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Medicine and Slavery in the Early Modern Mediterranean World

Friday 19 September 2025 14:30 (1 hour)

Part of the panel organized by Valentina Pugliano (Ca' Foscari), and including as speakers Valentina Pugliano, Ana Struillou (IHR, London).

Rationale: Throughout the early modern period the Mediterranean was a major stage for practices of enslavement, affecting millions of individuals across ethnic groups, religious communities, and social ranks. While the medicalization of race and, more recently, slave medicine have become key entry points for the study of Atlantic slavery, the same cannot be said for the Mediterranean context, where enslavement has been traditionally examined from the viewpoint of religious and economic history. Yet, we know, for instance, that the role of physicians was crucial in the selection process of convict and slave galley rowers, and in defining the monetary value of captives. We are beginning to appreciate that bagnos (the slave enclosures dotting the Mediterranean coast, both Christian and Muslim) served economic interests but were also key structures through which early modern states conceived the management of public health. We are also beginning to uncover how captives were crucial for the transfer of medical and pharmaceutical knowledge, and material culture, from one side of the Mediterranean to the other, and beyond. This panel tries to provide a first corrective, aware that the heterogeneity of contexts, perspectives and lived experiences across the wider Mediterranean world cannot be easily reduced to generalities.

Presenter: Valentina Pugliano

Title of the paper: Alessandro Pini (1653-1717), medico condotto: galley slavery, medical practice and Venetian public health

In a dramatic reversal of fortunes typical of Mediterranean slavery, the Florentine physician Alessandro Pini (1653-1717) ended his life in Istanbul's slave bagno. For the previous twenty-five years, after a stint in the 1680s exploring Egyptian flora for the Granduke of Florence and a summer corsairing with the military Order of St. Stephen, Pini's job had been to ensure the health of convicts and slaves, alongside Christian merchants and soldiers, first as galley physician in the Venetian fleet engaged in the Peloponnese wars against the Ottomans, and then as personal doctor to the Venetian ambassador in Istanbul. In contact with Italian scholars including his patron Francesco Redi and the apothecary Diacinto Cestoni, he had expressly chosen such positions to cultivate his interests in cartography, archaeology and natural history. Pini's case is instructive not only of the variety of contradictory roles which early modern physicians played in the Mediterranean slave trade; but also, because he was one cog in a much larger public health initiative established by the Venetian Republic in the eastern Mediterranean and Levant to guard its representatives, manage the threats of plague epidemics, and also –a facet still in need of study –preserve its convict and captive population.

Presenter: Ana Struillou

Title of the paper: Captivity, Slavery and Circulation of Medical Knowledge between Early Modern Spain and North Africa

From the sixteenth century onwards, the expansion of North African privateering in the Western Mediterranean led to the captivity of a growing number of medical practitioners from the Spanish littoral, including surgeons and barbers serving aboard Iberian vessels. At the same time, Spanish military incursions along the North African coast resulted in the forced migration of enslaved Maghribi practitioners to the Iberian Peninsula. This paper examines these reciprocal movements of captive and enslaved medical practitioners across

the Strait of Gibraltar during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By focusing on the material environment of these male and female healers, and how they continued to practice medicine on the other side of the Mediterranean, this paper explores the dynamics of the circulation of practical knowledge across the Western Mediterranean and the role of various forms of forced mobility in shaping its diffusion. At a time when practices associated with Islam faced increasing repression in the Iberian Peninsula, this paper also interrogates the nature and the shape of the archives that allow us to unearth the itineraries of medical knowledge and expertise across the region.

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Short Biography

Valentina Pugliano is a historian of science, medicine, and material culture of early modern Italy and the Mediterranean world, with a special interest in the relations between the Republic of Venice and the Ottoman Empire. She is currently a Marie Skłodowska Curie Research Fellow at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and previously taught and held research positions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Cambridge. She was awarded her doctorate from the University of Oxford (2013), and over the years her work has been supported by, among others, the Wellcome Trust for the History of Medicine, the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, the Institute for Historical Research in London, and the US National Endowment for the Humanities.

Alongside a number of pieces in *Isis*, the *Bulletin for the History of Medicine, Early Science and Medicine*, *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* and *PLOS* as well as in edited collections, she is currently working on three books. She is finishing a monograph on the role of pharmacy in the development and 'democratization' of natural history in sixteenth-century Italy; and she is beginning to write up a second one on the ways in which a public health initiative established by the Republic of Venice in its maritime state and Levantine emporia where it had diplomatic presence became a platform for the exchange of knowledge and materials between Christian Europe and the Islamicate Near East, silently supporting the development of key intellectual trends in Europe such as antiquarianism and natural history. In relation to this second project, thanks to generous funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, she is also preparing a critical edition and English translation of the only extant memoir of a Venetian diplomatic physician working in Damascus in 1542-43.

Ana Struillou is a Past and Present Fellow at the Institute of Historical Research (London), interested in all things material and mobile. Her work explores the movement of artefacts and commodities between the Ottoman and non-Ottoman Maghrib, the Iberian Peninsula, and the French Monarchy across the early sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She is currently working on the publication of her first monograph titled *Across the Material Sea: Travelers and their Things across the Early Modern Mediterranean* which explores the material culture of travelers across the Western Mediterranean (sixteenth-seventeenth centuries). Dr. Struillou holds a doctorate from the European University Institute of Florence (2023). Her PhD dissertation entitled "Objects on the Move: The Material Culture of Travel in the Western Mediterranean (1530-1640)", offered the first sustained examination of the materiality of movement in the early modern Mediterranean. Her previous research project, at Exeter College (University of Oxford) focused on the material culture of Morisco diplomacy across early modern France and Spain. Her work has appeared in the *Mediterranean Historical Review* and *E-Spania*, among other academic venues, as well as in various public history fora. In addition to her individual research, she actively collaborates on several international projects at both the European and national levels, focusing on Christian-Muslim relations and early modern material culture.

Position

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