

Silk Roads or Slave Roads? Slavery in Tang Dynasty Caravans

Abstract

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The Silk Road is often idealized, conjuring up romantic visions of caravans laded with exotic silks and aromatic spices. The glamor persists because at least one unsavory aspect of commerce, slavery, has received little scholarly attention. A rare glimpse of the medieval trade in humans comes from Tang Dynasty (618-907) contracts and travel permits, excavated at the oasis city of Turfan in Xinjiang, China which clearly distinguish between unfree slaves and commoner servants. Inner Asian merchants and Tang elites can be seen buying, selling and travelling with human chattel with Chinese-language and foreign names. The small sample of permits provides intriguing testimony that slaves comprised about a third of the travelers recorded on this section of the Silk Road, supplied the majority of labor in travelling households of Tang government officials, and enhanced profits of itinerant merchants who relied on slave sales and slave labor. Tang law, which prohibited enslaving free subjects of the empire, may have stimulated the Silk Road slave trade by creating a perverse incentive to import foreign slaves. Nonetheless, slave sales apparently only supplemented merchant profits because pack animals loaded with goods outnumbered slaves by a 3.6 to 1 ratio. Most intriguing is the 2 to 1 ratio of slaves to commoner servants in the households of Tang officials. Further study is needed to determine whether this was a Silk Road phenomenon—due to the relatively low cost of foreign slaves versus commoner labor near the frontier—or also held true in the empire's interior.