

## Slavery Was Never About Race: Power, Prophets, and Profits in Medieval Europe

The term “Slav” and its haunting echo in the word “slave” often spark misconceptions about the origins of slavery and its ties to race. Many assume that slavery, as we understand it today, has always been rooted in racial divisions. However, a closer look at medieval Europe, particularly the interactions between the Christian Franks and pagan Slavic peoples, reveals a different story. Slavery in this period was driven not by race but by power dynamics, religious differences, and economic incentives. This article explores the historical relationship between the Franks, Slavs, and the slave trade, with a focus on the multicultural hub of Al-Andalus, demonstrating that slavery was a system built on prophets—religious ideology—and profits, not racial hierarchies.

### The Origins of “Slav” and “Slave”

The word “Slav” derives from the Old Slavic term *Slověne*, meaning “those who speak,” referring to the Slavic-speaking peoples of Eastern and Central Europe, including groups like the Poles, Russians, Serbs, and ancestors of modern Slovenians. These tribes shared linguistic and cultural ties but were not a unified political entity during the early medieval period (roughly 700–1000 CE). By contrast, the English word “slave” traces its roots to the medieval Latin *sclavus*, which emerged in the eighth to tenth centuries. The phonetic similarity between *Slav* and *sclavus* is no coincidence, but the connection is not as simple as it seems.

*Sclavus* originally referred to enslaved Slavic people, who were captured in large numbers during this period by neighboring powers, particularly the Franks. Over time, the term became synonymous with “slave” in general, as Slavs were a significant portion of the enslaved population traded across Europe and the Mediterranean. This linguistic evolution reflects a historical reality: Slavic peoples were disproportionately targeted for enslavement, but not because of race. Instead, their vulnerability stemmed from their geographic position, political fragmentation, and religious differences.

### The Frankish-Slavic Dynamic: Power and Religion

The Franks, a Germanic people centered in what is now France and Germany, were a dominant force in early medieval Europe under leaders like Charlemagne. By the eighth century, they had embraced Christianity and used it as a unifying ideology for their expanding empire. The Slavic tribes, living on the eastern fringes of Frankish territory in regions like modern-day Poland, Czechia, and the Balkans, were often pagan, adhering to polytheistic beliefs that clashed with Christian doctrine.

This religious divide was crucial. The Franks, viewing themselves as champions of Christianity, often justified their conquests and enslavement of pagans as a moral imperative. Pagan Slavs were seen as “outsiders” to the Christian world, making them prime targets for raids, wars, and enslavement. This wasn’t about race—both Franks and Slavs were what we’d now call “Caucasian”—but about power and ideology. The Franks’ military superiority and organized empire allowed them to exploit weaker, fragmented Slavic tribes, capturing prisoners during border conflicts or

raids.

Enslavement wasn't just a byproduct of war; it was a deliberate strategy. Slavic captives were valuable commodities, and the Franks capitalized on this by selling them to thriving slave markets across Europe and the Mediterranean. The religious justification—Christian superiority over pagans—meshed neatly with economic motives, creating a system where ideology and profit reinforced each other.

## **Al-Andalus: The Multicultural Slave Hub**

One of the primary destinations for enslaved Slavs was Al-Andalus, the Muslim-ruled region of the Iberian Peninsula (modern-day Spain and Portugal) from the eighth to fifteenth centuries. Al-Andalus was a vibrant, multicultural society, a crossroads of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish cultures, and a major economic hub. Its wealth and demand for labor made it a magnet for the slave trade, with enslaved people sourced from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

In Al-Andalus, enslaved Slavs were known as *saqaliba* (from the Arabic for "Slav" or "slave"), though the term later applied to other enslaved Europeans as well. The *saqaliba* served in various roles, from domestic servants to soldiers in elite guard units, reflecting the diverse needs of Al-Andalus's sophisticated economy. The trade in Slavic slaves was so significant that it influenced the Latin term *sclavus*, as Frankish and other European traders supplied captives to Muslim merchants in Iberia.

The slave trade in Al-Andalus wasn't driven by race either. Enslaved people came from diverse regions—Slavs from Eastern Europe, Berbers from North Africa, and others from sub-Saharan Africa or the Byzantine Empire. What mattered was their status as captives, often acquired through war or piracy, not their ethnicity. Al-Andalus's cosmopolitan nature meant that slaves were integrated into a society where cultural and religious diversity was the norm, further underscoring that slavery was about labor and power, not racial categories.

## **Slavery Beyond Race: A Medieval Perspective**

In medieval Europe, the concept of race as we know it today didn't exist. People were divided by religion, language, and political allegiance, not skin color or racial categories. Enslavement was a practical tool of conquest and commerce, used by Christians, Muslims, and others alike. The Franks enslaved Slavs because they were accessible, often pagan, and lived in contested borderlands. Similarly, Muslim rulers in Al-Andalus enslaved people from various regions to fuel their economy, not because of racial ideologies but because slavery was a cornerstone of medieval societies.

This is a stark contrast to the transatlantic slave trade of later centuries, which became heavily racialized, particularly from the fifteenth century onward. In the medieval period, however, slavery was opportunistic and flexible, driven by whoever was vulnerable—whether pagan Slavs, captured Christians, or African tribes. The Frankish-Slavic slave trade and its connection to Al-Andalus highlight this reality: slavery was about exploiting power imbalances for profit, often cloaked in religious justification.

## Prophets and Profits: The Core of Medieval Slavery

The interplay of “prophets” and “profits” captures the essence of medieval slavery. Religious ideology—Christianity for the Franks, Islam for Al-Andalus—provided a moral framework to justify enslaving those deemed “other,” whether pagans or enemies. But the real engine was economic. Slavery was a lucrative business, and the demand for labor in wealthy regions like Al-Andalus created a thriving trade network. Slavic captives, among others, were a commodity, their value measured in gold rather than ideology.

This system wasn’t unique to the Franks or Al-Andalus. Across the medieval world, from Viking raids to Byzantine markets, slavery flourished where power and profit intersected. The linguistic legacy of *sclavus* becoming “slave” is a reminder of this history, but it also obscures the broader truth: slavery wasn’t about race. It was about who could be conquered, controlled, and sold.

## Conclusion

The story of the Slavs, the Franks, and the slave trade in Al-Andalus reveals a complex web of power, religion, and economics. The term “slave” may have roots in the enslavement of Slavic peoples, but the practice itself was driven by opportunity, not racial prejudice. In a world where religious identity trumped all else, the Christian Franks exploited pagan Slavs, feeding a multicultural slave market in Al-Andalus that cared little for ethnicity. This history challenges modern assumptions about slavery, reminding us that its roots lie not in race but in the timeless pursuit of power and profit. By understanding this, we can better contextualize the evolution of slavery and its lasting impact on language, culture, and society.