Jewish Slave Trade in Medieval Europe

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These days, **Otto the Great**, a German Emperor, found his final resting-place in Magdeburg's Cathedral, Eastern Germany. Reason enough to focus on a forgotten chapter of German history: The long-distance slave trade crossing wide parts of medieval Europe and which was impossible to realize without **imperial protection**.

The Slave Market of Prague was at the beginning of an important route for trading slaves to al-Andalus, an Islamic state that temporarily covered most of Spain. Similar to al-Andalus, the Duchy of Bohemia was a state in a religious border zone, neighbouring the Slavic lands.

The Duchy of Bohemia had already been partly christianized. In 895, Prague became part of the Bavarian Roman Catholic Diocese of Regensburg. In 973 a bishopric was established in Prague. By the 10th century, several native saints emerged in Bohemia: Saint Wenceslas is said to have completed the Christianization of Bohemia in the early 10th century, shortly before his assassination in 935 by his own brother Boleslav the Cruel. Boleslav's daughter, Dobrawa of Bohemia, married Mieszko I of Poland, and became instrumental in converting him, his court, and Poland itself to the Christian religion.

On the left: The Baptism of Duke Bořivoj of Bohemia, a historical painting by Václav Markovský

The Arabic Caliphate of Córdoba (al-Andalus) referred to the forests of Central and Eastern Europe as a rich source of pagant slaves, using the expression **Bilad as-Saqaliba بلاد الصقالبة**

The name translates into **Land of the Slavs** from which derives **Land of the Slaves**. That's why Bohemia was in a perfect position to become the source of supply for pagan slaves to al-Andalus. The slaves were acquired through slave raids toward the lands north of Prague.

The Prague slave trade adjusted to the al-Andalus market, with females required for sexual slavery and males required for either military slavery or as eunuchs. Male slaves selected to be sold as eunuchs were subjected to castration in Verdun [near the valley of river Rhine].

Traditionally, the slave traders acquiring pagant slaves in Prague and transporting them to the slave market of al-Andalus were said to be dominated by **Jewish Radhanite** merchants. How dominating the Jewish merchants were is unknown, but Jewish slave traders did have an advantage toward their non-Jewish colleagues, because they were able to move across Christian and Muslim lands, which was rarely the case for Christian and Muslim merchants.

Christians were not allowed to enslave Christians & **Muslims not allowed to enslave Muslims**, while **Jews could sell Christian slaves to Muslim buyers** & **Muslim slaves to Christian buyers**, as well as pagan slaves to both sides. In the same fashion, Christians and Muslims were prohibited from performing castrations, but there was no such ban for Jews, and it was possible for the Jews to meet the demand for eunuchs in the Muslim world.

The slaves were transported to al-Andalus via France. While the church discouraged the sale of Christian slaves to Muslims, the sale of Pagans to Muslims was not met with such opposition. White European slaves were viewed as luxury goods in al-Andalus, where they could be sold for as much as 1,000 dinars, a substantial price. The slaves were not always destined for the al-Andalus market. Similar to Bohemia in Eastern Europe, al-Andalus was a religious border state for the Muslim world, and pagan slaves were exported from there further to the Middle East.

Trade of the pagan slaves from Prague to al-Andalus via France began to decline when north-eastern pagan Slavs started to gradually adopt Christianity in late10th century, and which prohibited Bohemia from enslaving them and sell them to the Muslims. During the 13th century pagan slave trade gradually came to an end and was finally forbidden.

On the right: Otto the Great and his court

The lucrative slave trade to and from Prague had reached its most active phase during the rule of **Otto the Great (912-973)**, **Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (962)**, and his son Otto II.

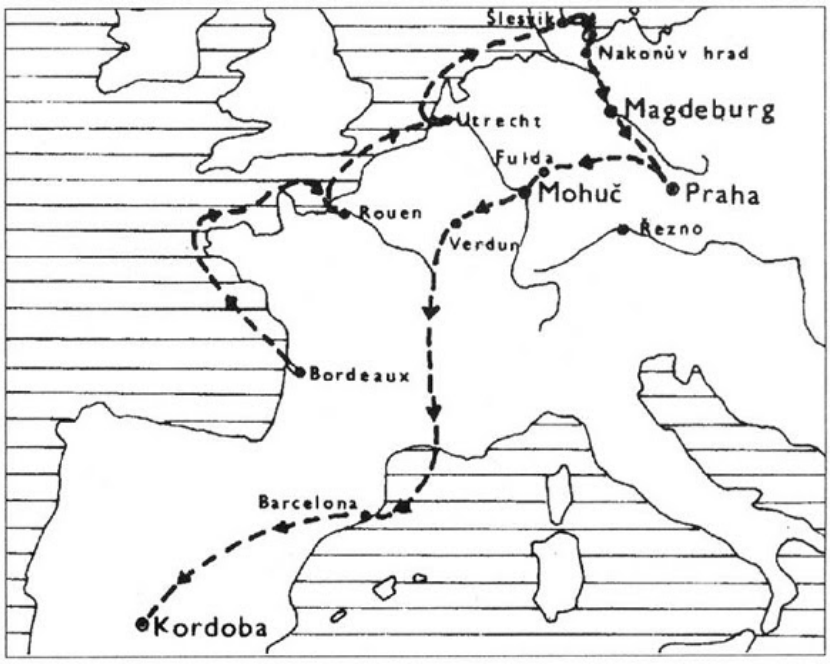
In his **capital Magdeburg** he was approached by a Jew, named **Ibrahim ibn Yaqoub** (in Arabic) or **Abraham ben Yacov** (in Hebrew) **(912-966)**, slave merchant & **envoy of the Caliph of Cordoba**. His task was to reach an agreement with Otto for trading with slaves on the route to al-Andaluz.

هذا وتجدر الإشارة أن لـ**إبراهيم بن يعقوب** دور كبير في عهد **الخليفة عبد الرحمن الناصر** فقد كان على رأس الكثير من سفاراته، ولعل هذا ما أفاده في إلمامه بجغرافية البلدان التي زارها، كذلك كان **له دورا كبيرا في استقلالية اليهود** في أيامه فقد ان بمثابة كبير اليهود في الأندلس

It should be noted that **Ibrahim bin Yaqoub** played a major role during the reign of **Caliph Abd al-Rahman al-Nasser**, as he was at the head of many of his embassies. Perhaps this is what benefited him in his familiarity with the geography of the countries he visited. He also **played a major role in the autonomie of the Jews** in his days, as he served as chief of the Jews in al-Andaluz.

[*Relevant Arabic source linked to the Arabic Enzyklopedia*]

The following document in the flowery language of the early Middle Ages is an excerpt from **bin Yaqoub's travel notes** on his way to Magdeburg where German emperor Otto the Great and his follower Otto II resided. It was translated by a Czech scholar at Prague University:



Above: Abraham ben Yakov and his route to Otto the Great
Below: Excerpts from Abraham ben Yakov's travel account

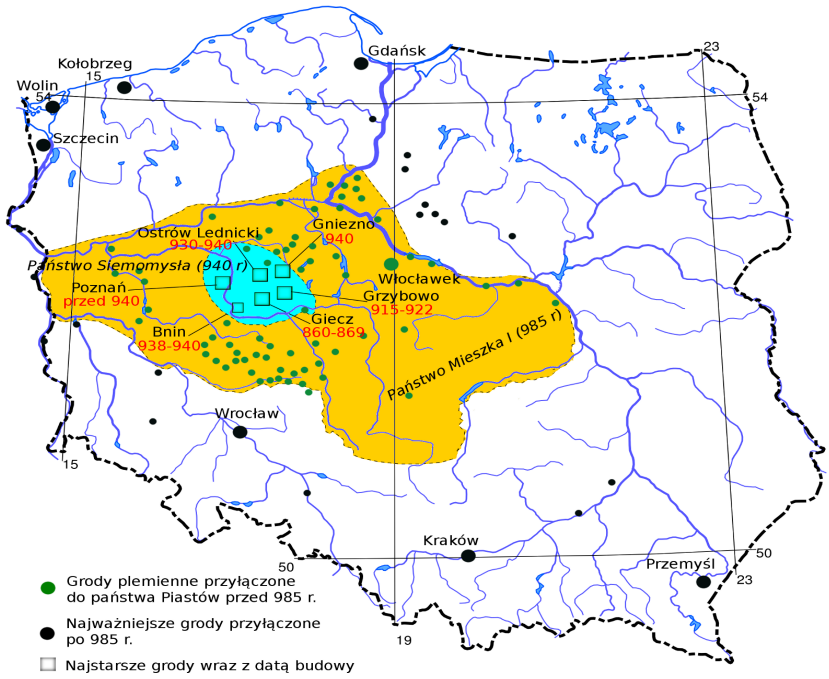
As for Mesko's [Mieszko's] state, it is the vastest of their [=> Slavic] states.
[*referring to the* ***Duchy of Poland*** *under Christian ruler* ***Mieszko I, 930-992***]

Mesko borders on the Rus [=> Russians] in the east and the Burus [=> Prussians] in the north. The main urban centers of Burussia [are located] on the Ocean [=> Baltic Sea]. They have a separate language [and] they do not speak the languages of their neighbors. They are famous for their valor. When an army attacks them, no man takes his time before joining his companions. Quite the reverse, he acts without thinking about the others and hacks away with his sword until he dies. The Russians cross from the west aboard ships and [attack] them.

West off Burussia [=> Prussia] [lies] the City of Women [=> Gdansk (?) mentioned 997]. It has lands & slaves and they [the women] become pregnant from their slaves. When a woman gives birth to a boy, she kills him. They ride on horseback and they personally fight in wars, and they are characterized by strength and ferocity. **Ibrahim Ibn Yaqub** said: "The news about this city [is] true; I have been told about it by **Hotto** [=> **Otto**], the Roman Emperor."

West off this city [lives] a certain tribe that belongs to Slavs, known as the Welteba people [=> the Veleti in Pomerania]. [It lives] in forests belonging to Mesko's lands [or: in forests located off Mieszko's lands] from the direction which is close to the west and a part of the north. They have a powerful city on the Ocean [=> Baltic Sea], which has twelve gates. It has a harbor, for which they use halved tree trunks. They fight Mesko, and their military potential [is] great. They have no king and they will not be led by a single [ruler]. They are governed by their elders.

On the right: Portrait of Mieszko I, first ruler of Poland



Above: Map of Mieszko's Duchy of Poland and the Strongholds of Mieszko I in 985 AD (yellow)

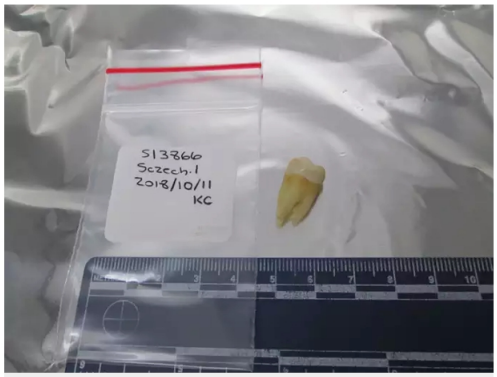
In 2022, a **Harvard group of scientists** under David Reich carried out **genetic studies** on 38 teeth found on the excavation site of a medieval Jewish cemetery in Eastern Germany, They delivered information about a **'founder event' in the Erfurt aeria**, not far from the former imperial capital of Magdeburg, where early Ashkenazi Jews settled in small groups possibly **long before 1300**.

Erfurt in today's German federal state of Thuringia, was the junction of important trade routes: The Via Regia (France to Russia) and another route connecting Baltic Sea ports with Italian city states (e.g. Lübeck to Venice & Milan)

In 1345, the Jewish population is known to have been wiped out almost entirely by some mob. That was a time when Jewish slave trade had already entirely declined and had been forbidden. From then, Ashkenazi Jews had to rely on money-lending and other despised activity to make a living.

Small population size

Digging into the ancient DNA of 33 Ashkenazi Jews from medieval Erfurt, the US-Israeli team of scientists discovered that the community can be categorized into what seems like two different groups. One relates more to individuals from Middle Eastern populations, the other to European populations, possibly including migrants to Erfurt from the East. The findings suggest that there were at least two genetically distinct groups in medieval Erfurt whose genetic variety and variability no longer exists in modern populations of Ashkenazi Jews.



A tooth collected from the medieval Jewish cemetery in Erfurt, Germany. Researchers collected 38 teeth from the... [more]
© David Reich, Harvard University

Researchers came to the stunning conclusion that some early Ashkenazi (East-European) Jews related to Sephardi (Spanish) Jews, a fact that nobody could immediately explain.

From there, it can be imagined that first Jewish communities in Eastern Germany were probably related to Jewish slave trade and serving the need for trade stations on the route to al-Andalus. This comes from an **interesting combination of genetic findings and historic facts**.

Genetically supported for the Madeburg area, this evaluation might even apply to some Jewish settlements in France and Spain, regarding the castration centres of Verdun and Becâne. In the 10th century, slave traders in Verdun, France, and in Becâne (Pechina), Spain, castrated captives who were then enslaved as harem attendants (eunuchs) in al-Andalus.

As more and more of Europe became christianized, and open hostilities between Christian and Muslim nations intensified, large-scale slave trade moved to more distant places. Sending slaves to Egypt was forbidden by the papacy in 1317, 1323, 1329 and 1338. In 1425, such slaves sent to Egypt would often become soldiers and end up fighting their former Christian owners.

Although the repeated bans indicate that such trade still occurred thereafter, they also indicate that it became less desirable. The focus on slave trade later shifted to African slaves.

Those, who believe that politics & religion don`t mix, understand neither

Albert Einstein