

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE HISTORICAL RESEARCH OF ANCIENT SLAVERY¹

Ever since the 1960s the history of slavery has become one of the major aspects of the study of antiquity. Over the decades a voluminous literature has examined the various ways and forms in which the exploitation and domination of slaves constituted a fundamental structural element of Greek and Roman economies and societies. Valuable work continues to be produced in this vein, as works mentioned below will demonstrate; but over the last few years a series of studies have started to explore new topics and questions, while still building on the deep foundations of previous work. While earlier work tended to focus on the economics of slavery, recent studies have started to examine the political, cultural and religious uses of slaves and slavery. Furthermore, the top-down perspective of studying what happened to ancient slaves, i.e. their domination and exploitation, is now starting to be balanced by exploring what slaves did, i.e. the historical significance of their agency. These new approaches have led to an explicit focus on comparison between slavery in the different ancient and modern societies, and the creation of new conceptual frameworks for its study. Finally, while written texts will always be a fundamental source for the study of slavery, recent work has started to grapple with the significance of the material evidence.

We can commence with recent general surveys, which give a good impression both of earlier work and of more recent approaches. P. Hunt's *Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery* (2018) is a general overview that aims to engage a broader audience by addressing the central issues in scholarly research within the field. The book discusses the economics of slavery, while also giving important space to the role of slavery in politics and culture, and the significance of slave communities and identities. Each thematic section is further divided into Greek and Roman subsections, and in several instances the author offers valuable comparisons and contrasts between Greek and Roman practices, such as the notable differences in approaches to manumission. S. Forsdyke's *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greece* (2021) aims to give an overview of slavery in archaic and classical Greece. While largely focused on Athens, the book also productively discusses evidence from other Greek communities that is often ignored. But more than anything else the book illustrates the utility of new approaches by focusing on the diverse experiences of

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enslaved persons and the historical significance of their agency, illustrating how slaves influenced the course of ancient Greek history. D. Kamen's *Greek Slavery* (2023) offers a detailed overview of modern scholarship on ancient Greek slavery, examining both traditional topics as well as new developments. It is an excellent introduction both for specialists and for interested readers; the forthcoming companion volume by U. Roth on Roman slavery will hopefully render the same service to Roman historians.

We can conclude this section by mentioning briefly four important works that are not exclusively devoted to ancient slavery, but adopt a global perspective essential for students of ancient slavery. *On Human Bondage: After Slavery and Social Death* (2016), edited by W. Scheidel and J. Bodel, offers a critical assessment of O. Patterson's reconceptualisation of slavery as social death and its application to ancient and modern societies. N. Lenski and C. Cameron's edited volume *What is a Slave Society? The Practice of Slavery in Global Perspective* (2018) re-examines the validity of the distinction between societies with slaves and slave societies introduced by Moses Finley in the 1960s. Finally, two recent collective global histories of slavery include significant essays on antiquity: P. Ismard and C. Vidal's *Les mondes de l'esclavage: une histoire comparée* (2021) and D. Pargas and J. Schiel's *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Slavery throughout History* (2023).

Closely linked to these global studies are a number of books introducing new approaches to the structural role of slavery in ancient societies. D. Lewis's *Greek Slave Systems in their Eastern Mediterranean Context, c. 800–146 BC* (2018) constitutes a ground-breaking contribution. Lewis argues that Greek slavery was not a unitary phenomenon, but a series of epichoric slave systems that developed their own characteristics as a result of local conditions. At the same time Lewis compares Greek slave systems with those in the contemporary Near East (Assyria, Babylonia, Judaea, Persian Empire), thus showing the fundamental role of slavery in many ancient societies and rejecting the notion that Greece and Rome were the only 'genuine slave societies'. Lewis outlines the dynamics of this complex mosaic of regional systems, advocating that historians need to revisit how they understand the role of slavery in antiquity.

P. Ismard's *La Cité et ses esclaves – institution, fictions, expériences* (2019) examines the structural role of slavery in classical Athens. It is a comprehensive examination of the laws, ideas and mechanisms that regulated slave exploitation within the city and their historical implications for Athenian society and politics. Ismard examines how Athenian institutions, rules and practices shaped the status of slaves as property, the exploitation of their labour directly, and the indirect profit from slaves who operated as autonomous economic agents, as well as how litigants and juries dealt with issues involving slaves in the court system. Particularly valuable is Ismard's use of a comparative perspective from other slaveholding societies, so as to illuminate the hard structures but also peculiarities of Greek slave systems. Equally fascinating is his exploration of the consequences of slavery for the experience of civic practices and discourses as well as the implications of this fundamental structural role of slavery for the reception of Athenian democracy in modern society.

Moving from the Greek to the Roman world, E. Cohen's *Roman Inequality: Affluent Slaves, Businesswomen, Legal Fictions* (2023) examines the social and legal foundations of inequality in the late Republican and imperial periods. Roman imperial society, while constituting one of the most extensive systems of slave exploitation in the premodern world, exhibited systemically enforced inequalities that facilitated the social advancement of certain groups of slaves and freedpersons through positions of power and entrepreneurial opportunities. Cohen compellingly demonstrates how the Roman legal system, paradoxically, encouraged servile enterprise at the expense of free enterprise through a series of legal fictions, resulting in widespread poverty among many freeborn Romans and the material

success of certain groups of slaves and freedpersons, while also forcing some free Romans to resort to voluntary enslavement as a means of improving their lives. Finally, Cohen highlights the dominant role of slaves and freedpersons in the administration of the empire, explaining that their attachment to imperial property rather than to the emperor personally enabled them to wield significant power within Roman society. By analysing these seemingly disparate themes, Cohen has opened new avenues in the study of ancient slavery and its broader societal implications.

While earlier studies have mostly focused on private slavery, an important recent development is the systematic study of the role of public slavery. P. Ismard's *Democracy's Slaves: A Political History of Ancient Greece* (2017) is centred around the significance of public slavery in the administration and ideology of ancient Greek cities. Although public slaves represented only a small portion of the slave population, they played a major role by performing a range of expert functions in Greek cities. In a world with habitual annual rotation of magistrates, public slaves played a crucial role in institutional memory and continuity; by using slave civil servants and experts, Greek *poleis* ensured that those who staffed the state apparatus would serve the interests of citizens rather than pursue their own. Through a series of comparisons and analogies with public slavery in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Islamic world, Ismard attempts to clarify how public slavery shaped what it meant to be a citizen in ancient Greece and the development of Athenian democracy.

F. Luciani's *Slaves of the People: A Political and Social History of Roman Public Slavery* (2022) offers a Roman counterpart to Ismard's book. It provides a holistic view of the institution of Roman public slavery, examining not only Rome and Italy, but also the western provinces. This is particularly significant, because it allows one to explore the similarities and differences between the uses and experiences of public slavery in the imperial capital and in the local communities of the Western Mediterranean. Luciani highlights that public slavery in imperial Rome reflected the Republican origins of its government and examines the long-term history of the institution. The fact that public slaves did not have human masters, but belonged to corporate entities, had significant implications for the peculiarities of their practical experiences; the strong heterogeneity of Roman public slaves, combined with the variety of tasks and responsibilities assigned to them, makes it difficult to situate them within a single place in Roman society. This focus on diversity is in line with the perspective of other recent works.

We can now move to works exemplifying the recent interest in the historical significance of the agency of enslaved persons. F.R. Merola, M.V. Bramante and A. Caravaglios have edited an important volume, titled *Le realtà della schiavitù: identità e biografie da Eumeo a Frederick Douglass* (2020). Slavery was not just an institution, but also a fateful event in the lives of millions of people, many of whom had prior lives before enslavement as well as lives post-emancipation. The adoption of a biographical perspective has already made a major contribution to the study of Atlantic slavery; the 40 essays in this volume, ranging across time and space, have the potential to equally transform the study of ancient slavery, by emphasising the fact that slave status was only one element in the lives of enslaved persons, who also had experiences, identities and communities that were shaped by lives before, during and after enslavement.

A. Richlin's *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic: Plautus and Popular Comedy* (2017) is a pioneering contribution to the role of slave agency in the creation and development of ancient cultural practices. Many studies have already been devoted to the depiction of slaves and slavery in Roman comedy; working along similar lines to the biographical approach of the volume above, Richlin argues that Roman popular comedy was strongly linked to Roman imperial expansion in Italy and the

Mediterranean, leading to the captivity and enslavement of large numbers of people. The troupes of professionals who created and performed comedies in Latin included many individuals who had experienced captivity and enslavement at first hand, and the same applies to a significant proportion of the audience of these plays. Accordingly, Richlin re-examines these texts through the slavery-related experiences of performers and audiences; it is undoubtedly a perspective that can bear fruit in relation to many other texts, objects and practices of ancient societies.

R. MacLean's *Freed Slaves and Roman Imperial Culture: Social Integration and the Transformation of Values* (2018) focuses on the transformation of elite values through the contributions of freedpersons to public morals and discourse during the transition from the late Republic to the *de facto* monarchical rule of the early empire. As the emperors consolidated power, the evolving political and social structures of the Roman Empire elevated a significant number of freedpersons into positions of social and economic influence, opportunities scarcely attainable under the Republic. Emerging from the lowest legal stratum of Roman society, ex-slaves employed various survival and commemorative strategies to assert their social advancement in a world no longer dominated solely by ancestry, but also by obedience to order and industriousness – strategies also adopted by the senatorial elite in its new subservient role under the emperor. Consequently, freedpersons became agents of a culture of tactful obedience and social conformity, which was subsequently employed to reshape elite social values. MacLean further highlights that these developments influenced both contemporary Stoic philosophy and the teachings of the Early Church, whose emphasis on humility and moral slavery reflects the dominant discourse shaped by successful Roman freedpersons.

This book should be read alongside *Freed Persons in the Roman World: Status, Diversity, and Representation* (2024), edited by S. Bell, D. Borbonus and R. MacLean. The nine essays in this fascinating volume re-examine various aspects of the identities, agency and representations of diverse groups of freedpersons in the Roman world. Particularly important is the volume's emphasis on diversity, and the need to take into account the alternative identities that freedpersons constructed on the basis of kinship, work, cult and ethnicity. Other essays examine the various practices in which freedpersons were involved, from funerary commemoration through public service to euergetism. Equally important is the exploration of the extent to which the voices of freedpersons can be reconstructed on the basis of ancient texts like the letters of Cicero or a novel like the *Ephesiaka*.

B. Amiri's *Religion romaine et esclavage au Haut-Empire: Rome, Latium et Campanie* (2021) is a significant contribution to the study of the religious agency of enslaved and freed persons in the Roman world. Amiri explores the constitutive role of enslaved persons in the religious practices of the Romans, both in the institutions and colleges of public religion as well as in the religious practices of key social building blocks, such as that of the *domus* and the *familia*. At the same time, Amiri examines the religious communities that enslaved and freed persons created and participated in, as well as the religious epigraphic habit expressed in their dedications and epitaphs. The study raises important questions concerning the religious autonomy of enslaved and freed persons; the focus of this study on the important, but rather unusual areas of Rome, Latium and Campania naturally invites the production of similar studies for other areas of Roman Italy and the Roman Empire.

P. Morton's *Slavery and Rebellion in Second-Century BC Sicily: From Bellum Servile to Sicilia Capta* (2023) investigates the two great Sicilian revolts of 136–132 and 104–100 BCE. Morton's central thesis argues that the narratives of these conflicts were constructed from the perspective of the slave-owning class, employing a framework that erases the

self-definition of the rebels. Morton analyses the ancient narrative sources and illustrates how they were shaped by servile stereotypes whose historical veracity should be challenged; equally important is his exploration of the wide range of events characterised by ancient authors as slave wars and of the rhetorical purposes such descriptions serve. Through a comparative approach Morton contends that labelling these uprisings as slave rebellions primarily served to discredit and to denigrate the rebels. His key conclusion is that neither conflict should be regarded purely as a slave war; instead, they were large-scale provincial rebellions in which revolting slaves sought to win support, particularly from the most disaffected among the free poor. This monograph provides a refreshing perspective on the Sicilian revolts, and Morton's characterisation of these conflicts as provincial rebellions is likely to provoke substantial debate.

D. Kamen and C.W. Marshall have edited a collective volume on *Slavery and Sexuality in Classical Antiquity* (2021). Illustrating the expansion of interest beyond the strictly economic role of slaves, this work combines two fields – slavery and sexuality – that have rarely been examined together systematically. The thirteen chapters range extensively, from the Homeric world through classical Greece to the Roman Empire; equally valuable is the diversity of genres and sources, with a particularly laudable effort to take the archaeological evidence seriously. The volume shows also an excellent balance between the sexual domination and exploitation of slaves through practices like rape and prostitution on the one hand, and the significance of the sexual agency of slaves, both in relation to other slaves as well as with their masters and with free third parties beyond their masters. This volume provides fresh perspectives on how enslaved individuals' sexuality is represented in different contexts, bringing attention to the highly complex and contradictory ways in which slavery and sexuality were entangled in ancient societies.

We can conclude this survey with *Ubi servi erant? Die Ikonographie von Sklaven und Freigelassenen in der römischen Kunst* (2019), edited by A. Binsfeld and M. Ghetta. While most research on ancient slavery focuses on written evidence, this volume offers a systematic exploration of the archaeological evidence for studying the pictorial representation and external appearance of Roman slaves. Its title reflects the complex challenge of identifying slaves in Roman iconography; this difficulty arises from the lack of a clearly defined artistic convention for depicting slaves. They were often portrayed either in a conventional manner or according to idealised iconographic styles dictated by their masters. In some instances, such as public slaves, they can be identified by distinctive features like a special belt. The volume's overall findings suggest that identifying slaves in Roman art is feasible, but only through careful contextualisation. This is due to the diverse roles slaves held in Roman society. Seneca the Younger's observation about a Senate proposal to require slaves to wear distinctive clothing underscores this issue; the proposal was rejected out of fear that slaves, realising their vast numbers, might rise in rebellion. This highlights the indistinguishability of slaves from the broader population, which itself speaks volumes about the role of slavery in Roman society. By systematically exploring both contextual and indirect evidence, this volume significantly enriches our understanding of the multidimensionality of Roman slavery and its representation in visual and material culture.

This survey illustrates the productivity and vitality of current work on ancient slaves and slavery; it is safe to predict that the field will be seriously transformed within the next few years. But the big challenge will be whether future works cannot only change the way in which we study ancient slavery, but, more importantly, change the way in which we study ancient history.

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