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Financing Freedom: Self-Purchase and Reenslavement in Seventeenth-Century Andalucía

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This article explores cases in which slaveholders, enslaved and freed people, and courts battled over the customary interpretation of the rights of wage-earning slaves in seventeenth-century Andalucía. Throughout the Spanish Empire, enslaved people could purchase their freedom through the processes of *cortación* (later known as *coartación*) and ransom (*rescate*). People paid their purchase price in installments and eventually received freedom papers, which were notarized agreements that reflected the terms of both parties upon receipt of payment. However, freedom papers do not reveal what happened when contracting parties experienced changed circumstances, and many of the particularities of waged enslavement on the Iberian Peninsula and in the Spanish Empire have remained obscure to scholars. Wage-earning slaves inhabited an ambiguous legal space of conditional liberty with rights determined by custom or social practice rather than legislation. Legal cases can shed new light on how the conditions of waged enslavement and conditional liberty were understood and contested in historical moments of economic crisis in seventeenth-century Andalucía. By focusing on stressful moments of property confiscation and currency devaluation, we can see the meanings ascribed to conditional liberty and the attendant legal rights that people who inhabited this conditional status wielded or struggled to enforce in the absence of legislation or codified doctrine.