

Slavery Defined

To begin our discussion it is necessary to define slavery. Coming from a Western and particularly North American perspective, we usually think of plantation-style racial slavery common in the Americas. To equate the slavery that existed in most African and Muslim societies with American slavery distorts some significant differences. Of course, slavery differed in practice from one society to the other; even within the United States slaves experienced different work regimes depending upon a number of variables including the attitudes of their master, the kind of work they performed, and where they lived. Whatever the differences, it is possible to agree on a definition to apply to slavery in all of its forms:

Slavery was one form of exploitation. Its special characteristics included the idea that slaves were property; that they were outsiders who were alien by origin or who had been denied their heritage through judicial or other sanctions; that coercion could be used at will; that their labor power was at the complete disposal of a master; that they did not have the right to their own sexuality and, by extension, to their own reproductive capacities; and that the slave status was inherited unless provision was made to ameliorate that status.

Source: Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983), p. 1.

Slavery—in its various forms—is ancient. It goes back thousands of years; it existed in ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt. Slaves have come from various places at different times in history. One source of slaves was sub-Saharan Africa. The export of slaves from sub-Saharan Africa was linked to the expansion of the Muslim Arab empire across North Africa in the centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E. Muslims used their religion (Islam) to justify the enslavement of nonbelieving (i.e., non-Muslim) Africans. Most of these African slaves crossed the Sahara Desert in caravans, or came via the Red Sea and East African coast in boats. They ended up in the countries of North Africa or in the Middle East.

The majority of African slaves were destined for domestic service. Women and children were wanted in greater numbers than men. They were likely to be incorporated into Muslim society. Boys were trained for military or domestic service. Females became domestics, and the prettiest were placed in harems. Slavery in the Middle East was not a self-perpetuating institution, and those born into slavery formed a relatively small proportion of the slave population.