

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Barker, Hannah. That Most Precious Merchandise: The  
Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260–1500**

Angela Zhang

Volume 43, numéro 3, été 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075301ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35319>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Zhang, A. (2020). Compte rendu de [Barker, Hannah. That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260–1500]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(3), 276–278. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35319>

Comme les précédents tomes, celui-ci est enrichi d'une substantielle bibliographie, d'un *index nominum*, et d'un index des provenances qui en font un instrument de travail très utile et un ouvrage de référence indispensable pour tous ceux qui s'intéressent à l'histoire du livre.

FRANÇOIS ROUGET

Queen's University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35318>

**Barker, Hannah.**

***That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260–1500.***

Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. 328 + 18 ill. ISBN 978-0-8122-5154-8 (hardcover) US\$79.95.

The title of Hannah Barker's book comes from a description of the Mamluk slave market by Felix Fabri, a Dominican friar and pilgrim passing through Alexandria between 1483 and 1484. His four words encapsulate the spirit of the monograph, a much needed and timely exploration of the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea slave trade in the premodern period. This long-awaited and overdue study fills the large gap in scholarship between the history of slavery in the Latin Crusader states and Atlantic slavery in the colonial era. Barker's survey takes a macro-historical approach, following trade routes and changing regimes to argue for a Mediterranean slave culture that stretches across religious lines and exists as a tool for religious and financial domination of the eastern Mediterranean. Barker weaves together religious concern for the soul of slaves and practical concerns for tax revenue held by both Christian and Islamic traders. Using notarial documents, travel accounts, ship manifests, state legislation, and private letters, Barker's overview of slavery, including the intertwined cultures of trade and labour, is an impressive feat of historical reconstruction out of piecemeal archival sources.

Synthesizing a wide array of archival documents in Arabic, Italian and Latin, Barker successfully establishes a common Mediterranean slave culture in the premodern period with particular attention to Genoa, Venice, and the Mamluk states. Barker argues for religious difference at the core of the justification of

slavery in the premodern Mediterranean period, although she rightfully places religion on a spectrum that is modified by race, geographic origin, ethnography, and physiognomic differences. She argues that the premodern Mediterranean was a society in which anyone, regardless of faith, could be enslaved. By centring her analysis on the Black Sea as the source for slaves, Barker explores the myriad of different peoples who traded and lived around its various polities to analyze both the intricate cultural exchanges of the slave trade and its ramifications within the geo-political developments of the eastern Mediterranean.

Barker organizes her study thematically. In her introduction, she establishes her work within her sources and the general historiography. Chapter 1 starts with a general overview of slavery, its etymology, and the role religion and law played in the practice of slavery. Chapter 2 is perhaps her most challenging: here, she broaches the topic of racialization through the liminal spaces between religion and ethnography in the perceptions of slave status; she identifies the key terms of racialization that are found within the premodern worldview, while pointing out that these terms also create an overarching understanding of the processes of othering at play during and after this period. Chapter 3 is a comparative study on Genoa, Venice, and Mamluk slavery, with their unique laws, codes, and values in the premodern Mediterranean world. The process of the sale of a slave is reconstructed in chapter 4 with emphasis again on the Venetian, Genoese, and Mamluk markets. The step-by-step processes of the slave trade are laid out through archival documents, tracing slaves from the various peoples around the Black Sea to the Italian ports of Caffa and Tana, through the Byzantine Bosphorus Strait and finally ending up in Italian and Mamluk port cities. Chapter 5 introduces the Black Sea as a geographical, political, and cultural centre of the slave trade and introduces one of the most important and understudied polities of the late European Middle Ages, the Golden Horde, placing it in the middle of Christian and Muslim relations. Chapter 6 looks at the cultural structure of the slave trade within the eastern Mediterranean, including shipping concerns and governmental regulations. Her last chapter goes back to the theoretical to demonstrate how both Islam and Christianity justified the slave trade within their own precepts. She concludes by explaining the title of her monograph and emphasizes the humanity of the slave trade, not only among its observers and traders but also in its subjects. The very thing that made the slaves valuable was their humanity and a soul that could feasibly belong to either Islam or Christianity.

Barker's book goes beyond the confines of the Middle Ages Series and demonstrates the future of premodern studies—a multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural approach that both points out the similarities of the Mediterranean culture of trade and accounts for its localized nuances. To date, Barker is one of the few scholars of the late medieval and early modern Mediterranean to be versed in the critical languages of both Islamic and Christian sources. As an English monograph, this book fills a long-existing gap in historical research of slavery in the premodern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Thus, this book not only functions as an overview of the Mediterranean world of the Middle Ages and the early modern period but also bridges the gap in the historiography of slavery and religious contact between the Crusades and the Atlantic Trade.

ANGELA ZHANG

York University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35319>

**Bastow, Sarah L.**

*Edwin Sandys and the Reform of English Religion.*

London: Routledge, 2020. Pp. 224. ISBN 978-0-3673-5315-5 (hardcover) US\$128.

The Reformation in England was a highly complex movement, one that not only affected and shaped the religious landscape of the English Commonwealth, but also substantially altered the political and social ethos of England. Reform was not merely confined to institutions such as the church or the government. Rather, it transformed the individual reformers themselves. That is one of the primary premises of Sarah L. Bastow's new work, which examines one of those reformers, Edwin Sandys, archbishop of York. While the monograph moves chronologically from Sandys's early career to the height of his influence in the 1580s, Bastow's primary interest is his ministry during Elizabeth I's reign against the larger backdrop of Elizabethan religion. She asserts that Sandys and other Elizabethan clerics should not be viewed as uniform in their theological convictions. Their doctrinal differences underscore the complexity of evangelical reform in England.