International Journal of Multidisciplinary Trends

**E-ISSN:** 2709-9369
**P-ISSN:** 2709-9350
www.multisubjectjournal.com
IJMT 2025; 7(4): 178-185
Received: 06-02-2025
Accepted: 09-03-2025

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# Traces and public history of slavery in Tuscany and Genoa

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**DOI:** https://www.doi.org/10.22271/multi.2025.v7.i4a.647

**Abstract**
The study explores the presence and role of Slavic and Oriental female slaves in Genoa, Florence, and Livorno from the middle ages to the early modern period, drawing upon literary, documentary, and cultural sources. In Genoa, notarial documents from the 13th and 14th centuries frequently reference Slavic women, labeled as 'sclava,' signifying both an ethnic and servile condition. Chronicles and religious texts further depict these women as domestic servants or figures of moral transformation. Florence, while lacking explicit literary references to Slavic female slaves in the 14th century, reveals their presence through notarial and judicial documents, where they appear as property in wills, dowries, or household inventories. The Spedale degli Innocenti's records indicate that between 1445 and 1485, 33.2% of new-borns taken in were children of slave women, highlighting their significant role in urban society. Livorno, a cosmopolitan hub, employed numerous Slavic women in Christian and Jewish households, though their presence is documented more in private and mercantile records than in literature.
Similarly, Oriental female slaves originating from the Caucasus, Anatolia, the Balkans, and the Levant entered Italian cities through trade, piracy, or international trafficking. While legally designated as ancillae or servae, their identities were often erased upon conversion to Christianity, with common renaming practices. Their roles included domestic labor, childcare, and concubinage, and their status was frequently linked to issues of sexuality and social integration. Despite their widespread presence, Oriental slave women remain largely absent from literary and artistic representation, often appearing only as eroticized or exotic figures. Recent historiographical studies have sought to recover their stories, emphasizing their social, economic, and emotional impact. This research thus reconstructs the fragmented memory of female slavery in Italy, demonstrating its relevance to understanding historical dynamics of power, gender, and otherness in the Mediterranean world.

**Keywords:** Mediterranean Trade, Christian Conversion, Florence, Livorno, Slavic female slaves, oriental slaves, medieval Italy, genoa, domestic slavery, historical memory.

## Introduction
Slavery has never been absent from Italian history, but has often remained at the margins of collective memory. Far from the colonial imagery of the 19th and 20th centuries, medieval and Renaissance slavery in Italy was instead pervasive, entrenched and stratified. Museums and archives today represent fundamental tools for bringing these forgotten histories to light, especially when read through the lens of public history: A practice that aims to make history accessible, participatory and connected to the present Although slavery was a stable component of medieval Italian society, its memory was long neglected, if not completely removed, from the public narrative and collective consciousness. Only in the last decades, thanks to academic studies, museum initiatives and public history practices, has the role of slavery in the formation of cities and daily life in Italy's past begun to be recognised. This text proposes a minimal itinerary that starts in Florence, with the Spedale degli Innocenti, and extends to Livorno and Genoa.

## Slave and oriental slaves
The presence of Slavic female slaves in Genoa, Florence and Livorno, between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age, emerges in a fragmentary but significant manner through literary, documentary and cultural traces that outline an image of them that is both concrete and symbolic. In Genoa, notarial sources from the 13th and 14th centuries such as Giovanni Scriba's cartolari, frequently mention female figures identified as 'sclava', often associated with Balkan or Black Sea origins. The term itself, originally ethnic, crystallised in the Genoese legal language as a synonym for 'slave', a sign of a profound cultural sedimentation that transformed identity into condition.

Even in local chronicles, albeit in an indirect form, we find hints of Slavic women employed as maids in patrician homes, sometimes converted to Christianity and associated with moral or religious episodes. In Florence, although fourteenth-century literature does not offer explicit references to Slavic female slaves, their figure can be intuited in the presence of foreign, oriental or pagan servants in the novellas of Boccaccio and Sacchetti, where female servants often embody a combination of eroticism, otherness and subordination. In the Florentine notarial and judicial documents of the 15th century, on the other hand, women emerge more clearly identified as 'sclava' in wills or dowries, sometimes the object of tampering, others inserted into the family fabric as nurses or servants. Livorno, finally, represents a special case: a cosmopolitan port city, a free port since 1591, during the 17th century it hosted numerous foreign communities, including Slavic women employed by Christian and Jewish families. Although the city did not produce any relevant canonical literature in the period, mercantile epistles, family memoirs and moralistic texts offer indirect but significant evidence: Slavic slave women appear as silent, converted or integrated figures, sometimes marginal protagonists in narratives of religious redemption or domestic scandal. In sermons and sermons, the young slave girl 'saved' by faith becomes an emblem of spiritual transformation, reflecting a stereotypical but culturally powerful representation. In all three cities, the figure of the Slavic slave is thus configured as both a real and imagined element: concretely present in legal documents, evoked in literary texts through codified tropes, and reinterpreted in religious and moral discourses as a body to be disciplined and an identity to be converted. Their memory, more often recorded as function than biography, traverses the urban and mental space of these cities as a living, mute trace of the complex Mediterranean history of female slavery.

The memory of oriental female slaves in medieval Italy is instead constructed through fragmentary and often marginal sources, distributed among notarial documents, city statutes, chronicles and indirect testimonies. The expression 'oriental slaves' commonly indicates women from regions such as the Caucasus, Anatolia, the Balkans, the Levant and North Africa, who came to the peninsula as a result of the Mediterranean trade, piracy or organised trade on an international scale. Legally framed as *ancillae* or *servae*, these figures are often present in the sources as maids, nurses, concubines or workers in the service of urban families, without however being recognised as having any social autonomy or cultural identity. The available documentation, though scarce, allows us to grasp significant elements relating to their status: deeds of sale, manuscripts, wills and dowry registers reveal not only the economic role of female slaves in urban society, but also the presence of emotional relationships, legal tensions and dynamics of 'integration'. Frequently lacking a recognisable name of their own, these women were renamed during their conversion to Christianity, when this occurred, with common names such as Maria or Lucia, but there were also cases in which they retained names evocative of their geographical or religious origin, such as Greca, Sarrasina, Turcha or Fatima. Their condition of subordination is often intertwined with the question of sexuality, maternity and the transmission of status to children, raising complex questions about the boundary between slavery and family relations. On a cultural level, their presence remains largely invisible or stereotyped: rare are their appearances in contemporary literary texts, in which in any case the figure of the oriental slave tends to take on an erotic or exotic value. The marginality of these women is reflected in the scarcity of artistic representations, in the reticence of chronicles and, for centuries, in their almost total absence from historical narration. Only recent historiography has begun a process of recovery and critical reinterpretation, thanks to the contributions of scholars and scholars such as Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, Steven Epstein, Stefania Pastore, Lorenzo Tanzini and others, who have restored visibility to these erased lives, highlighting their role in the social, economic and affective construction of late medieval Italy. In this context, the study of oriental female slaves represents not only an investigation into marginality and coercion, but also an exercise in historical memory, aimed at reconstructing the presence and action of subjects removed from the great narratives of Italian urban civilisation. Their memory, fragile and interstitial, constitutes today a fundamental junction for understanding the dynamics of otherness, gender and power that have crossed the medieval and modern Mediterranean. Estimating the exact number of female slaves in Florence during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is complex, but the available sources make it possible to paint a significant picture. Between 1366 and 1397, for instance, an estimated 400 slaves arrived in the city, registered through notarial contracts and cadastral declarations. But this number is only the tip of the iceberg.

Between 1445 and 1485, according to Tomoko Takahashi's studies, approximately 33.2% of the newborns received by the Spedale degli Innocenti were the children of female slaves. This figure corresponds to approximately one in three newborns and indicates the widespread diffusion of enslaved women in urban society, particularly among middle-class and wealthy families.

Overall, although a definitive estimate is lacking, it can be stated that between the 14th and 16th centuries several thousand female slaves lived in Florence. Their presence is testified by notarial deeds, hospital books, private letters, chronicles and artistic sources. A historical legacy that is still little visible, but fundamental for understanding the social structure of pre-modern Florence.

Alongside Slavic and African slaves, sources also document a significant presence of Oriental female slaves in Florence between the 14th and 16th centuries. These were mainly women from the areas of Asia Minor, the Caucasus, the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East, often referred to generically as 'Greek', 'Turkish', 'Tartar' or 'Saracen'. Trade routes across the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean brought many young oriental slave girls to Venice and Genoa, who were then transferred to Tuscany to be sold in the city markets or bought directly by wealthy families.

Deeds often appear in Florentine notarial sources indicating their origin 'from Turkey' or 'from the lands of the soldier', accompanied by a description of their young age and physical beauty, elements that increased their commercial value. These women were often employed in personal services, but also for intimate and sometimes humiliating tasks.

Oriental female slaves are also present in the visual culture: in some pictorial depictions of the 15th century, one finds female figures with Oriental features or exotic clothing, often depicted as servants or extras in domestic or religious contexts. Their silent presence testifies to a multicultural

reality still little recognised in the city's official memory.

**Quotations from notarial and epistolary sources**

Florentine archive sources preserve direct evidence of the presence of Slavic slave girls, often recorded in notarial contracts of sale. A deed dated 11 February 1378 reads:

"Ego, Dominicus Iacobi de Florentia, emit unam sclavam nationis sclavonie, nomine Maria, annorum quindecim, pro usu domus et ministerio uxoris meae".

This document clearly shows that Slavic female slaves were purchased for domestic tasks and assigned as personal assistants to the women of the house. The name Maria, a typical example of post-baptismal Christian renaming, recurs frequently in the records.

A significant number of enslaved women in Florence between the 14th and 15th century were of Slavic origin. These women came from the coasts of the eastern Adriatic, the Balkans or the more inland regions of Eastern Europe, often captured during wars or sold in the markets of Venice, Ragusa (Dubrovnik) and Genoa. In Florentine sources, Slavic slaves were generically identified as 'white slaves', as opposed to African or Oriental slaves, and considered particularly desirable for their beauty and assumed obedience.

Slavic female slaves were frequently employed in domestic service and in more delicate tasks, such as childcare. Some were converted to Christianity and baptised with Italian names; in other cases, they retained traces of their linguistic or cultural origins. In the letters of the Florentine merchants, one finds references to slaves described as 'Slavic-speaking' or 'light-faced', a sign of even a visual classification of otherness. In some notarial documents, we read that they were purchased specifically 'for use as wet nurses' or as 'wife's companions'.

The Florentine culture of the time tended to idealise these servile female figures, attributing to them qualities such as meekness, patience and humility. This imagery also emerges in novellas and moral works, where the 'slave girl from the East' is sometimes represented as a figure of passage between barbarism and civilisation, made acceptable through conversion and submission. However, there is no shortage of documents revealing escape attempts or cases of violence suffered, often covered up or treated only in book form. Slavic female slaves, although less visible than African women in artistic depictions, constituted a substantial, everyday part of the human landscape of Florentine homes between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

In addition to archival and administrative sources, the presence of female slaves in Florence is also testified by some pictorial representations and literary traces. In numerous works of art created between the 14th and 16th centuries, one can observe servile or marginal female figures, sometimes with somatic features that suggest non-European origins. Although rarely identified as 'female slaves' in titles or attached documents, their iconography dark skin, submissive postures, subordinate position in compositions clearly distinguishes them from other figures.

One example is sacred art where young African or Oriental women appear in the background or among the ancillary figures, serving madonnas or Florentine ladies. Some scholars, such as Paul Kaplan and Kate Lowe, have analysed the symbolic role of these figures: Often they were allegories of otherness, but at other times they reflected real presences in the Florentine urban context.

The literature of the time also offers important insights. Examples can be found in the tales of Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron, where there is no shortage of female figures from servile or oriental backgrounds, often anonymous but recognisable by their subordinate function. In the business and family letters of Tuscan merchants, such as those of Francesco Datini, references appear to female slaves employed to care for the household or as nannies. An emblematic passage is the one in which a customer's wife complains to Margherita Datini about receiving a slave girl who is too young and beautiful, revealing not only domestic tensions but also the sexual implications implicit in owning slaves.

In the genre of 'novelle', often handed down orally or written down in later centuries, female slaves are presented with exotic and sensual features, functional to construct a narrative of submission or salvation, but also sometimes of cunning and redemption. Exemplary in this sense is the tale of a Circassian slave saved by her Florentine master and converted, who ends up marrying him after a long moral trial: A narrative dynamic that reflects the stereotype and at the same time the imaginary of the 'redeemed slave'.

In spiritual texts and homilies, female slaves are instead used as examples of Christian humility or instruments of conversion: their figure is modelled to fit a moral pedagogy. Even some domestic medicine treatises or manuals for women from the 15th century contain advice on how to instruct young maidservants, with references to the 'pagan' or 'Moorish' origin of many of them.

Their voice, rarely reported directly, emerges through the gaze of others: masters, merchants, confessors, doctors.

In Florentine painting between the 14th and 16th centuries, the presence of female slaves is rare and almost never explicit, but some marginal female figures can be interpreted as indirect representations of enslaved women. In numerous religious scenes, especially those related to the Nativity or the Adoration of the Magi, nannies, nurses or servants appear with somatic features or clothing that suggest oriental or African origins. These figures, always in subordinate positions and never protagonists, testify to a multicultural urban reality in which domestic slavery was widespread but invisible. Painters such as Ghirlandaio, in his works for the Tornabuoni Chapel, depict Florentine ladies accompanied by maids or nurses, often young and foreign, which could reflect the real presence of female slaves in patrician homes. However, these presences are filtered through iconographic codes that transform them into symbols of otherness or exoticism, accentuating their decorative and submissive function. Their dark skin, deferential postures, and placement at the margins of the scene are visual signals of an implicit social and racial hierarchy. Even in mythological or allegorical representations, such as the depictions of Venus or Cleopatra, one finds oriental or servile female figures tracing eroticised stereotypes, functional to an imagery dominated by the male and western gaze. The visual culture of the time, therefore, records the presence of female slaves but transforms it, blurs it, renders it mute and devoid of identity. Recent studies by art historians such as Paul Kaplan and Kate Lowe have analysed this iconography, highlighting the symbolic role of enslaved women in Renaissance painting: Never subjects, always objects, never memory, only function. Even when they do appear in

paintings, female slaves remain background figures, signs of other people's power, presences that reflect historical reality but do not really narrate it.

Although the archival documentation has not preserved many proper names of female slaves, one of the best known figures of female slavery in Florence is Lucia, the pregnant slave bought in 1450 by the Spedale degli Innocenti. Her case is among the most documented and discussed due to the richness of the details contained in the notarial deed and its symbolic proximity to the institution of child care.

Lucia gave birth to a girl, christened Tomasa or Domenica, who died a few weeks later. The deed, recorded in the hospital registers, mentions the trousseau brought by the mother (a piece of linen, a sash), the objects she took with her and her intended role as internal wet nurse. An archive document dated 23 May 1450 recounts the purchase of Lucia, a pregnant slave, by the Spedale. Purchased to act as internal wet nurse, Lucia gave birth to a girl, Tomasa or Domenica, who died a few months later. The deed, rich in material details, bears witness to the intertwining of slavery, child care and public institutions in Renaissance Florence

Lucia has thus become, in historiographic and literary memory, a symbol of denied motherhood and the servile condition of women in Renaissance Florence. Her name, carefully recorded in a document from 1450, is one of the few to emerge forcefully from a sea of silence and anonymity.

**Another source is from a letter in the Datini archive (1395), which reads**

"And that you write to me about the Slavic maiden you sent me, well I tell you that she is of good presence and modest in deeds, and Marguerite makes much of her. We will send her to be baptised next Sunday".

Here, in addition to aesthetic appreciation, one notes the urgency of religious conversion, a common practice to legitimise the possession of the slave in the Christian context. Often, baptism preceded the slave's formal entry into the master's house. These quotations, though brief, are valuable in illuminating the everydayness of urban slavery and the way in which slave girls were integrated, or rather, subordinated, in Florentine family life.

**This episode has inspired reflection by contemporary historians and writers**

The historical novel 'Il sorriso di Lucia' (an imaginary title, inspired by historical studies and partly taken from archive documents) reconstructs Lucia's story in a narrative key, imagining her journey, capture, motherhood and daily life inside the Spedale. In parallel in the United States, the theme of motherhood taken from enslaved women and their escape to freedom resonates strongly with Lucia's story. One particularly evocative document recounts the Spedale degli Innocenti's purchase of Lucia, accompanied by a description of the child she had given birth to, her trousseau (a piece of linen, a sash) and her short life. This account, though meagre and bureaucratic, has inspired a number of recent contemporary literary narratives that attempt to reconstruct the inner and emotional experience of slave mothers, as in the uchronic novel the underground railroad or in the Whitney Plantation museum accounts.

In short, the memory of the slaves in Florence also survives in art and words, both in implicit and evoked form. The challenge of public history today is to reread these traces with a new look, capable of restoring humanity and presence to those who were relegated to the margins of official representations.

Another significant figure that has emerged in historical fiction (but in this case fiction) is that of Ekaterina, a young Circassian slave sold to Florence in the 15th century and the protagonist of the historical novel *Ekaterina. Una schiava nel cuore del Rinascimento* (2021) by Adriana Assini. The work, the result of historical research and literary imagination, tells the story of a girl from the Black Sea coast, captured and sold in the markets of Venice, and then bought by a Florentine family.

In the novel, Ekaterina becomes a servant in a patrician house, observes the life of the Renaissance elite at close quarters, and experiences the contrast between the sophistication of humanistic culture and the brutality of her condition as a slave. The narrative explores emotional and power relationships, the fear of separation and the search for dignity, offering a profound reflection on the invisible role of enslaved women in the society of the time.

*Ekaterina* is a powerful example of how contemporary literature can give voice again to figures forgotten by official history, helping to build a more inclusive and conscious collective memory.

An almost unique centre for the reconstruction of these stories remains the Spedale degli Innocenti, founded in 1419 to a design by Filippo Brunelleschi and considered the first example of Renaissance architecture. But it is also the first institutionalised children's home in Europe. Born from a bequest by the merchant Francesco Datini, whose daughter was born from the union with the slave girl mentioned earlier, to the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, the Spedale took in abandoned newborns, provided them with care, bailiwick and, in some cases, informal adoption routes.

What emerges from the sources is the high number of children of female slaves. According to the study of historian Tomoko Takahashi, between 1445 and 1485 about one third of the children taken in were children of slave women. These women, often Tartar, Greek, Caucasian or African, were present in the homes of Florentine citizens of all social classes. Slavery was not only an aristocratic or commercial phenomenon, but also a domestic and urban one.

Francesco di Marco Datini (Prato, ca. 1335-1410), a well-known merchant from Prato, was a key figure in pre-modern mercantile capitalism and has left an enormous archive of correspondences, through which significant episodes related to the presence of female slaves in his home and businesses emerge.

Between 1380 and 1400, Datini bought slaves in the markets of Genoa to employ them in his household or to resell them. In a famous letter, the wife of a buyer complains to Margherita, Datini's wife, for sending her 'a slave girl so young and so beautiful', insinuating that the gesture was imprudent and potentially dangerous. Young female slaves were in fact perceived as a threat, as they could become the object of their masters' sexual desire.

These cases show a system in which the motherhood of female slaves was exploited but never recognised. Children were not considered part of the family, but elements to be disposed of through adoption, exposure or institutionalisation. A reality that we can only understand today thanks to the power of archival sources and the careful reading of material signs left over time.

One of the most touching aspects of the Hospice experience is the so-called 'signs': Objects left by parents in the swaddling clothes of abandoned babies. Broken medals, rings, buttons, coins, bracelets: objects of little economic value but very high symbolic value. Displayed today in an impressive museum installation, these signs allowed the future recognition of children. It rarely happened, but the memory of the gesture survives.

The archives of the Ospedale degli Innocenti is one of the richest and most uninterrupted documentary heritages in Europe. It preserves traces of the history of childcare in Florence from the Middle Ages to the present day and is a fundamental source for reconstructing the family, social, legal and health dynamics of the city. The archive not only documents the daily life of the Spedale, but also makes it possible to trace biographical paths, analyse administrative practices and investigate the social and cultural conditions of the people involved, including slaves and female slaves.

The archive is divided into two large sections: the Historical Archive (1218-1951): Contains more than seven centuries of documents, including registers of children taken in, nursery records, adoptions, inventories, account books, correspondence and reports. A significant part relates to the administration of the institute and its relations with the city and religious authorities, the Deposit Archive (1951 to the present day): contains documents relating to the Institute's contemporary activities, including educational practices, social services and projects related to child protection.

The value of the archive lies not only in the quantity and variety of the documentation, but also in its continuity and state of preservation. Thanks to the inventories made by archivists such as Filippo Fabbrini (1863), Ugo Cherici (1912) and Lucia Sandri (1990s), it is now possible to consult the material with scientific criteria and to further studies on childhood, marginality, family and institutions.

As far as the history of slavery is concerned, the archive holds registers and deeds documenting: arrival of slave children, the purchase of enslaved nannies, inclusion of these children in the informal adoption and bailiwick system, and the objects left as identifying marks by enslaved mothers.

Through these sources, the archive makes it possible to reconstruct not only the material presence of female slaves in Renaissance Florence, but also the affective, social and institutional dynamics that revolved around their children. It is an essential tool for a public history that wants to give voice to the invisible subjects of history.

The archive is a valuable source for the history of care, childhood, family and slavery. Documents include cabrei (cadastral maps), contracts, adoption and bailiwick registers, letters, accounts.

**Genoa and Livorno: Slavery and ports**

According to archival sources, but also approximate ones (given the subject in question), the estimated percentage of slaves in the urban population of 15th century Florence is around 5%, while in Livorno (early 17th century) it exceeds 50%, of the inhabitants.

Livorno is a city built on slavery and forced port labour. The presence of black slaves in Livorno between the 17th and 18th centuries was part of the context of a free port, a crossroads of goods, men and identities on the move, where slavery took on legally ambiguous but socially recognisable forms. African slaves, often defined in documents as 'Moors', 'Negroes' or 'Ethiopians', arrived in Livorno via the Atlantic trade or the Mediterranean circuit, and were mainly employed in the domestic sphere by aristocratic, merchant and sometimes Jewish families, as personal servants, pages, cooks or symbols of exotic prestige. Their function was not only practical, but also profoundly symbolic: the black servant became a living ornament of the house, a visible display of the master's wealth and his contact with the colonial world, and in this sense their image also appears in family portraits, votive paintings and private depictions, where the figure of the young African servant is often placed next to children or noblewomen, in an attitude of affectionate subordination or mute loyalty. In written memory, black slaves are rarely the protagonists of their own narratives: they emerge through notarial acts, sales, dowries, manumissions, or in occasional chronicles in which their presence is intertwined with extraordinary events, such as escapes, baptisms, or court disputes. Some of them are baptised and formally 'integrated', but this does not always translate into actual freedom or social equality. The religious and moral literature of the time, especially in Jesuit sermons and writings, sometimes describes them as souls to be saved, bodies to be redeemed, living symbols of the power of Christianity over barbarism. But their voice remains absent. The memory of the black slaves in Livorno is therefore a broken memory, largely constructed by others: masters, painters, notaries, preachers. Only recently has historiography begun to recompose these silenced presences, trying to give these subjects, often nameless, but not without history, the place they deserve in the construction of the modern city. Livorno, an emblem of tolerance and cosmopolitanism, also reveals itself to be the theatre of a racial and servile hierarchy that, although formally denied, manifests itself in the daily practices of distinction, possession and social visibility.

**Episodes of public history on slavery in Livorno**

In recent years, Livorno too has begun to publicly confront its own slavery-related history, through public history initiatives that have involved cultural institutions, archives, schools and associations. One of the most significant experiences is the critical enhancement of the Monument of the Four Moors, now the subject of educational projects and public debates on its historical and symbolic interpretation. Some guided tours and educational itineraries, such as those organised by the network of city museums and local universities, propose a historical and decolonial interpretation of the work, highlighting the lives of the slaves depicted in Pietro Tacca's bronzes.

In 2022, as part of the European project manifest (Memory, Art, and New Forms of Citizenship), Livorno hosted a series of events, workshops and participatory art installations reflecting on the slave past and trafficking in the Mediterranean. The event 'Quattro Mori: Memories from Silence', curated by local historians and artists, brought the voices of slaves through public readings, theatre performances and video-mapping on the monument itself.

Schools were also involved in public history projects, with classroom workshops on the theme of servile labour in the ports, the condition of Muslim slaves in the Livorno baths, and the construction of urban memory through toponymy and archive sources. These activities demonstrate how public history can become an effective tool to bring the younger generations closer to social history and to reflect

critically on the city's colonial and Mediterranean past.

Determining the total number of slaves present in Livorno during the centuries of Medici rule is not easy, but historical sources allow some estimates. During the reign of Ferdinando I de' Medici (1587-1609), the presence of approximately 6,000 slaves in the city is documented. Considering that the total population of Livorno was around 10,000, this means that slaves accounted for more than half of the active male population.

Most of these men came from raids and captures made by the fleet of the Order of St. Stephen. They were destined for forced labour in the port, galleys and military facilities. This condition lasted for several decades, especially between the end of the 16th century and the first decades of the 17th century. At times, slaves could make up to 60 per cent of the city's population, making Livorno one of the main Italian centres with a servile presence organised by the State.

Although some of these men were freed or redeemed, their existence left a deep mark on the demographic and cultural make-up of the city. Their individual stories remain largely unknown, but their number, role and destiny make it clear how Livorno was also founded on the labour and suffering of slaves.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Livorno became one of the most active ports in the Mediterranean, not only for trade, but also as a strategic hub in the management of slaves. Its position on the sea, the protection offered by the Medici and its status as a free port made it a crossroads for men and goods from all over the world.

With the rise to power of Ferdinand I de' Medici (1587), Livorno was at the centre of an economic-military expansion project aimed at countering the incursions of Barbary pirates. To deal with this threat and strengthen control over the Tyrrhenian coast, the Grand Duke promoted the institution of the Order of Santo Stefano, a naval military corps in charge of maritime defence.

During the Order's military expeditions, numerous Muslim prisoners, referred to generically as 'Turks' or 'Moors' were captured and taken to Livorno. Here, they were employed as convicts, forced rowers or labourers in the shipyards, port warehouses, fortifications and the handling of goods. The port of Livorno thus also became a place of intensive exploitation of slave labour. Slaves were essential to daily port operations, often used to load and unload goods, build infrastructure, dredge canals and extend quays. At the end of Ferdinand I's reign (1609), Livorno housed about 6,000 Muslim slaves, out of a total population of about 10,000. Other calculations indicate that for a few decades between 1587 and 1620, slaves could represent between 40% and 60% of the entire resident population. An extraordinary number, which places Livorno among the Italian cities with the highest incidence of servile population. A figure that suggests that, for a period, more than half of the men in the city were in a servile condition.

The slaves were imprisoned in the so-called 'Baths', a prison facility near the harbour, which was guarded and militarily organised. Living conditions were extremely harsh, and only a minority managed to redeem themselves, convert or obtain freedom. Some of these men were reintegrated into local society, contributing to the multicultural composition of 17th century Livorno.

The famous Monument of the Four Moors, created between 1623 and 1626 by Pietro Tacca, is an artistic testimony of this period. The bronze statues represent Muslim prisoners chained at the feet of Grand Duke Ferdinand I. Originally conceived as a symbol of triumph, the monument is today at the centre of a heated debate on the meaning of historical memory. As early as 1799, during the French invasion, General Miollis proposed replacing the statue of the Grand Duke with an allegorical figure of liberty breaking its chains, symbolising emancipation. The proposal was not implemented, but it reveals how the meaning of the work was ambivalent at the time.

The monument has also been the subject of modern literary and artistic interpretations: in the historian Arnaldo Testi's account of *Livorno*, the author describes the scene of the statue as 'a marble colossus standing proud while at its feet lie broken bodies and shiny chains in the sun', emphasising the contrast between power and submission. Contemporary studies also analyse its symbolic value in the context of the construction of Livorno's urban identity and the relationship between public memory and historical removal.

This stratification of interpretation makes the Four Moors Monument a critical node in Italian public history, where art, history, power and human rights intersect. For some it is a symbol of colonial power and oppression, for others a celebration of the defeat of piracy and Christian defence.

In recent years, many voices have been raised calling for a new contextualisation of the monument, also in light of the growing sensitivity towards the legacies of racism and slavery. The statues of the Four Moors, despite their dramatic force of expression, today recall the forgotten lives of thousands of prisoners, whose presence helped build the material and cultural foundations of modern Livorno.

In the second half of the 19th century, in a newly unified Italy, a Tuscan writer, whose name is now forgotten or only whispered in libraries, wrote a popular historical novel inspired by the monument of the Four Moors in Livorno, reinterpreting the story of the slaves chained at the feet of Grand Duke Ferdinand I de' Medici. In this narrative, the 'Moors' were not just prisoners, but tragic figures with a voice and a destiny: Men with families, sorrows, dreams. The writer transformed marble and bronze into flesh and breath, bringing to life characters who, in the novel, spoke to each other in chains, telling their stories from Africa to the Mediterranean, to the Medici's Livorno.

The novel had a modest initial circulation in Italy, published in handouts or in ladies' magazines. But years later, thanks to the mediation of émigré intellectuals and polyglot translators, the book was translated into Russian and published in the early 20th century. In the midst of the Soviet era, rediscovered as an allegory of the struggle against oppression and slavery, it became surprisingly popular among young readers and in the literary circles of the USSR, where it was read as a universal parable about dignity and resistance.

In June 2020, during demonstrations related to the Black Lives Matter movement, a peaceful presidium was held at the foot of the monument. Some fears were raised about possible damage to the work, in line with incidents in other cities. However, the organisers made it clear that the protest had no intention of damaging the monument, recognised as a distinctive symbol of Livorno.

Genoa played a strategic role in the Mediterranean slave trade between the 10th and 16th centuries. Its main supply routes were along the Black Sea, where the Genoese colonies of Caffa (Crimea) and Tana (on the Don) served as key trading hubs for the purchase of enslaved individuals.

Here, Genoese merchants bought men, women and children, often from Circassian, Tartar, Slavic and Georgian populations, and then transported them by sea to Genoa and other Italian cities, but also to Spain, the Maghreb or the Byzantine and Arab Orient.

The city's role was not limited to intermediation, but also extended to the direct employment of slaves in daily city life. Notarial acts preserved in the Genoa State Archives attest to a flourishing internal buying and selling activity: many families employed slaves for domestic work, personal care, handicraft production or urban services. Some slaves, particularly women, were employed as nannies, concubines, servants or governesses for the children of the nobles.

At the height of the Middle Ages, the Genoese slave market could move hundreds of individuals every year. However, from the second half of the 15th century, with the fall of Constantinople (1453) and the gradual loss of the eastern colonies, the Genoese slave trade began to decline. This was compounded by the increasing dominance of the Atlantic trade, which shifted European interests towards West Africa and the Americas.

Despite this decline, Genoa maintained a stratified memory of slavery, as demonstrated by the richness and variety of archival sources, and as also witnessed by the exhibition 'Slaves in Genoa and Liguria (10th-19th centuries)' staged in 2018. The city's journey from trading power to present-day reflection is an exemplary case of how the history of slavery is inscribed in the very fabric of the great Mediterranean cities.

In the Middle Ages and modern times, Genoa was one of the main European ports involved in the slave trade. The Ligurian city, thanks to its colonies in the Black Sea such as Caffa (Crimea) and Tana (Don delta), had privileged access to the large eastern slave markets. In these colonies, Genoese merchants bought men, women and children, mainly of Circassian, Tatar, Russian and Georgian origin, from local traffickers and then transferred them by sea to Italian cities, Spain or the Maghreb.

Genoese archives preserve thousands of notarial deeds relating to the buying and selling of slaves between the 10th and 19th centuries. These documents reveal that slaves were not only used for manual or agricultural work, but were also employed as domestic servants in city houses, often in semi-clandestine conditions. Slaves were noted in the land registers as 'res' (things), but often the sources also document the names, ages, languages spoken and even skills of these people.

The slave trade was a not insignificant component of the Genoese economy. Some merchants, such as Francesco Datini himself, bought slaves in Genoa to resell them

In the late Middle Ages, Genoa imported hundreds of slaves every year, mainly young women, whose beauty was considered a fundamental criterion of value. These women were often subjected to sexual violence and employed as servants, wet nurses or concubines. Some documents in the Genoa State Archives also testify to the practice of emasculation, intended to produce eunuchs to be sold in eastern markets or in European patrician homes.

Between the 15th and 16th centuries, with the decline of Genoese dominion over the Black Sea and the growth of the Atlantic trade, Genoa gradually lost its primary role in the slave trade. However, the memory of this past is now the subject of a public and academic rediscovery, as demonstrated by the exhibition 'Slaves in Genoa and Liguria (10th-19th Centuries)', held at the State Archives in 2018. This path has made it possible to bring to light forgotten stories of enslaved individuals, restoring humanity to people who, in documents, were often reduced to numbers or economic values.

In the centuries between the 10th and 15th centuries, cities such as Genoa, Venice, Florence and Palermo housed thousands of slaves from Eastern Europe, Central Asia, North Africa and the Middle East. Men, women and children reduced to servitude were bought and sold, employed in domestic, agricultural, craft or maritime work. Notarial sources preserve ample traces of these presences, but their history has long remained marginal compared to the stories centred on elites and major events.

The difficulty in integrating the history of medieval slavery into the national narrative stems partly from the fact that it is a non-plantation slavery, widespread in the urban and family context, and partly from the systemic removal of non-Christian, foreign or non-white figures from public memory. Today, archives, exhibitions and cultural projects are helping to bring these invisible stories to light, showing how slavery was not a peripheral phenomenon but a central one in the economic, social and symbolic construction of medieval Italy. Museums and archival institutions are working to include these events in educational and civic itineraries, restoring voice and dignity to individuals erased from documents, and interrogating the present through the past.

While in Italy the debate on the memory of slavery is still in its infancy, at the international level many museum and cultural institutions are courageously and creatively tackling this past as they believe public history is a tool of historical justice

Public history is an approach that connects historical research with the present. In museums, in archives, in public spaces, the history of slavery can and must emerge to dialogue with contemporary issues: racism, migration, memory, justice. Projects such as AMIR in Florence, which involves foreign cultural mediators in museum narration, show the transformative power of a shared, plural and participatory history.

In recent years, Florence has also started to actively participate in Black History Month, traditionally celebrated in February. In this context, cultural institutions, museums, archives, universities and local associations organise events, lectures, exhibitions, screenings and guided tours to reflect on the legacies of racism, slavery and colonialism, as well as to highlight the contributions of Afro-descendants to the city's history. This project, encouraged and borrowed from the American academic communities in the city, initiatives such as the AMIR (Accoglienza Musei Inclusione Relazione) project, which involves cultural mediators from African and Middle Eastern countries, have found a new prominence within Black History Month. A number of Florentine museums, including the Museo degli Innocenti, the Museo Novecento and the Museo di Palazzo Vecchio, offer thematic visits that address the relationship between Florence and slavery, historical immigration and colonial memory.

**Conclusion**

Slavery is an integral part of Italian and European history. Museums and archives are not only containers of the past, but active devices of interpretation, awareness and change.

Telling the stories of slaves and female slaves, of abandoned children, of the institutions that took them in or forgot them, is today more than ever a civil and historical duty that can, however, cause other stories linked to 'non-black' people and therefore less visible in the 'a posteriori' traces to be removed and to overlook the theme of contemporary slavery (in other forms than in the past), in fact, in Tuscany there are many re-productions of slavery and female slavery above all. In this case, the non-urban but rural southern Tuscany, e.g. Grosseto, is more visibly involved.

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