



# Slavery or freedom? The causes of early medieval Europe's economic advancement

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After years of divergent interpretations and reinterpretations of predominantly well-known written sources mentioning the commerce of early medieval Europe, Michael McCormick now presents new basic source material which puts discussions about a crucial question of medieval history on a new footing.<sup>1</sup> Data on 669 travellers in the Mediterranean world between AD 700 and 900 turn out to be of surprisingly high relevance for reconstructing communications and routes between western and central Europe on the one hand and the Arab and Byzantine territories on the other. The most surprising observation is that in comparison with the centuries immediately following the decline of the western Roman empire, between the eighth and the tenth century the number of long-distance routes can be proven to have increased, and with them the infrastructure for trading and commercial activities between west and east evidently improved. Thus again serious doubts are raised about Pirenne's theory that a breakdown of maritime trading connections occurred as a result of the Arab conquest of the eastern, southern and western parts of the Mediterranean world.

Concerning the northern regions of Europe, post-war archaeological activities and large-scale excavations of early medieval proto-urban trading settlements in the North Sea and Baltic regions (Dorestad in the Netherlands, Haithabu in Germany, Ribe in Denmark, Birka in Sweden,

<sup>1</sup> M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge, 2001). The publication of the prosopographical data catalogue extracted from the written sources as the basis for the synthesis discussed here is in preparation. Unfortunately the author of this review was not able to attend the panel organized at the Kalamazoo 2002 congress. He expresses his gratitude to Michael McCormick for an intensive exchange of ideas on his book on the occasion of a personal meeting in January 2003 in Cambridge, MA, partly reflected in the following lines.

Staraja Ladoga in Russia, and others),<sup>2</sup> a new numismatic understanding of the evolving silver currency in the Frankish heartlands from the seventh century onwards,<sup>3</sup> as well as careful interpretations of the written sources<sup>4</sup> have already undermined belief in Pirenne's thesis of a shift in the Frankish kingdom of the eighth and ninth centuries to a barter economy without any monetized commercial activities worth mentioning. Now, thanks to McCormick's successful efforts in analysing the situation on the southern border of the Frankish kingdom, recent findings about the situation north of the Alps appear in a new light.

The upturn of northern trade in the eighth and ninth centuries cannot now be seen only as a simple compensation for lost connections to the south, but must be viewed as a result of a general expansion of the trading activities of the Frankish kingdom into new areas. Where did the forces for this expansion come from?

Scholars' opinions about the driving powers that enabled Europe at the end of the Middle Ages to outrun all neighbouring economies and to conquer the whole globe are still divided. Did European society accidentally leap forward after having profited from contacts with the Orient in the age of crusades (eleventh to thirteenth centuries)? Was it a sudden and rootless jump from the backwardness of the 'dark ages' into the light of civilization? Some think so.<sup>5</sup>

McCormick's new results contribute to make such views increasingly implausible, even unnecessary. His thesis is broadly in accordance with a growing number of recent investigations which indicate that the picture of a deep economic collapse after the fall of Rome should rather be replaced with the assumption of a broad reorganization of economic structures in the immediate post-Roman centuries. These 'reformed' structures (methods, peoples, etc.) should be seen as the decisive basis which enabled that fascinating increase of economic activities after the end of the first millennium AD. Considerable evidence suggests that this picture of a transformation of the Roman world describes the reality of early medieval developments much better than that of the Roman world's

<sup>2</sup> See for example: H. Jankuhn (ed.), *Handelsplätze des frühen und hohen Mittelalters*, Archäologische und naturwissenschaftliche Untersuchungen an ländlichen und frühstädtischen Siedlungen im deutschen Küstengebiet 5:II. Jahrh. n. Chr. 2 (Weinheim, 1984) and B. Ambrosiani and H. Clarke, *Towns in the Viking Age* (Leicester, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> P. Berghaus, 'Wirtschaft, Handel und Verkehr der Merowingerzeit im Licht numismatischer Quellen', in K. Düwel, H. Jankuhn, H. Siems and D. Timpe (eds), *Der Handel des frühen Mittelalters. Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Zeit in Mittel- und Nordeuropa* 3. Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften Göttingen. Phil.-hist. Klasse, 3. Folge Nr. 150 (Göttingen, 1985), pp. 162–213.

<sup>4</sup> A.C.-F. Koch, 'Phasen in der Entstehung von Kaufmannsniederlassungen zwischen Maas und Nordsee in der Karolingerzeit', in A. Verhulst (ed.), *Anfänge des Städtewesens an Schelde, Maas und Rhein bis zum Jahre 1000* (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 1996), pp. 323–36.

<sup>5</sup> N. Daniel, *The Arabs and Medieval Europe* (London, 1981); A. Zimmermann (ed.), *Orientalische Kultur und europäisches Mittelalter* (Cologne, 1985).

collapse.<sup>6</sup> McCormick's book – though primarily concentrated on the Carolingian period – proposes important new arguments in this direction.

One of the most remarkable qualities of McCormick's analysis is the way the author combines the evidence of written sources with that of archaeology. Thus for example, the chapters about trade goods do not neglect the current analysis of relevant archaeological materials (coins, grave-goods, precious art materials, etc.). Archaeologists may feel invited to add further results to the newly won picture and to discuss its consequences.

So once again back to the question of driving forces. Some of the possible factors which may have stimulated commercial activities, notably the trade in humans, are more broadly discussed by McCormick and documented with written sources and archaeological materials. Verlinden's opus about medieval slavery already dismantled some visions of a social harmony that was supposed to have followed the decline of Rome,<sup>7</sup> and archaeology has begun to add further information to this picture,<sup>8</sup> but McCormick's conclusions explicitly exceed previous ones. The author considers the slave trade of the eighth and ninth centuries to have been 'the source of [the] western wealth' (p. 758) and 'the first great impetus to the development of the European commercial economy' (p. 768). So, in McCormick's opinion, the slavery practised in large parts of the eastern, southern and western Mediterranean was most significant for the 'origins of European economy' though first of all 'the human capital . . . [flowed] out of Europe' (p. 776).

In fact McCormick has good reasons to assume that the slave trade might have been one of the important factors in the surprisingly fast evolution of such former fishing or salt-producing islands on the Frankish periphery as Venice. I think the location of Venice, closer to the Slavic lands – the main supply region for slaves – should also be taken into account when considering its success as compared to Marseille (see McCormick p. 793). The demand for slaves in the Arab world is amply documented by McCormick. And in the face of so many written records there can be no doubt that Byzantine armed forces' attacks on Italy or other European Mediterranean coastal areas, as well as Arabic raids on Spain and southern France, opened up temporarily important sources for the slave supply of the Islamic world. In these cases there

<sup>6</sup> After thirty years the debate on agricultural technology and society (see the most important study by Lynn Jr. White, *The Transformation of the Roman World* (Los Angeles, 1966)) has been recently reactivated in the multiple volume work *The Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. Walter Pohl *et al.*, 13 vols (Leiden, 1997–2003) but with fewer important insights on rural technology and social change in the transition period.

<sup>7</sup> C. Verlinden, *L'esclavage dans l'Europe médiévale* 1 (Bruges, 1955) and 2 (Ghent, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> J. Henning, 'Gefangenenfesseln im slawischen Siedlungsraum und der europäische Sklavenhandel im 6. bis 12. Jahrhundert', *Germania* 70 (1992), pp. 403–26.

is no doubt that European Christians (Franks or Lombards, Visigoths or Romans) became victims of slavery. But are these really cases of commerce between west and east? McCormick's impressive Table 25.2 (p. 773) shows that in all well-attested cases of mass transportations of such captives to the south (most probably into slavery), Byzantine or Arabic forces or agents both were the initiators and the beneficiaries. Also, notably, these mass actions – apart from the story of the freed disciples of Methodius, written in the late ninth or early tenth century with its obvious pro-Byzantine political character and its attempt to construct a kind of biblical parable against western heretics<sup>9</sup> – were sources of eastern (including Byzantine enclaves in Italy), not of specifically western, wealth.

In contrast to this relatively clear picture it is more difficult to find evidence for the suggestion that, as an effect of Charlemagne's victory over the Saxons or of the Carolingian conquest of other western and central European territories (except the eastern borderlands), a flow of captives was sold to the Arabs. Even for the captured non-Christian Saxons it seems more likely that they were resettled in other still sparsely populated corners of the Frankish empire, as must be supposed from numerous place names using the element '-leben' and 'Sachsen-' outside of Saxony (for example in Thuringia and Hesse).<sup>10</sup> 'Europeans hunted and captured across the continent' (p. 733) is an excessively broad characterization. There is no evidence for slave-hunting actions in the Paris basin or in the Rhineland, though McCormick has documented such activity by the Arabs in Sicily. It is crucial to differentiate between the centres of Frankish territory and the less controlled and more threatened periphery, between exceptions such as illegal kidnapping inside the empire

<sup>9</sup> The Franks are called 'heretics' and 'savage' 'by nature' whereas Svatopluk, the Slavic ruler in whose sphere of control the case would have fallen, is called only 'half-savage', and he was unfortunately absent when the priests and deacons of Methodius were thrown into the dungeon. It was not Pilate, the governor, who was guilty, but 'Judas': that is, the members of Wiching's faction. 'For just [as] that man [i.e. Judas] sold Christ, so did these men sell to the "ever-provoking" [Jews] the servants of Christ.' 'So they were themselves deserving of the fate of Judas, namely hanging': trans. S.N. Scott, *The Collapse of the Moravian Mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius, the Fate of their Disciplines, and the Christianization of the Southern Slavs: Translations of Five Historical Texts with Notes and Commentary* (Berkeley, CA, 1989), pp. 99–104.

<sup>10</sup> The term *captivus* is sometimes used, sometimes not. But in no case is the sale of Saxons abroad explicitly mentioned, whereas in some cases it is clear that resettlement took place. For example, Einhard c. 7 summarized the events: 'and settled them, with their wives and children, in many different bodies here and there in Gaul and Germany': *Einhard: The Life of Charlemagne*, trans. S.E. Turner (New York, 1880). 'One third of the Saxons' were taken away: it does not mean one third of the whole population of Saxony, but refers to the situation after the Sintfeld battle between the allied forces of the Slavic Obodrits and Frankish contingents in the extreme north-eastern corner of the largely occupied Saxon territories. Angelika Lampen ('Sachsenkriege, sächsischer Widerstand und Kooperation', in C. Stiegemann and M. Wemhoff (eds), *799 Kunst und Kultur der Karolingerzeit*, vol. 1 (Mainz, 1999), pp. 264, 270) interprets the event as belonging to Charlemagne's deportation strategy.

and the comparative normality of slave deportation in Slavic territory encouraged by frequent disturbances and wars. There is no doubt that the heirs of Roman urban culture in the eastern, southern and western Mediterranean, Byzantines and Arabs, continued to deal in slaves either for the households of the rich or for special tasks in agriculture and military organization. But it is difficult to imagine that landlords of the west would have systematically destroyed their most effective rural production network – the manorial system – by selling their own peasantry into slavery only to buy silk and drugs in southern markets.

Of course McCormick does not argue that this was the case. He properly notes, very briefly, that ‘food production’ is ‘the primary sector of any economy’ (p. 30). And of course he does not intend and does not have the room in his book to show in more detail the essential non-slavery-based features of early medieval central European peasant society (especially here within the manorial system of the Carolingian period). This brevity, however, could unintentionally contribute to misunderstandings in the discussion.

There is good evidence for a visible development of local market relations in the Frankish heartlands in the Carolingian period. The spread of silver currency is among the most obvious. But it seems hard to explain this process as primarily inspired by an importation of luxury goods for a small upper class. We have even more archaeological evidence for far-reaching imports of luxury goods from the east to central Europe for the early Merovingian period, whereas evidence for local market relations in this time is still rare.<sup>11</sup> The later intensification of local market relations which becomes more visible from the seventh century onwards, must primarily be explained by an increase in the production and local exchange of everyday goods, above all food.

This is not the place to present all the new archaeological evidence indicating a considerable amelioration of the technological basis of central European agriculture in the first millennium AD.<sup>12</sup> McCormick is right, when he points out our insufficient knowledge about rural technology, tools and methods (p. 30, n. 30). This is, however, mainly the

<sup>11</sup> H. Roth, ‘Handel und Gewerbe vom 6. bis 8. Jh. östlich des Rheins’, *Vierteljahresschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 58 (1971), pp. 323–58; J. Henning, ‘Handel, Verkehrswege und Beförderungsmittel im Merowingerreich’, *Die Franken – Wegbereiter Europas*, vol. 2 (Mainz, 1996), pp. 789–801.

<sup>12</sup> For the English speaking reader the up-to-date synthesis by Karl Brunner can be recommended: ‘Continuity and Discontinuity of Roman Agricultural Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages’, in Del Sweeney (ed.), *Agriculture in the Middle Ages – Technology, Practice, and Representation* (Philadelphia, 1995), pp. 21–40, who broadly reflects the consequences of the re-dating of the Osterburken iron hoard for European economic history. J. Henning, ‘Zur Datierung von Werkzeug- und Agrargerätefinden im germanischen Landnahmegebiet zwischen Rhein und oberer Donau (Der Hortfund von Osterburken)’, *Jahrbuch des römisch-germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz* 32 (1985), pp. 570–94.

result of insufficient archaeological efforts in the past to bring more light into this area of early medieval life. Archaeologists have recently begun to investigate this field more deeply, and (as it seems) with significant results concerning the reorganization of 'the primary sector' of the post-Roman economy in Europe.<sup>13</sup> Many of the so-called inventions of medieval European agriculture, traditionally attributed to the period after the year 1000, turn out to have been known already in Roman times, such as the heavy-wheeled plough in its sophisticated form of a 'swivel plough' or the long-handled 'authentic' scythe. But they were limited in their diffusion. Immediately after the decline of Rome in the west some of the most effective methods were selected and became integrated into the newly dominant rural economic structures, which consisted basically of villages, farmsteads and peasants. Some special Roman 'inventions' closely linked with *latifundia* structures were not lost by chance. According to the archaeological and linguistic record the Roman *villa*, based on permanent labour forces attached to this unit (slaves) as well as temporarily engaged field workers, did not survive in post-Roman central Europe except as a word. The key factors for the new system were a technological base which in part reached a nearly nineteenth-century level of quality (not of quantity), and the increasing number of relatively autonomous and self-managing peasants organized mainly in villages, a growing interest of these food producers in their own daily work, and finally, a higher degree of freedom in the rural world.<sup>14</sup> This 'sort of freedom' was, in the words of Karl Brunner, 'the successful rural concept of the early Middle Ages'.<sup>15</sup> The effects on the agricultural efficiency of labour must not be underestimated.

There may have been a late and post-Roman population decline in central Europe as well as in Byzantium and in the Arabic Caliphate, as McCormick points out with good arguments. The plague certainly played a role in some areas. There is no question that everywhere the absolute volume of agricultural production must thereby have been unfavourably affected. But this does not necessarily mean that the efficiency of western and central Europe's agricultural labour was diminished. The opposite could be possible.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> First results: J. Henning, 'Landwirtschaft der Franken', in *Die Franken – Wegbereiter Europas*, vol. 2 (Mainz, 1996), pp. 774–85.

<sup>14</sup> J. Henning, 'Germanisch-romanische Agrarkontinuität und -diskontinuität im nordalpinen Kontinentaleuropa – Teile eines Systemwandels? Beobachtungen aus archäologischer Sicht', in D. Hägermann, W. Haubrichs and J. Jarnut (eds), *Akkulturation – Probleme einer germanisch-romanischen Kultursynthese in Spätantike und frühem Mittelalter*, Ergänzungsband, Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde (in preparation).

<sup>15</sup> Brunner, 'Continuity', p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> See Brunner's opinion, 'Continuity', p. 24: 'The shortage of workers, however, improved the social situation of the population and created pressure to develop innovations in agriculture.'

In 1978 an early seventh-century shipwreck was found in Fos-sur-Mer near Marseille, the Frankish gateway to Byzantine shores.<sup>17</sup> The vessel was seemingly on its way back to its eastern or southern Mediterranean homeland heavily laden with a cargo consisting of forty to fifty tons of wheat. If we can trust palaeobotanical analysis of the load, this wheat had come from Continental European locations.<sup>18</sup> Was the newly organized but still unimposing rural economy of the west feeding the 'living fossil' of the east, the shining empire of Byzantium, at least in part? This must be analysed more deeply by archaeology and its neighbouring disciplines in the future.<sup>19</sup>

The social acceptance of village communities in west and central Europe that were on the one hand obliged to pay rents out of their single units (farmsteads), but on the other hand partly enjoyed rights of self-management and even elements of self-administration, also seems to be important for the reorganization of the world of commerce which took place as a consequence. Under such conditions, how could society do otherwise than accept more self-confidence and elements of self-administration within settlements of groups of traders, that would become the first roots of the later autonomous towns of western and central Europe?

McCormick (p. 778) cites the most remarkable case of Cremona's merchants of the year 851, who tried to shake off their bishop's (i.e. their local town lord's) permanent control and demands for trading fees. These traders provoked an endless-seeming investigation at the king's court of law in Pavia in the very presence of Emperor Louis II in order to decide the case. In later times local town lords may have had reasons to remind some inhabitants of their towns of this past debacle which had ended successfully for Benedict, bishop of Cremona. In the meantime, similar efforts by groups or communities of traders may have ended less successfully for the local lords, but the outcomes would not have been documented by ecclesiastical writers. Rialto and its neighbouring islands with their excellently defended site surely held

<sup>17</sup> M.P. Jézégou, 'L'épave II de l'anse Saint-Gervais à Fos-sur-Mer. Sa contribution à la commerce et de la céramique du haut Moyen-Age', Dissertation, Aix-en Provence (1983).

<sup>18</sup> W. Janssen, 'Reiten und Fahren in der Merowingerzeit', in H. Jankuhn, W. Kimmig and E. Ebel (eds), *Der Verkehr. Verkehrswege, Verkehrsmittel, Organisation. Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Zeit in Mittel- und Nordeuropa* 5. Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften Göttingen, philosophisch-historische Klasse, 3. Folge Nr. 180 (Göttingen, 1989), p. 223.

<sup>19</sup> For the disruption of the annona service to Constantinople, starting in 617, see M. McCormick, 'Bateaux de vie, bateaux de mort. Maladie, commerce, transports annonaires et le passage économique du Bas-Empire au moyen âge', in *Morfologie sociali e culturali in Europa fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo*, Settimane 45 (Spoleto, 1998), p. 115. This could have given an incentive to locating new sources of grain supply, and in fact McCormick (*Origins*, pp. 107–8) points to written evidence of Constantinopolitan ships sailing to Gaul in the seventh century. Courtesy of M. McCormick.

the best cards in this game and gained early success in reaching self-administration and then autonomy. In this case the struggle for more freedom of trade accompanied the maintenance of a very old feature of Mediterranean history: the slave trade. And its existence in the eighth and ninth centuries is excellently documented by McCormick.

But the slave trade in the Mediterranean was not a new invention of the Carolingian era; nor did it end in this period. After having its peak in Roman antiquity, it did not stop in the Merovingian period; and after the Carolingian age, in the tenth and eleven centuries, the development of Christian principalities in the Slav territories – formerly the main source of slaves – brought at most a slight eastward dislocation of slave recruiting. Slave extraction from the African continent did not remain an antique Mediterranean tradition with a significant peak in the times of the early medieval Arabic conquest of central Africa, but continued almost seamlessly into early modern times.<sup>20</sup> The America of the conquistadors and the planters was more than slightly touched by it. And who would argue that the globe in our days is free of all elements of slavery?<sup>21</sup>

Though probably all of the ‘centres of civilization’ in the Old World were more or less active in the slave trade or even in using slaves for different purposes at the end of the first millennium AD, none of them experienced an economic upturn like that of western and central Europe. How could slavery stimulate only certain societies, and why? In contrast, no other region except western and central Europe in the second half of the first millennium shows such a high degree of agricultural technological innovation and of experimentation with sophisticated new forms of organization of an even more free peasantry. Not to speak of the uniqueness of those ultimately successful struggles of merchants for more freedom in their sphere of activity. Neither the traders of Byzantium nor those of the Arabic world, or those of any other corner of the globe, succeeded in creating their own fortified centres for trade and crafts with their own laws and their own administration – as happened first in the lower Rhine region and in northern Italy. Thus I estimate that the reasons for Europe’s economic upturn must be linked primarily with the step-by-step reorganization of agriculture soon followed by that of trade. And McCormick is right as well: slavery and the search for luxury goods stood at the cradle of Europe’s

<sup>20</sup> D. Gronenborn, ‘Mai-mbauji – Eine Studie über Entstehung und Wandel eisenzeitlich-historischer Fürstentümer im südlichen Tschadbecken (7./8. Jahrhundert n. Chr. bis ca. 1925)’, *Archäologisches Nachrichtenblatt* 6:4 (2001), pp. 329–39.

<sup>21</sup> Kevin Bales, ‘The Social Psychology of Modern Slavery’, *Scientific American* (April 2002), pp. 80–8. I owe this reference to Jonathan Conant.



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economy. But it was propelled above all by another driving force, the stimulating impetus of greater freedom for peasants and traders.

Thanks to McCormick's extraordinarily innovative and inspiring work, with its convincing new arguments concerning an intensification of trading activities in the Mediterranean between west and east in the time after the Arabic conquest, the picture of the commercial situation in the Mediterranean has fundamentally changed. Now it is up to archaeology to invest significantly more effort in these areas to detect the nature of exchanged trade goods in the Carolingian era. No doubt slaves were a part of it.

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