Catholicism: see Sylvène Édouard, “Argo, Don Juan de Austria's royal galley at Lepanto,” *Reales Sitios. Revista de Patrimonio Nacional* 172 (2007), 4–27. Some monastic orders sought to convert enslaved Muslim in the ports, as studied in Rafael Benítez, “Las conversiones de soldados y galeotes en Barcelona según la correspondencia del jesuita Francisco Poch (1676–1685),” *Actes del VIII Congrés d'Història Moderna de Catalunya* 39 (2019), 1075–1094.

[4] Archivo General de Simancas (Spain), Guerra y Marina, file 210, document 121.

[5] I approach the ransom petition as an ego-document, understood as “those historical sources in which the researcher is faced with an *I*, or occasionally a *he*, as the writing and describing subject with a continuous presence in the text.” Rudolf Dekker, “Jacques Presser’s Heritage: Egodocuments in the Study of History,” *Memoria y civilización: anuario de historia* 5 (2002), 13–37 (at 14).

[6] The original Spanish text is as follows: “*Maestre Luis, cirujano de la Capitana de España, dice que él a que es esclavo de V. M. veinte años y ahora avrá uno que Dios fuese servido de dalle luz para que conociesse su sancta fee.*”

[7] Benedetta Chizzolini, “Medicare, Osservare, Controllare: Medici e Galeotti a Livorno Tra XVI–XVIII Secolo,” in *Un Mare Connesso. Europa e Mondo Islamico Nel Mediterraneo (Secoli XV–XIX)*, ed. Jake Dyble, Lo Bartolo and Elisa Morelli (Rome: Carocci, 2024), 71–91.

[8] Miguel Ángel de Bunes Ibarra, *La imagen de los musulmanes y del norte de Africa en la España de los siglos XVI y XVII* (Madrid: CSIC, 1989); Gillian Weiss, *Captifs et corsaires. L’identité française et l’esclavage en Méditerranée* (Toulouse: Anacharsis, 2014).

[9] “*Después desto, ha servido en todas las ocasiones que este verano passado se ofrecieron, assí de mar como de tierra, donde, en una cabalgada el Adelantado de Castilla hizo, se señaló aventajado de los demás porque mató un moro cuerpo a cuerpo y los dos solos pelearon con las espadas hasta que le corto la cabeza. Y, assimismo, en otras ocasiones en Berbería, trayendo cuatro soldados un moro herido a cuestras, estando a peligro de perderse con la dilación por codicia que tenían de no dexar el esclavo, llegó a ellos el suplicante diciendo que le dexasen ver la herida la cual, aunque no era de muerte, les hizo entender que lo era juntamente con matallo. Y con quedar desembarazados pudieron salvarse, lo que no hizieran si el dicho maestre Luis no tuviera la industria que tuvo. Atento a esto suplica a VM mande se le de libertad y que se sirva de mandalle dar un entretenimiento honrado en las dichas galeras para que el haga su oficio de cirujano, de que es tan hábil y eficiente como VM será informado por avello hechos tantos años. Y demás de la merced que V. M. le hiciese, se dará ánimo a los demás para que, viendo como V. M. le honra, se esfuercen en volverse cristianos. Madrid 27 de febrero de 1587.*”


[10] “*Que dando otro esclavo se le de libertad y en cuanto a lo demás que por ahora se le asiente una plaza de cirujano.*”

[11] For more information about patronage in slaves’ baptisms, see Thomas Glesener, “Se (re)faire musulman. L’accès des pauvres itinérants aux droits de la conversion (Espagne, XVIIIe siècle),” *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 64 (2017), 129–156.

[12] Julia Winnebeck *et al.*, “The Analytical Concept of Asymmetrical Dependency,” *Journal of Global Slavery* 8 (2023), 1–59.

[13] Giovanna Fiume, *Schiavitù mediterranea. Corsari, rinnegati e santi di età moderna* (Milán: Bruno Mondadori, 2009); Valentina Oldrati, “El triple ascenso de Pietro Velasco. Cautiverio, promoción del talento *asimilación antagonista* entre cristiandad e islam (1583–1608),” *Millars* 47 (2019), 117–143 (at 122–123).

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