

Meredith Martin and Gillian Weiss, *The Sun King at Sea: Maritime Art and Galley Slavery in Louis XIV's France*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2022. xi + 244 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781606067307.

Review Essay by Ian Coller, University of California, Irvine

For a quarter of a century after 1666, Amet, a Turkish Muslim from Izmir, lived and labored as a slave in southern France. He died in the arsenal of Marseille at the age of 70 without seeing his birthplace or his family again. Amet was just one of many thousands of Muslims captured on the Mediterranean by European ships and forced to undertake the back-breaking work of constructing and rowing the vast, richly ornamented galleys that served the power and glory of Louis XIV's France. With his enslaved status marked by his bare torso, his ragged trousers, and the red bonnet over his shaven head and distinctive top-knot, he labored under atrocious conditions of physical restraint, heat, stench, and brutal discipline. Amet was, as Gillian Weiss and Meredith Martin insist, no exotic anomaly, but "one of the cogs in a state machine" (p. 36) that underpinned the expanding power of France on land and sea. *The Sun King at Sea* is not a book that deals with early modern French maritime expansion. Instead, it brings that larger global and imperial perspective back to France itself. Weiss and Martin show that slavery was an integral element of early modern French history and that Muslims were central to that phenomenon. It serves to remind us that Muslims have a history in France stretching back before colonialism and migration. If Louis XIV is critical to our understanding of French history, his enthusiastic enslavement of Muslims is also a part of that story.

Amet's presence, and that of fellow Muslims from Algiers, Belgrade, Tunis, and Tripoli, cannot be separated from the everyday life of ports like Marseille, Toulon, and Brest. Some "*Turcs*" were able to secure a small stand on the wharf to make a few extra pennies hawking trinkets, and others gained privileges by conversion. But becoming "Jean-Baptiste" did not spare Amet from the chain or the lash. While conversions to enhance Catholic prestige were aggressively pursued after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, the Code Noir of the same year affirmed that Christianity was not incompatible with slavery in the Empire of Louis XIV.[1] Amet served alongside convicts sentenced to penal servitude and Huguenots condemned for the practice of their religion, and perhaps even West Africans and Indigenous Americans sent to the galleys. These latter experiments were short-lived, pointing to the role of the galley as a kind of "laboratory" in which practices of enslavement were tested and shaped. The numbers of enslaved Muslims grew exponentially after Amet's capture, reaching into the thousands by the 1670s. Even after the conclusion of French treaties with North African powers shrank supply, officials continued to acquire *esclaves turcs* by all possible means. A central question of Weiss and Martin's book is just why these enslaved Muslims were so highly prized in seventeenth-century France. Muslim galley slaves, they conclude, were more than a convenient labor force or infidels to be punished: they were "unstable emblems of royal authority, Catholic piety and aristocratic glamor" (p. 174).

Enslavement performed crucial symbolic work in Louis XIV's France, both in the colonies and in the metropole.

The galleys in which Amet served had a long and complicated history. Practices of capture and enslavement for military service, and particularly for the construction and propulsion of oared vessels, stretched back to the Romans, carrying the pedigree of universal empire. The heritage of the Crusades and its sequels in the Reconquista and the Fall of Constantinople gave oared galleys a new religious valency by the sixteenth century, whether commanded by the Knights of Malta, Charles V's Spain, or Süleyman the Magnificent's Ottoman Empire. The lineage of French galleys was linked to the Medici redevelopment of Tuscany, and in particular the Grand Duke Ferdinand's establishment of Livorno as a free port constructed and driven by enslaved labor: his niece Marie de Medici arrived for her marriage with Henri IV escorted by seven oared vessels crewed by enslaved rowers. When her grandson Louis XIV subjugated Marseille in 1660, his administration's project to transform the port borrowed from the model of Livorno, including the establishment of a slave-driven arsenal that would project French Bourbon power in the Mediterranean, but equally carry meanings back to the center of absolutist power in Versailles.

Galleys were floating signifiers, invested with massive and shifting symbolic meaning beyond their effectiveness as military machines. This makes them a rich base for a collaboration between historical research and art history that is more than the sum of its parts. Weiss, the leading historian on captivity and enslavement between France and North Africa writing in English, leads the archival investigation that underpins this meticulously researched book, and puts the local politics of the ports in conversation with the larger functioning of the French state. Meredith Martin, a specialist in ancien régime visual and material culture, interweaves a sophisticated reading of the multiple layers of political, religious, and economic meaning carried by images and objects produced in and around the galleys—not least the vessels themselves and their crews.

The book is divided thematically rather than chronologically, which makes for deep analysis, although occasionally resulting in repetition of historical moments and anecdotes. The introduction opens with a visit to the Municipal Museum of Marseille, noting the erasure of Muslim slavery from its exhibit on the galleys. The first chapter begins to fill that gap by charting the working lives of enslaved Muslims in the arsenal of Marseille, and their wider circulation to Rochefort, Brest, Dunkirk, and even Paris and Versailles. The contrast between the brutal conditions of enslavement and the prestige that these *Turcs* carried is striking. While there is no doubt that their exploited labor had economic significance, Weiss and Martin emphasize the symbolic work that *Turcs* were doing. That work might be embodied—like the two *esclaves turcs* taken on as manservants by Colbert, or the more unfortunate *forçats* missing ears or branded with the fleur-de-lys who served as “roving reminders of royal authority” (p. 45). It might equally be refracted through images and objects produced as royal propaganda, which combined function and decoration in curious ways. A bladed pike called a *pertuisane*, used in maritime battles and control of *forçats* on the galleys is forged in silver and incised with highly detailed figures of cowering captives. The most visually striking example is a cannon cast in the shape of an *esclave turc*, destined to be used in fighting Muslims and other enemies. These objects are fascinating, bizarre, multivalent, and often tinged with violence. They serve here not as curiosities but as matrices for unpacking and thinking through the various registers in which Muslim enslavement made meanings in seventeenth-century France.

The book's second chapter traces the cycling of this machinery of enslavement from the ports to the center of French power, for example in the model galleys used in pageants at Versailles, the bi-annual southward march of *forçats* from Paris (albeit only occasionally including *Turcs*), and aristocratic portraits featuring dark-skinned servants who may have been *Turcs* or *Maures*. This imagery was ramped up after the bombardments of Algiers by the French fleet in the 1680s led to a treaty protecting French shipping from seizure, and its crews and passengers from captivity. The flourishing of this imagery was short-lived. By the 1690s, a pan-European backlash against a weakening France—condemning Louis for brutality against Protestants, collaboration with Muslims, and lust for world domination—led the regime to restrain its imagery of captives cowering under Louis's heel (although notoriously persisting in the Place des Victoires until 1790) and to decouple the now-inconvenient *esclaves turcs* from the Sun King's image.

Chapter Three returns to Marseille and the local uses of galley slavery and its meanings. Weiss and Martin argue that galleys were not just top-down expressions of monarchical propaganda. "Oared vessels and servile oarsmen," they suggest, "allowed Marseille elites to fulfill multiple and sometimes conflicting desires for naval glory, political utility, religious fervor and nostalgic fantasy" (p. 130). Striking here are the manuals and albums produced by local elites, apparently seeking to transform the sordid realities of the *chiourme* into aesthetically pleasing and intellectually legible diagrams. Yet, queasily enough, the manuals celebrate that brutality in the decoration of the cartouches, where French overseers wield the lash against cowering *Turcs*.

That local ambivalence is further in evidence in Chapter Four, which deals with the plague of 1720 and its aftermath. In the history paintings produced locally (but exhibited for profit in Paris and around the country) top-knotted *Turcs* collect the dead from the streets of the plague-stricken city. However, documents suggest that few of the highly-prized rowers were in fact permitted to join the perilous clean-up. The ostensible origins of the pandemic in ships coming from the Levant served to associate Muslims with plague in the public imagination. But these figures pressed into frontline service do not appear as sinister agents, but rather as helpers, perhaps implying a contrast with the inaction of city authorities and the church. This might seem impossibly contradictory, but Weiss and Martin make a powerfully convincing case for such instability of meaning. This moment seems to mark an inflection point in the enslavement of Muslims: when the treaties with North African states were renewed by Louis XV in 1726, most remaining *esclaves turcs* were gradually exchanged or sent home. In 1748, the Marseille arsenal was ultimately closed and the galleys integrated into Toulon's *bagne*, which remained a notorious place of incarceration for more than a century. All that remained of the galleys of Marseille, and the Muslim slaves who had resided there for a century, were ghosts, like the abandoned remnant of the non-existent former "mosque" of the arsenal standing in a park on the edge of Marseille (in reality a piece of architectural bric-à-brac).

This is an important book that shows us slavery was not simply a colonial question "over there" but a question "at home" at this crucial moment in the construction of France. Enslaved African labor was indispensable to the formation of the fabulously lucrative sugar islands of the Caribbean. But slavery in France had longer and deeper roots: it originated in the Mediterranean rather than the Atlantic, and in the metropole rather than the colony. This is not to relativize the scale or the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade, but to recognize that this trade emerged within and was shaped by the very different structures of slavery in the Mediterranean. If, as Weiss has written elsewhere,

esclaves turcs were neither fully severed from connection with their homelands nor “socially dead,” this difference does not lessen their servitude, but rather challenges the framing of a singular, universal model.[2] Equally, the openly trumpeted presence of slaves in France’s port cities opens up new questions in the debate over the “free soil” principle. Why did *esclaves turcs* not succeed in challenging their enslavement in the metropole, when in numerous cases enslaved people of African descent won their freedom on the principle that there were “no slaves in France”?[3] These questions may push us to think in new and more nuanced ways about race, religion and liberty in the construction of early modern France.

The Sun King at Sea is a rich book that points to further questions. One that intrigued me was how these Muslims understood and responded to their captivity. We hear in passing of escape, rebellion, and even of a converted *Turc* who traveled to Versailles to petition the king for his release. We follow the rhythms of their lives as recorded by French authorities, but it is much harder to know how the vast majority of *Turcs* who remained Muslim practiced their religion, beyond the existence of the small cemetery that was claimed by Muslims in Marseille long after the dismantling of the arsenal. It would be fascinating to hear what an Ottomanist or North African specialist would make of this miniature Muslim society that emerged in the port cities of Marseille and Toulon.

The book suggests other transnational questions. Galley slavery, as Weiss’s previous work shows, stretched not only from Italy to Spain, but across the North African littoral and into the Levant. So-called *Turcs* were captured by Italian, Spanish, or Maltese crews and circulated widely across that carceral archipelago. While the book shows effectively that France did continue to capture and enslave Muslims and did not simply acquire them by purchase, the form and function of the galleys, the arsenal, and its forms of coerced labor were all based on widely circulating Mediterranean models. Nonetheless, the book resolves that tension in interesting ways. What seems peculiarly French about this version of galley slavery is its incorporation into the new state logic in the age of Colbert and Vauban, even as its own local dynamics often exceeded the bounds of that control. This was never more evident than in the plague of 1720 that revealed the state’s impotence in the face of transnational circulation, but also set the scene for new kinds of governmentality that no longer relied in the same way on the exercise of hard sovereign power. Muslims were sent “home” in an act of humanity that also served a progressive whitening by a state that was beginning at precisely this moment its long-term legislation against Black presence in France. To think about these multiple dynamics side by side is a challenge that *The Sun King at Sea* launches in spectacular and brilliant fashion.

NOTES:

[1] See Malick Ghachem, *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[2] See Gillian Weiss, “Infidels at the Oar: A Mediterranean Exception to France’s Free Soil Principle,” *Slavery & Abolition*, 32 (2011): 397-412; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Harvard University Press, 1982). For approaches to connecting Mediterranean, Atlantic, and other slaveries, see Daniel Hershenzon, “Towards a Connected History of Bondage in the Mediterranean: Recent Trends in the Field,” *History Compass* 15-8 (2017): 1-13.

[3] See Sue Peabody, *'There Are No Slaves in France': The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford University Press, 1996); for new critical directions in thinking about this complex question, see Miranda Spieler, "The Vanishing Slaves of Paris: The Lettre de Cachet and the Emergence of an Imperial Legal Order in Eighteenth-Century France," in Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Nicole Jerr, eds., *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept* (Columbia University Press, 2017): 230-245.

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