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Introduction

IN A STRIKING passage from Xenophon's *Anabasis*, set at the beginning of the fourth century BC, Xenophon goes to treat with Seuthes, a dispossessed Odrysian prince, with a small company from his mercenary army of ten thousand.¹ Seuthes was camped somewhere near Byzantium, in the neighborhood of the mountain Thracians known as Thynians, who were said to be the most warlike of men. Son of a deposed king, Seuthes had put himself at the head of a troop of horsemen, and lived with them by plundering his own ancestral land, and in particular the Thynians. The first objective he proposes to Xenophon is a raid on a set of villages, the king reserving for himself all of the people, whom he will sell as captives in order to pay the Greek soldiers. At dinner, Xenophon happily promises his aid in the venture, offering to seize "many horses, many men and beautiful women" as a gift for Seuthes. The next day they descend on a group of villages and capture one thousand people, two thousand cattle, and many smaller animals, burning the villages completely. Seuthes's man Heracleides is sent to Perinthus to sell the booty, thereby raising the money from the new slaves to pay Xenophon and his army. This account shows to what degree people were fungible in the ancient world, and just how easily they could be turned into cash.

The inhabitants of these Thracian villages had been going about their daily routines that morning; by the next day, they were being dragged to the coast to be sold into slavery abroad, as commodities rather than people. The consideration of this situation should fill a modern reader with disgust and horror: We generally acknowledge that slavery—in Noel Lenski's words, "the enduring, violent domination of natally alienated and inherently dishonored individuals (slaves) that are controlled by owners (masters) who are permitted in

1. Xen., *An.* 7.3.10–4.2.

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their social context to use and enjoy, sell and exchange, and abuse and destroy them as property”²—brings into sharp relief some of the worst and most shameful elements of human nature. At the same time, some form of socially sanctioned violent constraint imposed by some individuals on others has been observed in societies of all scales and organizations, from hunter-gatherer bands to empires, and in every period of human history in almost every part of the globe. Practices that can be defined as slavery continue today, from cyber-scam centers in Myanmar to fishing boats in the Pacific, construction projects on the Arabian Peninsula and trafficked women and girls forced into the sex trade in the Americas. This is clearly an element of human behavior that is too persistent to ignore, however loathsome we find it.

Slavery is not a monolithic phenomenon. Many forms of dominance and exploitation described under this heading take place at small scales, are not permanent, and are embedded in social systems that do not remove all identity or human connections from those in the role of “slave.” But because of the history of the Transatlantic slave trade, scholarly attention is usually focused on chattel slavery, which works at very large scales, usually over very long distances, and in specifically commercial rather than personal terms. The result of this process for enslaved people, as Orlando Patterson has shown, is their utter alienation—from their own families, from their region, and often from their language and their culture. Sale transforms the chattel slave from a subject to an object through a process Patterson calls “social death.” This idea matches closely with the opinion of ancient authors, who can state plainly, as the jurist Ulpian does, that “slavery is equated with death.”³ A master was substituted for kin, and fellow slaves for neighbors. Any afterlife in a pretend “family” did not alter the fact of that death. The terrifying depth of this process of dehumanization seems to recommend it, however, for the development and intensification of productive industries requiring large amounts of hard labor. This is familiar from the early modern history of the New World: Spanish colonial administrators, having found that indigenous people died too quickly in their new mines, began to import enslaved Africans, who were later pressed into service in the hell of the sugarcane plantations of the Caribbean or Brazil, and then in the commercial cotton, indigo, and tobacco monocultures of the English colonies of the American South.

2. Lenski 2018, 51.

3. Patterson 1982; Ulp. at *Dig.* 35.1.59.2; Bradley 1994, 26–28.

Both Northern and Southern writers of the antebellum period compared chattel slavery in the United States with Greek and Roman practices. But the most influential and systematic exploration of this similarity was provided by the ancient historian Moses Finley in the mid-twentieth century. Finley memorably pointed out that this uniquely awful system of chattel slavery was in fact relatively uncommon, and that the form of slavery practiced in the ancient Mediterranean, in both Greek and Roman contexts, was more similar to the recent New World institution than to other historical cases of enslavement. Finley distinguished widespread “societies with slaves,” in which human beings were held in various forms of bondage on a personal scale, from the very small number of “slave societies,” in which chattel slavery was an inextricable component of politics, economy, and culture.⁴ In “slave societies,” enslaved people were simply commodities, examined like livestock for defects while they stood naked on the block, paid for with cash or exchanged for goods, and considered property, no more nor less than cattle. Finley argued that it was that transformation of person into commodity that distinguished ancient slavery, together with that in the Americas, as something radically different from other forms of servitude or dependent labor. Unlike more archaic forms of exploitation, the type of slavery that characterized “slave societies” required developed markets, private ownership of land, and commodity production.⁵ “To become a commodity a product must be transferred to a buyer for whom it will serve as a use-value by means of an exchange,” as Marx put it in a very different context.⁶ It is the transfer and exchange that matter here, not the subjection: The transformation is not from one social state to another, but from a person into a unit of value. Moreover, in a “slave society” enslaved people are embedded in production at all levels. Not all developed, slave-using economies fit the description: In medieval Europe slaves were luxuries, engaged in domestic service, while the producers were in almost all cases peasants or serfs. Although Finley warned that the very different contexts of antiquity and modernity required a cautious approach to comparative historical research,⁷ the similarities between the

4. Finley 1998. For criticism of Finley’s distinction see most recently Joly and Knust 2024, with a convincing answer in Lewis 2024.

5. Finley 1980, 86. For a recent argument that Finley’s definition is far too Eurocentric, see Lenski 2018.

6. Marx and Engels 1971, 48.

7. Finley 1980, 127. A particular difficulty was that New World slavery existed within the context of a society based on free wage labor and industrialization. Caution in comparison is also urged by Kostas Vlassopoulos (2021), and Christopher Parmenter (2024a) highlights the

American and the classical systems are deeply rooted, for just these reasons: The enslaved were people turned into objects, their obvious humanity was rejected by the buyer, and their role in the economy was fundamental. However different the historical contexts, the comparisons are many, and illuminating.⁸

This book seeks to take advantage of such a comparative approach—not to “slave societies” in the Finleyan sense, like Athens and Rome, but to what we call “slaving states”: stratified, centralized political formations that develop on the supply side of chattel slavery, catalyzed by the economic and social opportunities afforded by the transformation of captives taken in war or raids into human commodities in demand in the distant markets of those “slave societies.” “Slaving states” emerge from smaller-scale, less stratified societies as those societies are reshaped by high-value imported goods acquired through the slave trade and deeply integrated into new structures of social, political, and economic life. The examples we have chosen—the Gauls, the Scythians, and the Garamantes—were all peripheral to the Mediterranean, and ideally placed to supply Mediterranean societies with enslaved labor. We will attempt to identify the similarities between societies based on slaving, and assess the effects of this activity on those societies. In doing so, we hope to fill a gap in the study of ancient slavery by closer investigation of the supply side of the Greek and Roman slave trade, a topic that has been nodded to but not fully explored in recent works on ancient Mediterranean slavery.⁹ We intend to answer in more detail questions about the process of human commodification: How did foreign slaves come into the societies of the ancient Mediterranean world? What happened in the process of transforming a person into an object, and what did that mean to those who carried out the transformation? How did the practice of slaving transform the slaving society?

The role of commodified individuals from foreign lands in ancient chattel slavery cannot be denied. For the Greeks, slaves were “bought barbarians,” as Yvon Garlan puts it.¹⁰ Although many slaves were captured in war by Greek

extent to which the modern construction of race influenced the way comparisons have been drawn between antiquity and modernity. Neither, however, suggests that comparison should be abandoned.

8. For a vigorous defense of the comparative method, see Marshall 2015.

9. For instance, Lewis 2018, 286f. on slaving zones; see also Vlassopoulos 2021, 79–90.

10. Garlan 1987, 15. The concept, if not the wording, is clear in the Greek sources. Euripides has a character refer to “a silver-bought (*argurônêtos*) Lydian or Phrygian” (*Alc.* 675–76), and the historian Theopompus of Chios is quoted in Athenaeus as saying that the Chians “possessed

armies, a substantial proportion were acquired from merchants. The Athenian list of goods confiscated after the sacrilegious mutilation of the herms in the fifth century BC includes forty-five slaves, almost all with barbarian names or ethnic designations.¹¹ Although Greek victors certainly made a habit of enslaving the vanquished, the majority of Greek wars were within Greece and against Greeks, rather than against barbarians; so the explanation for the predominance of the latter among slaves in Athens—always our best-documented Greek city—must lie in the fact that they were traded. Indeed, there was an explicit negative reaction to the enslavement of free Greeks, culminating in a law of 330 BC forbidding any Athenian and inhabitant of Athens “to buy a free person among the prisoners in order to enslave him.”¹² Garlan argues that war and piracy were far less important than trade, which was an “indispensable” element in their procurement.¹³ By trade, “barbarians” could be acquired without any cultural or social ties that would suggest that they were in some way like the owners. An enslaved person who spoke the owner’s own language and participated in their culture was harder to control, socially connected, and potentially embarrassing. An enslaved person who shared a language with other enslaved people in the household or the field could conspire to escape, so care was sometimes taken to mix slaves of different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds.¹⁴ Thus the social death experienced at the time of enslavement was perpetuated by the erasure of the slave’s identity in the new context. The desire to shield one’s own people from this sort of social death is easily comprehensible. Instead, being quintessentially “other,” barbarians made excellent objects. The existence of a source of potential slave labor beyond the bounds of a zone of shared culture, language, and social ties—and, ideally, separated from it by a body of water—was thus indispensable for systems of production dependent on such labor. The ideal-type of the newly enslaved had to pass over water in order to become invisible from, and inaccessible to, their own homes. Their social deaths took place by means of a

barbarian slaves (*barbarous . . . oiketas*), having paid for them (*timèn autôn kataballontes*)” (*FGrH* II 115 f122a).

11. Garlan 1987, 12; *IG* I³ 421–22, 426–27, 429.

12. [Plut.], *X orat.* 842A. That the free people mentioned here were citizens of Greek cities is strongly suggested by the clear distinction drawn in Greek thought between culturally and linguistically Greek people, who were naturally free, and barbarians, who were naturally slavish: Rosivach 1999; Hunt 2011.

13. Garlan 1987, 19.

14. Pl., *Leg.* 776b–c, 777b–78a; Varro, *Rust.* 1.17.5.

passage over water just as the souls of the physically dead passed over the river Styx.

The violent transformation of person into commodity is an uncomfortable subject in all respects. The consideration of slavery is itself deeply disturbing and difficult, especially for members of New World societies that practiced and benefited from chattel slavery and for those North Americans and Europeans who consider Greece and Rome to be the ultimate source of Western identity and thus worthy of reverence. In the past, reverence for Greece and Rome led some historians to minimize the role of slavery in those societies, or simply not to mention it; this tendency was exacerbated by the Cold War, when ideological issues relating to communist and capitalist worldviews were added to the mix. Once Stalin, in 1938, had confirmed the “slave mode of production” as the stage before feudalism in the historical dialectic, Soviet scholars were required to find evidence of pervasive chattel slavery in antiquity, while Western scholars were equally bound to reject it as a central force in historical developments.¹⁵ There is still a school of thought that does not want to deal with the fact that chattel slavery was at the root of Greek and Roman societies, tarnishing their image. Similarly, as we write, some voices in the United States have begun to call for textbooks and public-facing discussions of slavery to downplay its horrors and its role in the pre-Civil War U.S. economy, so that white students are not made to feel ashamed of the country’s past.¹⁶

The question of Greco-Roman chattel slavery has thus occasioned two hundred and fifty years of scholarship,¹⁷ a mountainous bibliography, and a curious reaction: denial. Not denial of the existence of the institution, but denial that we could, or should, give it much importance. It was argued that agricultural slavery was marginal in democratic Athens.¹⁸ This theory was characteristic of the school of West German historians of the 1950s, particularly those associated with the “Mainz project,” who in the wake of World War II, and in contrast to historical schools in communist Eastern Europe, tended to play

15. Nippel 2018, 199–200.

16. See, for example, the boundaries set for classroom discussion of slavery in Florida HB 7 (2022): <https://web.archive.org/web/20230216134241/https://www.flsenate.gov/Committees/BillSummaries/2022/html/2809>.

17. For the historiography of ancient slavery, see Finley and Shaw 1998, brought up to date by the introductory essay by Shaw.

18. Wood 1988, in the suggestively titled *Peasant-Citizen and Slave: The Foundations of Athenian Democracy*.

down the economic relevance of slavery while examining its social aspects, reconstructing as far as possible the lives of the slaves.¹⁹ Much was made of the Roman *familia* and the possibility of earning freedom within it. Slaves and slavery were the eggs that had to be broken in order to cook the omelette of Greek democracy and humanism. The Marxist analysis of slavery as an economic institution was regarded as aberrant. While the schools of Besançon in France, the Istituto Gramsci in Italy, and, of course, the Soviet Union itself concentrated on the economic aspects of slavery, these were largely ignored or denied in West Germany and the United States well into the 1980s.

Perhaps as a result of its association with Marxist historiography, the study of slavery is still less acceptable than, say, that of Roman sexuality, and slaves are often simply left out of the discourse. A recent paper showed a remarkably low Gini coefficient for wealth in Late Classical Greek society, and thus claimed a relative egalitarianism, ignoring the fact that as slaves had no wealth or legal standing they did not figure in the measurement.²⁰ Such denial is also visible in the refusal to find physical traces of slavery: Structures identified as slave barracks are dismissed because they could have been stables. Where the evidence is ambiguous, identifications of buildings as slave quarters are rejected.²¹ A recent critique of the identification of some Roman buildings as slave markets concluded, “Despite the evidence, which testifies to the existence of ancient slave markets, scrutinizing the archaeological record for purpose-built, clearly identifiable facilities for the slave trade is probably a wrong approach.”²² “Wrong” is not explained. Does it mean impossible, immoral, or disturbing?

19. See Bellen and Heinen 2001 for an overview of the history of the Mainz project, *Forschungen zur antiken Sklaverei*. For the denial in the 1950s of the value of the Mainz project, see particularly Finley and Shaw 1998, 58–62; for contrasting views and a re-evaluation of the Mainz project, see Heinen 2010 and the review by Nikolaus 2013.

20. de Callatay, forthcoming; Ober 2018.

21. Marzano 2007, 130–37. Michele George makes the same point about the rooms in the basement of the house of Aemilius Scaurus in Rome, where the explanation of a brothel has been preferred to that of slave quarters (2013, 389). See also Fracchia (2018), on the slave barracks at the imperial villa of Villa Magna. The positivistic lament that the legal status of individuals is never certain from their remains or material culture obscures the overwhelming probability that if a building looks like slave quarters (cramped, dark, and of limited access), it probably is.

22. Trümper 2009, 78.

The tide is clearly changing, however, as the impressive number of monographs and edited volumes on Greek and Roman slavery that have been published in the last fifteen years attest.²³ Rightly, such recent work has tried to recover slaves from their social death, restoring agency and identity, and reconstructing the rhythm of the lives of enslaved people alongside the social, economic, and psychological mechanisms that allowed Greek and Roman societies to normalize and justify their reliance on large numbers of people who were treated as objects. Despite this renewed interest in slavery, however, slaving itself has hardly been discussed, and when it is, it is framed as a minor detail in a larger picture. More often, the role of slaving and the commerce in the enslaved has simply been ignored, although one article specifically devoted to it perceives slavers as entrepreneurial actors working on the periphery of the classical world, following armies and transferring “captives taken in remote military campaigns to domestic households at home”²⁴—a formulation that simultaneously implies small-scale, opportunistic trade and gives the impression that the enslaved benefited by their transferal from chaotic and chilly peripheries to cozy domesticity in civilized Rome.²⁵ In a 2001 edited volume on Hellenistic economies there are only a handful of mentions of trade in slaves,²⁶ and while the massive importation of wine amphorae to the Scythian city at Elizavetovskoe at the mouth of the Don is mentioned in one contribution, no return cargo is suggested.²⁷ This is perhaps due in part to a reluctance to blame the residents of regions providing slaves to Greek and Roman centers for their own enslavement, and in part to the lack of evidence in areas where the literary and historical record is less informative. Some of the recent works on ancient slavery acknowledge that slaving should be considered more closely, but even in those cases the focus remains more on the Mediterranean consumer than on the dynamics of the slave-producing regions.²⁸ Although

23. To cite only a few, Heinen 2010; Bradley and Cartledge 2011; Harper 2011; Hodkinson et al. 2016; Bodel and Scheidel 2017; Lewis 2018; Vlassopoulos 2021.

24. J. C. Miller 2008, 99. Miller’s work *The Problem of Slavery as History* (2012) concentrates on slaving as a political strategy within a society, allowing marginal actors to improve their status. Alice Rio takes this up and develops it in *Slaving and the Funding of Elite Status in Early Medieval Europe* (2024).

25. A sentiment echoed by Florida governor Ron DeSantis: Sullivan and Rozsa 2023.

26. Archibald et al. 2001.

27. Gibbins 2001, 215.

28. David Lewis (2018, 84), for example, suggests that Greek demand for slaves might have had a ripple effect on Phrygia and Thrace, while Kostas Vlassopoulos (2021, 90) wonders if the same might have been true for Thrace and Scythia.

David Braund concludes that “however unpalatable the thought may be, there is not much room for doubt that the slave supply was a significant factor in driving the extended process of Greek colonial settlement,” few others would go so far.²⁹

Rare exceptions that approach these questions from outside the Classical viewpoint, on the other hand, emphasize the vast scale and local impacts of the supply of chattel slaves to Greek and Roman markets.³⁰ The use of enslaved people in production in parts of the ancient world, particularly in the production of wine, took place alongside other labor regimens, but in those places where wine-making was dominant—on Chios from the sixth century BC onwards or in Central Tyrrhenian Italy in the late Republican period—it led to a need for a regular supply of slaves.³¹ Though modern work stresses other sources of slaves—prisoners of war, breeding, the exposure of infants, the sale of children, or the indigent selling themselves into slavery³²—we believe that supply from sources outside the classical world was more important than is generally assumed, especially at moments of the intensification of agriculture for export crops or of extractive industries like mining. And in contrast to the other forms of enslavement, it is understudied.

By contrast with classical scholars, historians of the Transatlantic slave trade have long been willing to recognize the scale of the traffic in enslaved people and, more recently, the material traces of their existence.³³ These facts are hard to ignore: In the period between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, the Middle Passage brought over twelve million humans to the Americas.³⁴ But here too, the study of the enslavement of Africans has traditionally begun with their purchase at the West African ports—the vast W.E.B. Du Bois database of cargoes and their conditions remains an

29. Braund 2010a, 123.

30. Taylor 2001.

31. On the question of the slave supply, see most recently Braund 2010a; Scheidel 2010. On the need for slaves in intensive wine production Horden and Purcell 2000, 215–20, 390–91.

32. Harris 1980; Bradley 1994, 31–56; Scheidel 1997; Harris 1999; Scheidel 2010.

33. Webster 2023. Public scholarship is also paying renewed attention to the history of slavery in North America, most notably in the New York Times’ *1619 Project* (Hannah-Jones et al. 2021)—although again not without provoking a reaction that downplays slavery’s role in U.S. history.

34. Curtin (1969) estimated 9.5 million; the estimate in the W.E.B. Du Bois database is now over twelve million: <https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>, accessed July 2024.

extraordinary resource³⁵—and then moved on to their sale in the Americas, the conditions under which they lived on the plantations, and the abolitionist movement. Only recently has attention turned to the history of slavery and slaving in Africa itself. Marxist anthropologists such as Claude Meillassoux have contributed theoretical studies, complemented by those of Suzanne Miers and her collaborators.³⁶ Straightforward historical research, based on the writings of early travelers, merchants, and missionaries, has gone forward apace.³⁷ Scholars such as Paul Lovejoy, Thomas McCaskie, and Robin Law have sought to describe the historical context of the trade within Africa: the forms and effects of slaving, the economics of the trade, and the dynamics of their effects both on the groups playing the role of the slavers and on their victims.³⁸ This extensive body of work throws light on a new aspect of African slavery, the rise of slaving states—those societies where the principal economic activity consisted in the capture, by warfare or other means, of neighboring people, and the transformation of those people into commodities for sale. The African studies thus give us a wealth of detail as to how the slave trade worked, who carried it out, what the slavers got out of it, and how it transformed them, their societies, and the communities and polities around them.

These studies provide models of how slaving changed society that seem applicable to the periphery of the classical world. The slaving zones of West Africa and of antiquity have much in common, and their similarities seem rooted in structures created by the activity of slaving itself rather than the specific historical context in which it took place. The use of a model for the development and operation of slaving states in early modern West Africa to help us understand the polities at the margins of the classical world thus seems justified by evidence for similar structural changes, both economic and social.³⁹ Further, for archaeologists, it is clear that many of the processes described in the model for a slaving state leave traces in the material culture of such states: their settlement patterns, their imports, and their social structure as revealed by buildings and by tombs and their contents. Evidence for similar

35. <https://www.slavevoyages.org/>.

36. Miers and Kopytoff 1977; Meillassoux 1986; Miers and Roberts 1988.

37. Smallwood 2007; Sparks 2014.

38. Law 1989a, 1991, 1992a; McCaskie 1995; Law 2004; Lovejoy 2012.

39. We are not the only ones to have recognized the value of such a comparison in recent years: See, for example, Harrison 2019; Scheidel 2023a; Nebelsick 2024; Iancu 2025.

material traces varies in kind and quantity depending on the context, but in all the examples discussed here consistent patterns are visible. For all the reluctance of classical archaeologists to engage in this kind of comparative study, the parallels here are clear enough to make this a test case.⁴⁰ We have no desire to reduce this evidence to a “universal, monolithic core”;⁴¹ rather, we want to explore the similarities and variations in the origins and processes of large-scale slaving.

Above all, the study of the West African trade allows us to perceive the social aspects of the slaving process, along with its economic side. A similar progression has taken place in the study of ancient slavery. While Finley made a general distinction between the study of ancient slavery from a humanistic point of view and the attention of the various Marxist schools to its economic consequences, more recent historiography has taken on the complex social reality of slave life, of the bodies of the enslaved and their representation, and of the relationships between the enslaved and the free.⁴² Along with its place in the economies of the ancient world, slavery has finally been approached as a social institution, embedded in classical society. In the peripheral areas outside the classical world the picture is far less clear, so the anthropology of the capture, “sacrifice,” and transformation through commodification of future slaves in Africa, as well as the individual slave memoirs of their capture, sale, and transport, provide examples of how such systems work that help us to reconstruct these transformations in places where classical authors barely ever went, and imagine experiences they were not interested in recounting—in Gaul, the Pontic steppe, or the deep Sahara.

To come back to our starting-point: Few subjects are more disturbing than slavery. The subjection of another human being, not only as dependent labor but as a commodity that could be legally rented, sold, beaten, raped, tortured, or executed by their owner, is repellent. It is entirely understandable that reconstructions of patterns of slaving in African states have met with resistance: Critics have argued variously that the slave trade was economically marginal for Africa, that there was never any African slavery before European involvement, or that slaves were so common that no transformation occurred.⁴³ To

40. For this reluctance, particularly in the case of ancient slavery, Webster 2008.

41. Marshall 2015, 2.

42. E.g., Bradley 1994; George 2013; Joshel and Petersen 2014.

43. For the first position, e.g., Eltis 1987; for the second, Rodney 1966; Inikori 1996; for the third, Thornton 1998.

focus on the role of local groups in the supply of slaves to consumers in slave societies can seem like blaming the victim for the crime; to focus exclusively on the role of European slave-traders neglects the agency and experience of African communities. Questions of blame and agency are already visible in the eighteenth-century account of Ludewig Rømer, a Danish commercial agent, of his time on the Gold Coast: He imagines local elders telling white merchants that they “have brought all the evil among us. Indeed, would we have sold one another if you, as purchasers, had not come to us? The desire we have for your fascinating goods and your brandy, bring it to pass that one brother cannot trust the other, nor one friend another.” Rømer summarily rejects this argument, on the grounds that the local societies were already in frequent conflict with each other, and European traders just took advantage of local circumstances; in fact, he opines, captives were better off being sold into slavery across the ocean than being killed by their conquerors at home.⁴⁴

In the face of such rationalizations, it is no wonder that modern African nations and scholars of slavery alike have hesitated to dwell on the dynamics of slaving in Africa itself.⁴⁵ Similar tensions exist between the way European nations want to perceive their ancestors and the way those ancestors might have behaved. Thus the question of Gaulish slaving has recently been debated in France and roundly rejected as nothing more than an incidental activity on the part of the tribes.⁴⁶ Agency is now commonly used as a way of analyzing subaltern societies in the ancient Mediterranean, but there is an understandable reluctance to perceive that agency in a negative light. Just as the descendants of enslaved people in the Americas might be reluctant to examine the role of African communities in the slave trade, those for whom Gauls, Scythians, or Garamantes figure as potent mythological ancestors, fundamental to the social identity of their territories, may not be delighted at their portrayal as slavers.

We begin, therefore, by acknowledging the fundamental responsibility of the Greek and Roman societies of the Mediterranean for the perpetuation

44. Rømer 2000 [1760], 35.

45. An excellent account of these issues as they play out in modern Ghana is provided by Holsey 2008.

46. Most recently Poux (2011, 109), who believes that Poseidonius’s account exaggerates the importance of the slave trade, and that it was only one component of a larger trade involving, for instance, furs and leather. Tsatskheladze (2008) makes a similar case regarding the Pontic cultures, rejecting the notion of a major trade in slaves from the northern Black Sea.

of chattel slavery in the ancient world. Without the Greek and Roman demand for enslaved people, the human suffering represented by the trade in bodies from the periphery would not have been as acute. At the same time, we insist that local contexts deserve to be investigated in their own right, not just from the Greek and Roman perspective, and that this investigation should follow where the evidence leads, even if the results are challenging. As descendants of slave-owning families in the American South, with ancestors on both sides of the Civil War, we also recognize the extent to which our own social and economic privileges have been shaped by the misery of enslaved people in the distant and more recent past. Many American family histories are inextricably tied up with this “peculiar institution,” no more or less than were those of democratic Athens or Republican Rome. Finley wrote that “slavery cannot be abstracted from its context”:⁴⁷ Conversely, neither the modern European and American nor the ancient context can be abstracted from slavery. The lasting benefits we derive from antiquity, from the Parthenon to the poetry of Vergil, are products of the exploitation of millions of enslaved people, as are the benefits derived from economic development in Europe and the Americas between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ferdinando di Giocondo, who commissioned the portrait of his wife known as the Mona Lisa, was a slave trader, while in Britain, Prime Minister William E. Gladstone’s father owed his fortune to slave-worked sugar plantations in the West Indies.⁴⁸ Enslaved laborers helped to construct the U.S. Capitol building and the White House, and served as both labor and capital for institutions like the University of Virginia.⁴⁹ In short, enslaved people built the modern Atlantic world, and they built the ancient Mediterranean world.

It is precisely because of the fundamental importance of enslaved people to the ancient Mediterranean world that we must look more closely at the systems that transformed human beings into commercial objects. The goal of this book is to remedy the absence of consideration of these systems in current scholarship on ancient slavery. Our work is necessarily situated within a tradition of Marxist historiography, in its debt to Karl Polanyi’s delineation of modes of economic exchange (and work on Dahomey), the core-periphery relationships in Immanuel Wallerstein’s “world-systems analysis,” and the exploration of slavery in the work of the Marxist anthropologists and

47. Finley and Shaw 1998, 133.

48. Fletcher 2020, 78.

49. McInnis and Nelson 2019; Harrison 2021.

archaeologists mentioned above. Like Marxist historians, we are interested in surplus extraction and relationships of exploitation, which must be central in any discussion of slavery, and in structural economic features that reappear across slaving societies. We set ourselves in conscious contrast to both the micro-histories of slave experience and the collective rationalism of New Institutional Economics that characterize a number of current approaches to the topic.⁵⁰ At the same time, we are seeking to move beyond the historiographical battles of the twentieth century that continue to constrain discussions of slavery in antiquity. We are not interested in questions of class conflict, nor—apart from establishing in chapter 1 the large-scale demand for enslaved labor in the Greek and Roman Mediterranean—do we focus on the relationship between an extractive core and an exploited periphery. In this book, areas “peripheral” to the Greek and Roman world are in fact the “core” zones for our analysis. Rather than seeking a macro-scale explanatory model that can be generalized to all human societies, or recounting the particularities of individual lives as microhistories, we attempt to understand the outlines of similar systems related to slaving as they are manifested in specific places and times.⁵¹

This is, of course, a comparative approach, and while Marx saw universal structures in human history that could be best illuminated by comparison, post-war historiography tended to reject the usefulness of comparative studies altogether. In spite of Orlando Patterson’s work, such studies were rare in the last century, and specifically rejected by Moses Finley and others.⁵² There were honorable exceptions: thus Andrea Carandini’s 1984 essay on the slave barracks at Monticello and other U.S. plantations provided an excellent comparison to the slave quarters of the villa he excavated at Settefinestre, and Keith Bradley has always made extensive use of comparison with the Americas, arguing for universal characteristics in the institution of slavery.⁵³ The tide is

50. For cogent discussions of approaches to slavery in the ancient world with respect to Marxist scholarship and its alternatives, see Vlassopoulos 2018; Roskams 2023.

51. Our approach is perhaps closest to the “novel metanarrative,” processual in perspective but attentive to historical *conjunctures*, that Vlassopoulos has recently proposed as a way forward for slavery studies. He advocates for a focus on the transformation of small-scale egalitarian communities into large-scale hierarchical societies and on the activity of slaving and its “entanglement [with] warfare, markets, lifeways, empire-building, community construction, and religion” (2018, 227–28).

52. Finley 1980; Schiavone 1989, 49. On this avoidance see Terrenato 2005, 61; Webster 2008; Vlassopoulos 2018, 228.

53. Carandini and Ricci 1985a, 188–89; Bradley 1994.

changing, however, and such approaches are no longer exceptional. In fact, our use of comparative material from Africa to study slave-making in the classical world follows a recent trend in which comparative studies of ancient slavery have re-emerged as legitimate tools. A series of conferences, particularly those organized by Constantina Katsari and Enrico Dal Lago at Leicester, have brought further acceptance of the comparison between slavery in the classical world and that in the Americas, as have a host of works on global slavery.⁵⁴ Walter Scheidel, in particular, has examined the comparative economics of the two systems.⁵⁵ A conference organized by Catherine Cameron and Noel Lenski has vastly expanded the range of slave societies outside those cited by Finley, all of which were Western.⁵⁶ The Cambridge *World History of Slavery* has, for all periods, contributed fundamental new studies.⁵⁷

Our method is thus, in the first place, analogical. It hardly seems necessary to defend the *use* of analogy in this case: Recent condemnations of analogy in ancient historiography have concentrated on the analogies chosen in a given context—British imperialism of the late nineteenth century as an adequate analogy for Roman imperialism, for example.⁵⁸ But, as Marcel Detienne has pointed out in a long essay on the comparative method,⁵⁹ comparison is a necessary corollary to history, in which we want to establish not only what happened but how what happened fits into a system, and how similar that system is to systems found elsewhere. The foundation of a new town, to take an example from Detienne, involves a set of people, of gestures, of acts, of objects in Greece, in India, and in Burkina Faso. How do they relate to one another? What is the interplay between the acts and the objects that are used, and how possible is it to deduce one from the other? What are the material traces that they leave behind to be eventually interpreted by archaeologists? Not surprisingly, the rare authors who have attempted a comparative approach to the history of the ancient Mediterranean have generally come from

54. Dal Lago and Katsari 2008; Zeuske 2012; Fynn-Paul and Pargas 2018; Pargas and Schiel 2023. We may note that renewed interest in comparative approaches has even led scholars such as David Graeber (2006) to seek to understand modern capitalist systems through their comparison with slavery.

55. Scheidel 2005, 2023a.

56. Lenski and Cameron 2018.

57. For the ancient world, Bradley and Cartledge 2011.

58. See, e.g., Owen 2005. For a more nuanced approach, see Dietler 2010, 27–53.

59. Detienne 2000.

anthropological backgrounds,⁶⁰ although a recent project by an ancient historian has undertaken to compare the Roman Empire with that of the Han dynasty.⁶¹ Comparison is enshrined in our language, in the metaphors that are at its base. The question remains whether a metaphor is apt, whether we are comparing African apples with Mediterranean oranges. Either it will prove convincing to the reader or it will not. In this book we are unashamedly resorting to analogy, indispensable for model-building and the observation and understanding of patterns.⁶²

In the second place, our method is archaeological. Archaeology has been set to the side by many historians of ancient slavery. Walter Scheidel, for example, explicitly rejects the usefulness of archaeology in the comparative study of ancient and modern slaving systems.⁶³ But the material record is gradually growing more important: Jane Webster, among others, has written extensively on the comparative archaeologies of slave societies.⁶⁴ And it is fundamental in areas where the textual sources fail us. As Ian Morris points out, slaves are invisible because we have failed to look for them, just as at a casual glance slave-raiders “look” archaeologically just like conventional warrior societies.⁶⁵ This essentially static picture of the “barbarian” peoples outside the classical world has, of course, been challenged, and stood on its head, most notably by Barry Cunliffe, to whose work we are much indebted.⁶⁶

In employing a comparative archaeological approach to slaving states in the ancient world, we have chosen to focus specifically on regions where, as in the kingdom of Dahomey, human beings were the most valuable and most abundant commodity that could be traded for imported goods. We have also limited our exploration to places where we have consistent evidence for a high volume of trade in goods from the Mediterranean, especially products like wine that leave material traces such as the amphorae in which they were transported. Finally, we have chosen to direct our attention to areas separated by space and sea from Greek and Roman centers, as West Africa was from both

60. Sally Humphries and Marshall Sahlins are obvious examples. Michael Dietler’s work on Southern Gaul (2005, 2010) has been especially influential in this research.

61. Scheidel 2009, 2015, 2017, 2023b.

62. Wylie 2002, 136–42.

63. Scheidel 2003, 581.

64. Webster 2005, 2008, 2010, 2023.

65. Morris 2011.

66. E.g., Cunliffe 1988, 2019. The debt extends further, to his supervision of Fentress’s doctoral thesis on a very different subject.

Europe and the New World, where the emergence of trade connections can be observed *de novo* rather than in the context of a millennium-long history of direct interaction; and to areas that were not part of existing state-level systems or empires when this long-distance trade appeared. These are places where we might develop an understanding of the direct effects of slaving on small-scale societies without the confounding entanglements presented by pre-existing administrative institutions. These considerations ruled out two of the areas most discussed in terms of provision of slaves to the Greek world: Thrace, with its contiguity with the Greek homeland, its social connections with the Aegean dating back to the Bronze Age, its early royal dynasties, and its substantial deposits of gold, silver, and copper; and Anatolia, under the control of imperial powers from the eighth century BC onward and endowed with extensive resources for trade, from gold to marble to agricultural products. For the same reasons, we have chosen not to consider the flow of enslaved people to Rome from the Near East, from the Aegean, or even from Italy, where the volume of enslavement in the Republic has led Scheidel to argue that Rome itself arose as a slaving state.⁶⁷ Our choices thus provide opportunities to illuminate local dynamics through archaeological evidence and a comparative model, without the overdetermination that extensive historical records can impose. Not coincidentally, these choices also leave us with three case-studies that match the three great “barbarian” peripheries of the ancient Mediterranean, half-glimpsed through cold fog or shifting sands: the European far west of the war-like Gauls, the Pontic far north of the Scythian nomads, and the sun-scorched African south of the chariot-riding Garamantes.

Our premise is that slavery transforms the society that supplies enslaved people as much as the society that uses them. These changes, based on violence and the commodification and exploitation of human beings, are difficult to reverse, even after the slave trade has fallen off. We therefore use the West African model of Dahomey, where changes related to slaving are well documented in both the historical and archaeological records, to consider case-studies of Gaul, Scythia (loosely, the north and northwest Pontic steppe and forest-steppe), and the Fezzan. In each of these examples we seek to identify evidence for, first, an expansion in trade and production that might be related to the traffic in human beings in the area; second, a change in the settlement patterns of the area and neighboring regions; and third, signs of state formation that might be associated with the intensification of slave-making and the

67. Scheidel 2023a, 97.

resulting accumulation of wealth among the most active slaving groups. We will also consider the developmental arcs of these emerging slaving states as they respond to shifting markets and changing political situations.

In the use of “slaving states” as our central analytical category and as the title of this book, and in our repeated references to “states” and “state formation,” we enter another academic minefield. Discussions of the organization of societies, and their transitions from one mode of organization to another, have increasingly called into question both linear, “evolutionary” development and the notion of clearly defined entities like “tribes,” “chiefdoms,” and “states.”⁶⁸ While state formation was a central concern of anthropologists and prehistorians alike between the 1960s and the 1990s, some scholars think the question should now be retired. As Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber write:

Surely we have learned all there is to learn from the endless theorizing on “the origins of the state” or “the process of state formation” that so dominated theoretical debates of the twentieth century. In retrospect, we may discover that “the state” that consumed so much of our attention never existed at all, or was, at best, a fortuitous confluence of elements of entirely heterogeneous origins (sovereignty, administration, a competitive political field, etc.) that came together in certain times and places but that, nowadays, are very much in the process of once again drifting apart.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, there is an extensive body of thought on states and state formation that extends to the classical world and that we cannot simply ignore,⁷⁰ especially since we are interested in exploring signs of state formation in slave-supplying areas in response to moments of rising demand for enslaved labor in the Mediterranean. Rather than attempting yet again to define the term “state,” we will therefore be looking for some of its ideal type-characteristics: a defined and relatively expansive territory with a permanent population; central places where social, political, and economic activities are focused; the centralization of power over a large number of people in the hands of a restricted group who organize and direct mass activities like military expeditions

68. Yoffee 1993, 2019. For a less scholarly but more lively and provocative take on the issue, see Graeber and Wengrow 2021.

69. Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 21–22.

70. As just a sampling over the last forty years or so, see Cohen and Service 1978; Cherry 1986; Kristiansen 1991; Laffineur and Niemeier 1994; Flannery 1999; Johnson and Earle 2000; Terrenato and Haggis 2011; Mattingly and Sterry 2020; Moreno García 2022.

or construction projects; the centralized coordination of relations with other polities; the emergence of social stratification manifested in conspicuous consumption of luxury goods; and evidence for rules or social norms shared by the population and contributing to a sense of shared identity. “State formation” is then reflected by the traces of some combination of these attributes.

Through our application of a comparison with Dahomey and the archaeological exploration of three “slaving states” that supplied enslaved labor to Greek and Roman centers, we hope to accomplish several goals. First, we intend to demonstrate that the combination of comparative study and archaeological evidence, when done with care, can in fact create a generalizable model for the dynamic effects of large-scale slave trade on the regions from which enslaved people are taken, applicable across different places and times. Second, using this model, we seek to better explain the feedback loop—noted in passing by other scholars but not yet explored in detail—between the intensification of certain kinds of labor-hungry productive activities in the Mediterranean and the expansion of the slave trade in its surrounding regions. A convincing picture of this relationship may also shed new light on unresolved disputes about the origins of Greek and Roman slaves. Third, we will try to connect the emergence of slaving states both to existing social practices in specific communities (the close association of social status with skill in violent conflict, for example) and to the incorporation of foreign trade goods into local symbolic systems to the extent that they become necessary for the expression and retention of social status. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we will attempt to understand the rituals, beliefs, and attitudes involved in first-hand participation in the act of making a person into a thing; that is, the moment of commodification, a moment that persists, as Igor Kopytoff writes, “only during the relatively short period between capture or first sale and the acquisition of the new social identity” that comes with re-inscription into a new society.⁷¹ In this last attempt, we will pay particular attention to the deployment of spectacular violence and the literal transformation of captives into things, in Simone Weil’s sense⁷²—corpses, dismembered body parts, decorative displays of flesh and bone—as a corollary to the process of human commodification in slaving states.

Intrinsic to our analysis will be the element of violence in these societies, as violence lies at the heart of the phenomenon we are investigating. An

71. Kopytoff 1986, 65.

72. Weil 1940, 561.

undercurrent of potential violence always ran through the life of the enslaved, but the process of capture—whether in a pitched battle, in a war made by a slaving state on its neighbors, or in a raid or a kidnapping—was violent by definition. Raids could be carried out by pirates within the Mediterranean or the Black Sea, by small groups of marauders, or by larger bands of warriors. This violence is difficult to accept within the borders of a state or an empire unless it is at war, and by its very nature uncontrolled violence within the state must be quashed or expelled: The state, as Max Weber pointed out, must have a monopoly on violence. The suppression of uncontrolled violence in central areas thus shifts the potential for violence to the periphery, and the peripheral lands in which what we will call slaving states were found inevitably included areas where violence was endemic.⁷³ We must also therefore consider visible violence against outsiders as a special element of a slaving state, the appearance or intensification of which we can include among signs of state formation in this context.⁷⁴ The notion of the “outsider” requires some further clarification. Although the foreignness of the enslaved was more or less indispensable for the slave society, the boundaries of foreignness could be shifted. For example, the incorporation into the Greek and Roman world of territories that had formerly been sources of slaves pushed the barbarian frontiers ever further away, turning “slaving zones” into “non-slaving zones.”⁷⁵

This book derives, rather distantly, from the Miriam Balmuth Lectures that Elizabeth Fentress gave at Tufts University in 2009. These were devoted to ancient trade in general, but the last one concentrated on the ancient slave trade as a whole, and in preparing it she ran across the extraordinary thesis of Matthieu Poux, which dealt with the numerous sites in Gaul on which Roman amphorae were found, the nature of the deposits, and their relationship to the texts on Gallic feasts and sacrifices.⁷⁶ Although Poux himself tends to reject the direct linkage between the slave trade and the amphora sites, André

73. Scott 2009.

74. An emphasis on the central role of violence in the origins of slaving states aligns our account, to some extent, with an interest in violence as a prime mover for state formation in processual archaeology, although we make no claims about the global applicability of our very specific case: See Carniero 1970; Wright 1986; Carniero 1992; Flannery 1999.

75. Fynn-Paul 2009, 4. Jeff Fynn-Paul demonstrates the way in which religion created such shifting exclusion zones for enslavement in the later Mediterranean: Christians were forbidden to enslave Christians, or Muslims to enslave Muslims, although the question could be blurred in the case of recognizably different people like Slavs or sub-Saharan Africans (2009, 22–24).

76. Poux 2004.

Tchernia, who made an early statement of the position that the Roman amphorae represented the visible part of the vast Gallo-Roman slave trade, had no such inhibitions, and has restated his case in a compelling article.⁷⁷ Poux's work on feasting sites was illuminated by Michael Dietler's anthropological study of feasting in Gaul and in Africa.⁷⁸ The work of these three scholars convinced Fentress that the subject was worth pursuing elsewhere, and she embarked on the study knowing fully well the limits of her own knowledge and the vastness of the material. A term as Visiting Fellow of All Souls College, itself a beneficiary of the African slave trade, was spent in the Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies, then in Rhodes House, gaining familiarity with the modern literature on West Africa: This is the source of the model based on Dahomey presented in chapter 2. Chapter 3 synthesizes and presents the ideas of Poux, Tchernia, Dietler, and others on Gaul, showing its relevance to that model: It is the first of the ancient examples because it fits the model so perfectly. The search for other slaving societies led initially to Thrace in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, the period of the formation of the Odrysian kingdom, but the long historical entanglement of the Thracians with the Aegean and their substantial mineral resources made them a difficult match for the model for the reasons described above. When Adam Rabinowitz joined the project, he concentrated attention on the Scythians of the North Pontic steppe from the sixth to the fourth century BC, who fit the model more closely. He brought his knowledge of the area and familiarity with Russian, Ukrainian, and Romanian scholarship to bear in chapter 4, and proposed the addition of chapter 1, on the demand for enslaved labor in Greece and Rome. The fifth chapter, on the Sahara and the Garamantes of the Fezzan, was initially developed by Fentress for a seminar on African trade at the British Museum; it has been expanded here, with the museum's kind permission. The investigation of Saharan trade led to some surprising conclusions, based largely on the abundant iconographic evidence in the form of statues of African boys. This trade would eventually merge into the medieval trans-Saharan trade in West African slaves with which the book begins and ends.

A few final notes on our choices of terminology and transliteration, which, at the time of publication, are not neutral decisions on either side of the Atlantic. In the United States in recent decades, the usages "enslaved people" and "enslavers" have become preferred to "slaves" and "slave owners," because the

77. Tchernia 2009.

78. Dietler 2001, 2005.

latter terms suggest that a person has actually *become* a thing that can be owned. “Enslaved person,” on the other hand, emphasizes the persistent humanity and agency of the individual involved and the violent imposition of a social status, rather than an identity. While we understand the reasons for that choice, it is particularly difficult for us to be consistent, in that we are distinguishing between those who actively enslaved other people, by war and raiding, whom we call “slavers”; the process by which a person is commodified, which we call “slaving”; and the buyers at the other end of the journey, who exploit the labor of the enslaved and are called by us “slave owners.” We generally choose to use the term “enslaved person,” but are occasionally constrained by sense or style to use “slave.” In this book, both terms are used exclusively to refer to chattel slaves, treated as commodities for trade into societies in which a market for people exists.

On a more technical level, we have Romanized all bibliographic references for works published using the Cyrillic alphabet; we have used a modified version of the BGN/PCGN 1947 standard to render Russian and the BGN/PCGN 2019 standard for Ukrainian.⁷⁹ Where the same authors also published in a language with a Latin alphabet, we have retained whatever transliteration system was used in the original publication (so K. K. Marčenko and K. K. Marchenko are the same person, with the latter form transliterated by us). For the modern places mentioned in chapters 1 and 4 that fall within the territory of Ukraine, including rivers, we have used the Ukrainian place name (so Dni-pro, not Dnieper; Buh, not Bug; Kyiv, not Kiev). For archaeological sites in Ukraine, the situation is a little more complicated, since the literature on many of these sites was produced in Russian in the twentieth or early twenty-first century, and the Russian toponyms are easier to look up. For these sites, we have preferred the Ukrainian place name where there is recent literature in Ukrainian (so Trakhtemyriv, not Trakhtemirov; Nemyrivske, not Nemirovskoe; Bilsk, not Belsk). Where the sources are mainly in Russian or the site is in Russian territory, we have retained the Russian toponyms (Basovskoe, Knyshovskoe, Elizavetovskoe). Many of these toponyms are in fact adjectives that describe ancient settlements near modern towns: Thus, the site near the village of Nemyriv is called *Nemyrivske gorodishche* (“the Nemyriv site”). Customarily, however, the adjective alone can be used to refer to the place (so Nemyrivske, Elizavetovskoe, etc.), leaving out the word *gorodishche*.

79. UK Ministry of Defence, “Guidance: Romanization Systems,” <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/romanization-systems>. Last updated January 28, 2025.

For ancient place names, we have generally used the Latinized versions. In a few cases where tradition or unfamiliarity demands it, we have retained the Greek form—for example, the site of Chersonesos in Crimea, for which we have retained the spelling used by the Institute of Classical Archaeology in its publications. Ancient authors and works are abbreviated in the notes according to the abbreviations list of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, fourth edition, with minor modifications. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of ancient sources in this book are by the authors.

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