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Intra-European Slave Trade and Migration in Medieval Arabic texts

Key words: slave trade, human relocation, Medieval Arabic texts, travelogues, Medieval migration, intra-European migration

Summary
In the Medieval era, forced and voluntary migrations often overlapped as the slave trade connected distant regions – linking Europe, Africa, and Asia through shared networks of commerce, conquest, and cultural exchange. Many Arabic authors journeyed across regions stretching from the Iberian Peninsula to Central Asia, producing detailed observations of diverse peoples, cultures, and economies. Because Islamic trade routes spanned multiple continents, these writings often include crucial details about slave markets, shipping routes, ethnic groups, and commercial hubs. This research employed a systemic content analysis method to examine both translated and original Arabic primary sources for mentions of intra-European slave trade and migration. The content analysis targeted keywords and thematic patterns across various medieval texts to trace references to human movement, forced and voluntary, and slave trade dynamics. The study encompassed both Arabic travelogues and geographical works, as well as untranslated manuscripts accessed via digitized collections, such as the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford and the Digital Library of the Middle East. The study reveals that Medieval Arabic texts document extensive human mobility across regions such as Andalusia, the Maghrib, the Volga region, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe, highlighting the roles of Slavic populations (Saqaliba), Vikings, and Arab-Berber groups in intra-European slave trade and migration. While some sources describe specific trade hubs like Bulghār and Kyiv, or population movements between Spain and North Africa, others offer more general geographic overviews, suggesting a broad but uneven record of how different peoples and regions were interconnected through slavery, conquest, and scholarly travel.

Eiropas vergu tirdzniecība un migrācija viduslaiku arābu tekstos

Atslēgas vārdi: vergu tirdzniecība, cilvēku relokācija, viduslaiku arābu teksti, ceļojumu apraksti, viduslaiku migrācija, iekšējā Eiropas migrācija

Kopsavilkums
Viduslaikos piespiedu un brīvprātīgā migrācija bieži pārklājās: caur vergu tirdzniecību savienojās attālie reģioni, sasaistot Eiropu, Āfriku un Āziju, kas karoja savā starpā un uzturēja kopīgus tirdzniecības ceļus un kultūras apmaiņas tīklus. Daudzi arābu izcelsmes autori apceļoja plašus reģionus no Pireneju pussalas līdz Vidusāzijai,

sniedzot detalizētus aprakstus par dažādām tautām, to kultūrām un saimniecisko darbību. Tā kā musulmaņu tirdzniecības ceļi aptvēra vairākus kontinentus, viņu pieraksti bieži ietver būtisku informāciju par vergu tirgiem, jūras ceļiem, etniskajām grupām un komerciālajiem centriem. Šajā pētījumā tika izmantota sistēmiskā kontentanalīzes metode, lai izpētītu gan tulkotos, gan oriģinālos arābu izcelsmes autoru tekstus, meklējot pieminējumus par vergu tirdzniecību un migrāciju, kas bija daļa no iekšējās Eiropas migrācijas. Analīze bija vērsta uz atslēgvārdiem un tematiskajiem modeļiem dažādos viduslaiku tekstos, lai izsekotu atsaucēm uz migrāciju – gan piespiedu, gan brīvprātīgu – un vergu tirdzniecības dinamiku. Pētījumā izmantoti gan arābu ceļojumu apraksti, gan ģeogrāfiski izdevumi, kā arī netulkoti manuskripti no digitalizētām kolekcijām, piemēram, Oksfordas Universitātes Bodlija bibliotēkas (*Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford*) un Tuvo Austrumu digitālās bibliotēkas (*Digital Library of the Middle East*). Pētījums apstiprina, ka viduslaiku arābu teksti dokumentē intensīvu cilvēku mobilitāti tādos reģionos kā Andalūzija, Magribs, Volgas reģions, Skandināvija un Austrumeiropa, izceļot slāvu tautu (*Saqaliba*), vikingu un arābu–berberu grupu lomu vergu tirdzniecībā un migrācijā Eiropā. Daži avoti apraksta konkrētus tirdzniecības centrus, piemēram, Bulghāru un Kijivu, vai iedzīvotāju migrāciju starp Spāniju un Ziemeļāfriku, kamēr citi sniedz vispārīgāku ģeogrāfisku pārskatu, liekot domāt par plašu, bet nevienmērīgu dažādu tautu un reģionu savstarpējo saistību, kuru veicināja vergu tirdzniecība, militārie konflikti un ceļojumi.

Introduction

Arabic writers have been well known for their travel writing, owing to several factors and motivated by the religious practice of Islam or for scholarly aims. Quran mentions the necessity of travel to see "how He [God] originated the creation" (Quran 29:20), hadiths (records of practices of the Prophet Muhammad) backing up the practice. During the early days of Islam, some of the most significant journeys were initiated with the primary goal of acquiring and disseminating knowledge for the pursuit of learning. For example, the work of al-Khateeb (Khatib) al-Baghdadi, who authored the well-known book titled "al-Rihlah fi Talab al-Hadith" (The Journey in the Quest for Hadith), emphasizes the importance of travel for seeking and sharing knowledge (Su 2022, 48). Citing Newman: "Qur'anic term for travel or journey, riḥla, which early on also came to denote a travelogue." (Newman 2019, 143) Very often Arabic writers mentioned in their travelogues slave trade and other migration phenomena.

The very first Arabic travelogue (most probably meaning "Risala", although Newman did not specify it) was written by Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān, a secretary of a Baghdadi ambassador at the time (921). Arabic travel writing can be described as having qualities of both chronicles of travel observations and autobiography of the observer. Closer to the fourteenth century, Arabic travel scriptures took a prosopographical form (Newman 2019, 146).

During the medieval period, Vikings established connections with Arabs,

engaging in slave trade while concurrently establishing a noteworthy slave market in Ireland. Medieval slavery functioned as forced migration (Schiel, 2013), surging in the 9th-10th centuries due to Muslim world demand, primarily involving Eastern European Slavs. Politically fragmented regions, not organized states, benefited most from this trade (Rio 2017, 19). Medieval migration and slavery were driven by trade networks, with European migration shaping settlements in the North Atlantic, Viking and Mediterranean merchants controlling slave routes, and politically fragmented regions benefiting from the demand for Eastern European and Balkan slaves.

The Rus migration southward established Kyiv as a central hub by the 10th century (Hraundal & Garipzanov 2013, 2). Two major trade networks emerged: the "Southern Arc" (Mediterranean/Black Sea) controlled by Italian/Islamic merchants and the "Northern Arc" (North Atlantic to Russian rivers) dominated by Vikings trading British and Baltic slaves (Paolella 2020, 84-103). The Almoravids transported thousands of Christian captives to North Africa, including 6,000 female slaves from Andalusia (1137) and 20,000 prisoners from the Battle of az-Zallaqaa (Ladjal 2017, 14, 25-26). In the 15th century, merchants traded Balkan slaves (mainly women) to Italian markets (Pinelli, 2008).

Medieval trade hubs like Scarborough and London attracted diverse European migrants (Valoriani et al. 2023, 120). Iceland represents "the first substantial movement of population out of Europe" with Norwegian settlements around 860-930, followed by Greenland (c. 900) and Atlantic islands (Phillips 2011, 15-17).

Medieval Arabic sources in European languages

Based on the theoretical background provided in the previous section, Arabic medieval travelogues and books on geography have potential for research on migration patterns and slavery. Several Arabic sources have been already digitalized and translated into European languages. For the aim of this paper, we will investigate both original, untranslated sources and translated sources, to detect presence of slave trade and migration mentions, and specifically inter-European slave trade and migration. We have conducted a systemic content analysis of the following sources:

1) The "Muqaddimah" by Ibn Khaldun,
2) The "Book of Roger" by Al-Idrisi (only the written commentaries),
3) The "Risala" by Ibn Fadlan,
4) The "Journey in the Quest for Hadith" by al-Khateeb al-Baghdadi.

Works of Ibn Hawqal and the "Book of Roger" by Al-Idrisi will be analyzed through secondary sources (monographs, etc.). While the original Arabic primary sources will be analyzed in the next section. Systemic content analysis was used to identify patterns and keyword presence in sources, with the potential to be used for further analysis in the scope of future research. Some of the most relevant and insightful citations have been included in this paper.

Ibn Khaldun (1377 [2015]), a 14th-century Arab historiographer and historian, in

his work "Muqaddimah" (Introduction to History), provides valuable insights into the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, including aspects of the slave trade and migration. Ibn Khaldun mentions slavery in around 20 instances throughout his work. However, he does not clearly mention patterns of migration or the origin of slaves. What should be highlighted is that the Europeans are mentioned as skilled seafarers who had control over certain parts of the Mediterranean at various points in history, indicating a level of migration through conquest and settlement. Ibn Khaldun also highlights the European Christians and the Goths as having lived along the northern shore of the Mediterranean and having had most of their wars and commerce by sea, suggesting a cultural familiarity and dependency on maritime activities, which includes the movement of peoples and goods. He speaks of the Christians capturing Muslim-controlled areas, including Tripoli, Tyre, and Acco (Ibn Khaldun (1377 [2015]), e. g. 315 – 329, 408, 428). We can cite such example of Arab migration to Europe (Spain): "… the situation of the Arabs at the beginning of Islam. Since they were a very large group, they very quickly overran neighbouring Syria, 'Irâq, and Egypt. Then, they penetrated Western India (as-Sind), Abyssinia, Ifrîqiyah, and the Maghrib, and later Spain. Their numbers were exhausted by that expansion. No further conquests could be made by them, and the Muslim empire reached its farthest extension." (Ibn Khaldun (1377 [2015]), 217)

Migration from Spain to Maghrib and Ifriqiyah after Christian Expulsions: "A good many of the inhabitants of (Spain) went over to the Almohads in the Maghrib, voluntarily or involuntarily... Later on, the inhabitants of Eastern Spain were expelled by the Christians and moved to Ifrîqiyah." (Ibn Khaldun (1377 [2015]), 430).

Migration from Spain after Christian Reconquest: "The Christians pushed the Muslims back to the sea coast and the rugged territory there... Thus, Spain has become an especially expensive region ever since the Christians forced (the Muslims) to withdraw to the Muslim-held coastal regions." (Ibn Khaldun (1377 [2015]), 420)

Tribal migrations due to pastoralism: "Those who make their living from animals requiring pasturage, such as sheep and cattle, usually travel around in order to find pasture and water for their animals, since it is better for them to move around in the land. They are called 'sheepmen'... Such people include the Berbers, the Turks, the Turkomans and the Slavs, for instance." (Ibn Khaldun (1377 [2015]), 165)

To summarize, Ibn Khaldun's "Muqaddimah" shows Arabs spreading from the Arabian Peninsula into Spain, while Europeans (including Goths and Christians) relied on maritime warfare to seize Muslim-held coastal areas, spurring forced or voluntary migrations to the Maghrib and Ifriqiyah. He also notes that pastoral peoples – Berbers, Turks, Turkomans, and Slavs – moved around in search of grazing land, highlighting a diverse mosaic of ethnic and territorial shifts throughout the medieval Mediterranean world.

The "Book of Roger" by Al-Idrisi, a 12th-century Arab geographer who wrote for the Norman King Roger II of Sicily, is another valuable source. It includes detailed descriptions of Europe and other parts of the world, providing insights into geographical knowledge and cultural perceptions during the medieval period. The

"Book of Roger" offers a great insight in both medieval cartography and some commentaries on geography, however it does not mention either migration or slave trade extensively, instead A. F. L. Beeston explains in his previous analysis of this source, that Al-Idrisi notes historical instances of civil conflict leading to emigration. For instance, regarding Scotland it states that internal conflicts among inhabitants, including civil wars, led to a part of the population emigrating to the mainland and leaving their cities deserted and ruined: "Some of them migrated to the opposite shore of the continent, and not a single inhabitant was left in the towns." (Beeston 1950, 278)

The Journey in the Quest for Hadith is *per se* a travelogue. It highlights several instances of migration to, from, and within Europe. For example, during the Islamic Golden Age, scholars from the Muslim world, including North Africa and the Middle East, traveled to the Iberian Peninsula. The inverse migration pattern is mentioned where European scholars traveled to places like Morocco and Egypt to learn from Muslim scholars. The Norman conquest of Sicily led to it becoming a place of scholarly exchange between the Islamic world and Europe (Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi [2014], e. g. 25, 120).

And one of the most well-known works on slave trade and migration is the "Risala" by Ibn Fadlan where he describes the trade of young boys and slave girls, exchanged in Bulghār for swords and sable pelts. This trade, happening in a medieval context, involved people captured from regions like France and Galicia, who were then sold on markets far from their homelands. There is a specific mention of the export of eunuchs, which primarily involved the Saqāliba (Slavs). These slaves were made eunuchs and sold on distant markets, reflecting a brutal aspect of the slave trade linked to migrations across regions (Ibn Fadlan 2012, 220-222, 420). He explained the exchange networks in Northern and Eastern Europe involving Vikings, particularly those from modern-day Sweden, who were active in trade and exploration during the 8th to 11th centuries. Massive amounts of silver coins moved westward via trade routes established by Swedish Vikings, illustrating a connection between Islamic economies in the East and European markets in the North and West. Coins were exchanged at important trading hubs like Bulghār (modern-day Volga Bulgaria, around the Volga River) and Itil (the capital of the Khazar state, located near the Caspian Sea). These hubs facilitated cross-cultural commerce between Vikings and Islamic traders. Vikings offered goods native to Northern Europe – such as furs, slaves, honey, wax, and amber – in exchange for Abbasid silver coins: "The fur trade also financed the formation of the Kievan Russian principality, which began as a Rūs-dominated trading post feeding slaves and furs first to the Khazars, and later to the Bulghārs. By the end of the tenth century, Kiev had become a Christian, Slavic-speaking principality" (Ibn Fadlan 2012, 262).

The Saqaliba (slaves from the Slavic populations of central and eastern Europe) are a valuable case study for understanding the early Islamic slave trade and the nature of Muslim demand for slaves due to their prominent presence in Islamic texts from the early 9th to early 11th centuries. Their high visibility in texts (as seen in the next section), including Arab geographies and diplomatic writings, provides insights into

their origins and roles. Additionally, archaeological findings, especially the numerous dirhams (the Arabic currency) discovered in Scandinavia and Slavic regions, offer tangible evidence of the slave trade involving the Saqaliba. By analyzing these diverse sources, researchers constructed a detailed picture of the slave trade systems that brought Saqaliba to Islamic markets, including Spain – Al Andalus or Andalucía. The case study by Jankowiak (2017) helps illustrate the broader mechanisms and dynamics of slave trade and demand in the medieval Islamic world.

Citing Encyclopedia Britannica: "Ṣaqālibah, in medieval Muslim Spain, Slavs, or people from the Black Sea coast north of Constantinople… [in 10th century Spain] Slavs captured by the Germans on their expeditions into eastern Europe. These and other slaves from Galicia, Lombardy, Calabria, and the land of the Franks" (Britannica, 2014). This even more shows the extensity and diversity of migrational patterns in Europe, which would be impossible to mention in full in this paper.

Work with the primary Arabic sources

While the slave trade and other forms of migration have been previously examined through sources transcribed and/or translated into European languages, a significant number of primary texts remain untranscribed or untranslated, representing a largely untapped resource for further scholarships. Some worthy manuscripts might be:

1) copy of Taqwīm al-buldān – "The Almanac of Countries" – by Abū al-Fidā' Ismā'īl ibn 'Alī (1273-1331),
2) Al-Jaghrāfiyah by Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr Zuhrī (1293?),
3) as a secondary source – Rasā'il by Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (1560) (not analyzed in this paper).

Also, solitary manuscripts such as letters in Arabic and Judeo-Arabic, as explained further. All these works focus on geography, travel and exploration, which corresponds to the keywords used in systemic content analysis for already translated sources.

For research we used the digital sources provided by the Bodleian Library, courtesy of Oxford University. All of the above-mentioned manuscripts can be found in the collection of "Arabic Manuscripts and Maps". As the secondary source, mostly for solitary manuscripts such as letters, we have used the Digital Library of the Middle East provided by a wide range of cultural heritage institutions and developed by an engineering team from Stanford Libraries.

In Taqwīm al-buldān we focused on descriptions of Al – Andalus – modern Andalusia – considering that it was a prominent slave trade route in the Middle Ages. Unfortunately, not too much is described on slave trade; mostly geographical features are mentioned in pages 100 –103 (Abū al-Fidā' Ismā'īl ibn 'Alī 1321/1560, 100 – 103,

Oxford Bodleian Library MS. Greaves 2). For example, on the bottom of page 101 Andalusia is described.[1]

The sentence is dense and somewhat elliptical, like many classical Arabic geographical descriptions. The text describes the geographical location of al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) in relation to North Africa (Ifriqiya) and Sicily. It can be interpreted as – Al-Andalus lies at a certain distance. It is considered part of the central and western (far) Maghrib, and part of Ifriqiya (North Africa). Opposite it lies Sicily. From Sicily one can reach al-Andalus, and since al-Andalus is adjacent to Ifriqiya, it can also be considered part of the land of al-'Awda (the return or return route). This passage places al-Andalus within a broader North African and Mediterranean geographic framework, suggesting that it is closely linked – both physically and culturally – to regions like Ifriqiya (modern-day Tunisia and parts of Algeria). Here it is worth citing Paolella (2020) explaining work if Ibn Hawqal (978): "By the tenth century, Iberian human trafficking networks had grown to encompass the Black Sea region, the whole of the Mediterranean basin, and Eastern and Central Europe. In the middle of the tenth century, Ibn Hawqal (d. 978) described trafficking networks that linked Andalusia to Slav (Saqaliba) and Bulgar territories, as well as to Byzantium and to the lands of the Khazars on the Caspian Sea. Closer to home, Andalusia imported slaves through raids on Christian territory in France, Italy, and northern Iberia, and also through commercial connections with Khorasan raiders who preyed upon Slavic communities in Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, Andalusia also served as a collection hub for eunuchs who were castrated in Francia and the Balearic Islands and then brought to Andalusia for export across the Mediterranean to Byzantium and the Caliphate." (Paolella 2020, 90).

Concluding, it would be valuable to explore more Arabic manuscripts on Andalusia, considering its importance in the Medieval slave trade routes.

Al-Jaghrāfiyah or in the literal translation "Geography" by Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr Zuhrī is perhaps one of the most famous Medieval Arabic travelogues. What is interesting in this work, is that Zuhrī mixes extensive geographic studies (e.g. fol. 2b) with Islamic teachings (e.g. fol. 1a) and history (e.g. fol. 2a). Zuhrī, coming from Andalusia, extensively described this region, and possibly slave trade (Oxford Bodleian Library MS. Bruce 31). However, due to the complex handwriting scripture, authors have been able to transcribe up to 50 pages of approximately 200 page work. So far it has not been possible to identify instances of slavery or migration.

Several solitary sources mention slavery, for instance, a pair of sheets briefly describe black populations, war, and slavery (Digital Library of the Middle East, 2024a). Meanwhile, a letter written by Solomon b. Judah (12th – 13th century)

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[1]

إلى الأندلس بعد المدة، وهو المغرب الأوسط والأقصى وما أفريقية، فيكون قبالتها صقلية، منها إلى الأندلس، وهي...

من أفريقية، فيكون من بزّ العودة أيضًا.

(To) al-Andalus, after the distance, and it is the central and far Maghrib and what [belongs to] Ifriqiya; thus opposite to it is Sicily, from it to al-Andalus, and it is from Ifriqiya, so it is from the land of return also. (translation from Arabic – lit.) (Abū al-Fidā' Ismā'īl ibn 'Alī 1321/1560, 100, Oxford Bodleian Library MS. Greaves 2).

describes how his father migrated from Spain, through Egypt to Yemen, where he got married before returning to Egypt. It is unclear, whether his father, having Arab-Judaic origins, was born in Spain or Egypt (Digital Library of the Middle East, 2024b). There were several instances of such solitary letters and even collections such as Rasā'il by Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Laud Or. 260), potentially having mentions of slavery, slave trade, or migration.

Conclusions

- Ibn Khaldun highlighted both Arab and European migration due to conquest, trade, and pastoralism. For example, he mentions "Christians and the Goths as having lived along the northern shore of the Mediterranean". While not always specific about the origin of slaves, he documented Arab conquests into Spain and Muslim-Christian territorial shifts, evidencing both voluntary and forced migration.
- Ibn Fadlan's "Risala" offered the clearest account of slave trade, describing the exchange of Slavic boys and girls "from regions like France and Galicia" for weapons and goods in Bulghār, a hub for trade involving Vikings and Islamic economies. His work provides a key to understanding how Slavic slaves (Saqaliba) entered Islamic markets, including Andalusia.
- Al-Idrisi, while not focused on slavery, noted population displacement due to civil wars in Scotland, demonstrating internal European migratory dynamics: "[..] migrated to the opposite shore of the continent, and not a single inhabitant was left in the towns".
- Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi documented scholarly travel between Europe and the Islamic world – Morocco and Egypt, pointing to reciprocal migration for educational and religious purposes.
- Manuscripts like *Taqwīm al-buldān* and *Al-Jaghrāfiyah* contained limited direct mentions of the slave trade, although geographic positioning and regional ties to known slave routes (e.g. Andalusia) suggest these texts could support deeper future analysis.
- Solitary letters and lesser-known documents highlighted individual migration stories (e.g. migration from Spain to Yemen), reinforcing the personal dimension of mobility often omitted in grand narratives.

In conclusion, the study confirms that Medieval Arabic texts offer rich, albeit uneven, documentation of slave trade and migration patterns. Intra-European slave trade appears indirectly in references to Slavic populations, eunuchs, and geographic trade routes, while migration is documented through conquest, scholarly travel, and pastoral movement. The sources collectively illustrate how Islamic and European worlds were deeply interconnected through networks of commerce, knowledge exchange, and human mobility.

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