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Bodies on the market

Mercenaries, organ trading, and a history of body history

Since the 1980s, the history of the body has been a fascinating and often flashy topic of scholarly debate. "The body", as it has been historicized and theorized, offered a powerful descriptive tool for a vast array of themes. This paper recommends a closer look at bodies as commodities on the market, rather than abstract concepts and metaphors: as bodies and body parts that have a monetary value and are bought and sold. Focusing on material from the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the author argues in favour of historical analysis of the different forms in which bodies were commodities, from medieval ransoms to fixing the price of Renaissance slaves and mercenaries. Bodies — or body parts — were sharply differentiated according to whether they were or were not "saleable", whether they were given a name or denied individual identity; these differentiations were based on broader concepts of the collective corporealities into which bodies were, quite literally, incorporated. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the return of private military enterprise, the phenomenon of "failing states", and the rise of an international illegal market for human organs, Renaissance categories of the commodification of bodies may offer an intriguing and disturbing framework for doing body history as an undertaking that not only relates to but also actively engages issues of our contemporary world.

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