Haberdashers' School

Occasional Papers Series in the Humanities

Occasional Paper Number Sixty-Nine

The Economic Role and Legal Status of Slaves in Ancient Greece

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May 2024

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Abstract

This paper examines the institution of slavery in ancient Greece. It draws on recent discussions of the analytical distinction between 'slave societies' and 'societies with slaves', arguing that the major civilisations of eastern Mediterranean, including Greece and the societies of the ancient Near East, fell within the former category and not the latter. It takes issue with the assertions of influential scholars, including Eduard Meyer and Moses Finley, who denied that Greece and the ancient Mediterranean were 'slave societies' in the conventional sense, and sides with the more recent arguments of David Lewis and Kostas Vlassopoulos, who have pointed to the vital economic role that slaves played in ancient Greece and beyond.

In a famous passage from the Epistle to the Galatians (3.28), composed around AD 50 and addressed to the nascent Christian community in Galatia in Asia Minor, St Paul wrote:

> οὐκ ἔνι Ἰουδαῖος οὐδὲ Ἕλλην, οὐκ ἔνι δοῦλος οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερος, οὐκ ἔνι ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ: πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἷς ἐστὲ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.

> There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus. [my translation]

Paul's fiery and impassioned missive to the fledgling church in Galatia, located in what is today central Turkey, called for unity and reconciliation among Jewish and non-Jewish (or Gentile) elements in the Christian body, in the face of division and heresy. No matter what one's legal status – whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female – all had fallen short of perfection in the eyes of God; redemption through Christ did not discriminate among any of the social, religious, legal or racial categories recognised by the transient world. Paul presents three main polarities: one racial, one legal, and one a gender divide. Each of those stated polarities entails an opposing pair of conceptual categories. For Paul, slavery was not a relative but an absolute estate: to be a slave was as opposite from free as male was from female, or Jew from Gentile. In the new community of faith which Paul preached, even the starkest polarities were rendered invalid. By contrast, the social order which Paul associated with the world that was about to pass away was one in which slave and free were mutually exclusive categories.

The Epistle to the Galatians is not the only place in the New Testament to reference slavery either as a real legal and social condition or as a metaphor for a spiritual bondage. Jesus proclaimed deliverance for the captives (Luke 4.18), which could refer either to material captivity, such as unjust taxation (Luke 19.1-10; 20.19-26) or to spiritual servitude (Matt. 23.1-4; Mark 7.1-23). In the synoptic gospels, we find slavery used as a metaphorical concept: Jesus, for example, commanded his followers to become 'the least of all and servant of all' (πάντων ἔσχατος καὶ πάντων διάκονος) (Mark 9.35). Paul saw himself a 'slave of Jesus Christ' (δοῦλος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) (Romans 1.1; Philippians 1.1), who himself had assumed the form of a slave (μορφὴν δούλου λαβών) (Philippians 2.7). In imitation, Paul exhorted his addressees to become 'slaves of one another through love' (διὰ τῆς ἀγάπης δουλεύετε ἀλλήλοις) (Galatians 5.13).

Slavery in the New Testament can have a very real literal, as well as a figurative, sense. In one memorable passage from the Letter to the Ephesians (6.5-8), Paul wrote:

Οἱ δοῦλοι, ὑπακούετε τοῖς κατὰ σάρκα κυρίοις φόβου καὶ τρόμου ἐν ἁπλότητι τῆς καρδίας ὑμῶν ὡς τῷ χριστῷ, μὴ κατ' ὀφθαλμοδουλίαν ὡς ἀνθρωπάρεσκοι ἀλλ' ὡς δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ ποιοῦντες τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, ἐκ ψυχῆς μετ' εὐνοίας δουλεύοντες, ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρώποις, εἰδότες ὅτι ἕκαστος, ἐάν τι ποιήσῃ ἀγαθόν, τοῦτο κομίσεται παρὰ κυρίου, εἴτε δοῦλος εἴτε ἐλεύθερος.

Slaves, obey your masters bodily with fear and trembling in sincerity of your hearts, as you would Christ, not according to an outward appearance of slavery, like those who please humankind, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, serving them out of goodness of will, as you would serve the Lord and not humankind, knowing that whoever wants to perform a good deed will receive benefaction in kind from the Lord, whether slave or free. [my translation]

The address to slaves in Ephesians is echoed elsewhere by a wish that slaves 'be obedient to their masters in all matters, be of kindly disposition and not answer back to them (δούλους ἰδίοις δεσπόταις ὑποτάσσεσθαι ἐν πᾶσιν, εὐαρέστους εἶναι, μὴ ἀντιλέγοντας) (Tit. 2.9). Though some scholars (see *infra*) have argued that a sharp juridical distinction between slave and free was available only at the height of the Athenian and, later, the Roman empires, those assertions are belied by the evidence of Near Eastern documents which show that whilst those cultures could speak of slavery in a rather more nuanced, figurative way, as does the New Testament (written in Greek) at key places, they could also make the same sharp legal distinctions between slave and free which are more abundantly attested in the Athenian and Roman systems. The New Testament is, in fact, a good example of how a spectrum of meanings which attached to slavery could, in different contexts, be applied. At times, as at Ephesians 6.5-8, slavery is to be taken in a very real literal sense, but there are other places where, as a semantic category, the concept of slavery could entail a more metaphorical meaning that was less legally bound and more connected with an intellectual, emotional, or spiritual sense of servitude.

The references to literal, physical slavery reveal a more disquieting truth. The world which Jesus knew was one in which slavery was not only taken for granted but indeed accepted as morally normal. Over three centuries earlier, writing during the twilight decades of Athens' independence as a political entity, Aristotle had proclaimed in the first book of his eight-volumed theoretical treatise, the *Politics*, that slavery was a natural state (*Pol.* 1. 1254b16-21) and slaves existed in a relationship with their masters within the household (*oikos*) in a manner prescribed by natural law.[1] More striking is Paul's reluctance, three centuries after Aristotle, to condemn slavery as an institution or to issue a preachment against slavery as a social and moral abomination. Like the pagan philosopher Aristotle before him, Paul accepted slavery as a fact of life. This was true not only of Paul but of his fellow apostle, Peter, who instructed that slaves should be 'dutiful in all fear to their masters, not only to the good and well-disposed, but also to the harsh' (ὑποτασσόμενοι ἐν παντὶ φόβῳ τοῖς δεσπόταις, οὐ μόνον τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς καὶ ἐπιεικέσιν ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς σκολιοῖς) (1 Pet. 2.18). At face value, it is easy to read these utterances as part of a broader moral condonement of slavery, but they must be read in their proper context: Paul (and Peter) bade slaves to submit to their masters to imitate Christ's example. As Peter said, Christ endured the lash without retaliation; any who does not retaliate will be faultless in the eyes of God (εἰ ἀγαθοποιοῦντες καὶ πάσχοντες ὑπομενεῖτε, τοῦτο χάρις παρὰ θεῷ) (1 Pet. 2.20). The Gospel was no emancipatory tract, and though condemning him to death as a sop to the angry crowd, Pontius Pilate publicly acquitted Jesus of political insurrection. The early Christians viewed emancipation in terms of freedom less from physical than from

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[1] For further discussion of Aristotle on slavery, see J. Karbowski, 'Aristotle's Scientific Inquiry into Natural Slavery', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 51 (3) (2014), 331–353.

spiritual bondage; far from political revolution, they preached submission to earthly authorities.

This essay examines the presence of slavery in societies with which the early Christian Apostles were familiar. It begins with a survey of modern treatments of the problem since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and moves on to consider the theoretical distinction between slave societies and societies with slaves. The final section examines the practice of slavery in Archaic Greece (c. 800-500 BC), in Sparta, on Crete, and in Classical Athens (c. 479-323 BC).[2]

1. Ancient slavery in modern scholarship (c. AD 1750 – the present)

Writing in 1776, the year of the outbreak of the American War of Independence, the Scottish philosopher, economist, and moral theorist, Adam Smith, put forward in *The Wealth of Nations* a case against the main form of slavery about which he knew, the chattel slaves who worked the plantations in the Americas and the West Indies. Smith argued that apart from being a moral outrage, slavery made little economic sense because it could not draw upon the self-interest of the exploited. The slave societies of ancient Greece and Rome, he maintained, were economically impoverished because they relied on forced, rather than on voluntary, labour. Chapter 2 of Book 3, titled 'Of the discouragement of agriculture in the ancient state of Europe, after the fall of the Roman Empire', Smith famously wrote:

> In ancient Italy, how much the cultivation of corn degenerated, how unprofitable it became to the master when it fell under the management of slaves, is remarked by both Pliny and Columella. In the time of Aristotle it had not been much better in ancient Greece. Speaking of the ideal republic described in the laws of Plato, to maintain five thousand idle men (the number of warriors supposed necessary for its defence) together with their women and servants, would require, he says, a territory of boundless extent and fertility, like the plains of Babylon.[3]

As elsewhere when speaking of 'ancient Europe', Smith did not mean quite what we mean by 'Classical antiquity', which in our understanding refers to a period in Mediterranean history spanning from approximately 1000 BC (the early Iron Age) to

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[2] My knowledge of ancient slavery is best documented within the societies of ancient Greece and Rome; for further afield, most of what I say rests on the authority of specialists. With quotations in Greek, I provide my own translations; when citing documents in ancient languages other than Latin or Greek, I rely entirely on translations provided by experts. My discussion is indebted to two recent studies of slavery, both of surpassing quality: the first, by D.M. Lewis, *Greek Slave Systems in their Eastern Mediterranean Context, c. 800-146 BC*, Edinburgh, 2018; the second, by K. Vlassopoulos, *Historicising Ancient Slavery,* Edinburgh, 2021.

[3] A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, London, 1776. Adam Smith's opposition to slave labour was later often cited by Abolitionists and Radicals: one famous example is the radical MP Richard Cobden's address of 1844, during whose campaign against the Corn Laws he quoted Smith's objection to slavery as an institution; see further, J. Bright and J.E. Thorold Rogers (eds.), *Public Addresses*, London, 1879, Vol. 1, 92.

about AD 600 (the eve of Islam). For Smith and his late eighteenth-century readers, 'the ancient state of Europe' included that period which we habitually call the European Middle Ages. Unlike the societies of Greece and Rome, wherein slaves were the property of human masters, the slaves (or serfs) of medieval Europe were, in Smith's conception, the property of the land they worked. Though writing from a different theoretical standpoint from Karl Marx two generations later, who borrowed much of his understanding of the transition from a slave-owning to a feudal mode of production from the end of Classical antiquity to the early Middle Ages, Smith laid the seedbed for what later became canonical in Marxist theory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: namely, that whereas Greece, Rome, and the ancient Mediterranean world drew surplus production from the labour of slaves, the medieval societies that replaced them relied on land-bound serfs, an evolution of the *coloni portiarii* first attested in the fourth century AD.

Smith's critique of slavery was indebted to the theories of his contemporary countryman, David Hume, who in an essay published in 1752, titled 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations', claimed that the societies of Greece and Rome were both more and less servile in constitution than their modern successors: that, whilst democratic or republican in respect of the liberties granted to their free citizens, substantial sections of their disfranchised populations were enslaved; and that, whereas the peoples of eighteenth-century Europe mostly showed formal obeisance to a petty sovereign who, in main, did not deprive them of civil liberties, the grim spectre of chattel slavery had largely vanished, except of course in the Americas. Like Smith, Hume held that the chief source of wealth production in Classical antiquity was slave labour, and that this was broadly detrimental to the flourishing of ancient civilisations at the level both of human happiness and of their material and economic prosperity. Hume's essay was phrased as a defence of civilisation in his own day against its more radical detractors, who admired the free political institutions of Athens and Republican Rome, but who saw slavery as the collateral price for political freedom. In recent years, as in his own day, Hume has been censured for his racial views, but even his staunchest critics have adopted some of his censorious views of ancient slavery, principally to argue against its modern counterpart.[4]

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[4] D. Hume, 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations', republished in *Population and Development Review*, 3 (1977), 323-9. On Hume and his influence, see D. Charette, 'David Hume and the politics of slavery', at David Hume and the Politics of Slavery - Danielle Charette, 2023 (sagepub.com), 2023 (published online). For further discussion of ancient slavery and the Scottish Enlightenment, see D. Cairns, 'Slavery and the Roman law of evidence in eighteenth-century Scotland' in A. Burrows and Lord Rodger of Earlsferry (eds.), *Mapping the Law: Essays in Memory of Peter Birks*, Oxford, 2006, 599–618; 'The definition of slavery in eighteenth-century thinking: not the true Roman slavery' in J. Allain (ed.), *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary*, Oxford, 2012, 61–84; D. Harvey, '"The severity of the master, and misery of the slave": fears and evils in David Hume's essay Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations' in A. Serghidou (ed.)*, Fear of Slaves, Fear of Enslavement in the Ancient Mediterranean / Peur de l'esclave, peur de l'esclavage en Méditerranée ancienne (discours, représentations, pratiques)*, Besançon. 2007, 347–60; C. Grieshaber, *Frühe Abolitionisten: die Rezeption der antiken Sklaverei zur Zeit der schottischen Aufklärung und deren Einfluss auf die britische Abolitionsbewegung (1750–1833)*, Hildesheim, Zurich, and New York, 2012.

The influence of Smith and Hume was felt in the century that followed. As noted earlier, their idea that Greece and Rome had been slave-owning societies was formative on the political theories of Marx and Engels, who borrowed from Hegel the idea of an historical dialectic but, unlike Hegel, presented dialectic within a materialist, as distinct from an idealist, framework. In classical Marxist theory, the progress of history is driven by the evolution of the means of production, which leads to an evolution in the different modes of production, from primitive communism in the Neolithic Age, to slave ownership in the ages of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, to feudal serfdom in the Middle Ages, to capitalism in the modern industrialised age, which, in turn, would give way to socialism and, ultimately, to communism in the age to come:

> The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. [K. Marx and F. Engels, *Communist Manifesto* (1848), 219]

Marxist theory relies heavily on the doctrine of class struggle, which views human conflict in terms of the struggle of one socio-economic class (defined by the relationship to the means of production) against another. A great weakness of the theory is that it fails to account for the fact that so few documented conflicts in history can meaningfully be analysed in the language of 'class struggle'; more recent studies of the French and Russian Revolutions have shown, *inter alia*, that the overthrow of the *anciens regimes*, and the scraps for power that followed, cannot be theorised in terms of one social class in operation against another.[5] That said, the received idea, inherited from the eighteenth century, that the tribes, societies, and empires of the ancient Mediterranean world were principally slave-owning, to be displaced in the Middle Ages and, later, in modern times by other modes of wealth creation, dominated the nineteenth century.

In 1893, the German academic and journalist Karl Bücher published an influential tract titled *Die Entstehung der Volkswirtschaft* ('The Rise of the National Economy').[6] Bücher claimed that society had evolved on a unilinear pathway since antiquity, which he understood to be less economically developed than the Middle Ages which succeeded it: accordingly, the societies of Greece and Rome were

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[5] See, for example, A. Beevor, *Russia: Revolution and Civil War 1917-1921*, Viking Press, 2021. Beevor points out *inter alia* that the enemies against whom the ruling Bolsheviks fought once they had cemented power consisted of a rag-tag alliance of revolutionary socialists and Tsarist reactionaries; though ideologically rooted in Marxist doctrine, the forces which drove the Bolsheviks to power were far too multifarious and complex to align with a reductionist historical explanation that invokes 'class struggle' as a major or primary causal factor.

[6] K. B, *Die Entstehung der Volkswirtschaft: Vorträge und Aufsätze,* Tübingen, 1917.

primitive in every sense and did not evolve economies that extended far beyond the confines of the household economy ('Hauswirtschaft'). Five years later, in 1898, Eduard Meyer reacted in his epoch-defining treatise, titled *Die Sklaverei im Altertum* ('Slavery in Antiquity'), which argued against Bücher's unilinear theory.[7] Meyer held that slavery was one of many modes of production in the ancient world and should not in every epoch be prioritised as an explanation for wealth creation. Meyer pointed out that the early phases of antiquity, reflected most visibly in the poems of Homer (c. eighth or seventh centuries BC), more closely resembled the feudalist systems of the Early Middle Ages than they did slave-owning societies, whereas the apex of slave-ownership came about with the flourishing of the Roman Empire at the end of the first millennium BC. In conjunction with this, Meyer observed that slavery did not die out in the Middle Ages but was prominent in Europe even into early modern times. During those periods of feudal antiquity when slaves were owned, he argued, they did not play a dominant role in economic production but were kept for the pleasure of their masters, in the case of women, sexual pleasure. Slaves were usually prisoners-of-war and were kept for the purpose not of creating a labour supply but of undermining the enemy. Most of the work carried out in the ancient agriculture was performed by free labourers. The gradual rise of slavery in high antiquity, argued Meyer, lay in the growth of industrial activity and in the need for wealthy industrialists, which could not be easily done by transforming free peasants into industrial workers, which was too expensive and required extensive re-training.[8]

Meyer's countertheory had groundbreaking implications. The first was to argue against the Marxist conception of ancient society as a 'slave society', as distinct from one that owned slaves. At a casual glance, this might seem to be a nuanced distinction, but the difference is nevertheless important: 'slave societies', on the Marxist conception, are societies whose main mode of production is slave labour, whereas societies that keep slaves do not necessarily prioritise the labour of slaves as the main or most important means of generating surplus. The second was to deflate the idea, inherited ultimately from the Enlightenment, that human history progressed down a linear path, arguing instead for a more cyclical conception of history whereby elements of feudalism and capitalism were visible both in ancient and in modern times at different key epochs. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, Meyer linked the growth of slavery in the ancient world to the concomitant rise of mass surplus in a mode of production not dissimilar to modern capitalism. Meyer's views were endorsed in 1965 by the German sociologist, Joseph Vogt, in his treatise titled *Sklaverei und Humanität*, translated by Thomas Wiedemann under the variant English title *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man*,[9] but perhaps the most vocal exponent was the American

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[7] E. Meyer, *Die Sklaverei im Altertum: Vortrag gehalten in der Gehe-Stiftung zu Dresden am 15 Januar 1898*. Dresden, 1898.

[8] For a useful discussion of Meyer and his wider influence, see E.M. Harris, 'Homer, Hesiod, and the "origins" of Greek slavery', *REG* 114 (2012), 345-366.

[9] J. Vogt, *Sklaverei und Humanität: Studien zur antiken Sklaverei und ihrer Erforschung, Ergänzungsheft zur 2. erweiterten Auflage*, Wiesbaden, 1965.

sociologist and Classicist, Moses Finley, who in several related works claimed that except for key defining moments in ancient history, slavery was relatively unimportant as a mode of wealth production. In his book *The World of Odysseus*, Finley argued that '[t]here was little ground, economic or moral, for sparing and enslaving the defeated men' and that 'heroes as a rule killed (or sometimes ransomed) the males and carried off the females, regardless of rank' (p. 54). He concurred with Meyer that slave women were kept mainly as sexual commodities for their captors but had limited economic value otherwise. Elsewhere, Finley claimed that slavery became more common in Greece after around 550 BC because of the growth of the economy and the unavailability of a local labour supply to meet the rising demands of economic production on a mass scale.[10]

The distinction between 'slave societies' and 'societies with slaves' was articulated most succinctly in 1968, in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (p. 308):

> Slavery attained its greatest functional significance, and usually the greatest numerical strength, in societies in which other, less total varieties of bondage, had either disappeared or had never existed. The distinction is particularly sharp as between *genuine* slave societies – classical Greece (except Sparta) and Rome, the American South and the Caribbean – on the one hand, and *slave-owning* societies as found in the Ancient Near East (including Egypt), India or China, on the other hand.[11]

Finley conceded to the idea that Greece and Rome at their height were 'slave societies' – *i.e.*, societies which depended on slave ownership as a primary mode of generating surplus, but he criticised the Marxist model in several important ways. First, whereas on the traditional Marxist model slavery was an *essential* component of ancient society, Finley argued that its rise in Greece from around 500 BC onward was down largely to incidental unforeseen factors, brought about by an explosion of trade and economic prosperity. Otherwise, Finley adhered to the idea, taken from Meyer, that the structure of the ancient economy was essentially feudal. Secondly, Finley abandoned 'class struggle' as an explanatory tool to account for fundamental shifts in modes of production from one epoch to the next, arguing instead that the growth of empire in its train brought on conditions whereby an extensive reliance upon slave labour was required. Thirdly, pointing out that neither Greek nor Latin have any word that can quite deliver the sense of 'class', which Marx and Engels defined in terms of relationship to the means of production, Finley argued that ancient society should rather be structurally conceptualised on a sliding scale of 'statuses' which could be understood both juridically and extra-legally. More recently, the idea of a society

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[10] M.I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, New York, 1980; *The World of Odysseus*, New York, 1982.
[11] D.L. Sills and R.K. Merton (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, New York, 1968.

constructed around social 'status', rather than economic 'class' in the Marxist sense, has been revived by Deborah Kamen in her influential 2013 monograph titled *Status in Classical Athens*. Focusing specifically on Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, Kamen maintains that society could be subdivided into ten self-contained 'statuses', with chattel slaves at the bottom of the social heap and free male citizens at the top; those status categories were less *de jure* than *de facto* and cut across the juridical divides between free, metic, and slave.[12]

As critics have since observed, there is a contradiction at the heart of Finley's approach. To quote Kostas Vlassopoulos (nt. 2, *supra*, p. 21), 'probably the most important was…between Finley's research agenda on the spectrum of statuses and his periodisation of the development of ancient slavery.' In *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*, Finley wrote:

> In classical Athens and Rome… the traditional dividing line, the traditional distinction according to whether a man is or is not the property of another, remains a convenient rule of thumb for most purposes. For them the metaphor of continuum breaks down…I might close with a highly schematic model of the history of ancient society. It moved from a society in which status ran along a continuum towards one in which statuses were bunched at two ends, the slave and the free – a movement which was most nearly completed in the societies which most attract our attention for obvious reasons. And then, under the Roman Empire, the movement was reversed; ancient society gradually returned to a continuum of statuses and was transformed into what we call the medieval world. (p. 132).[13]

Vlassopoulos brilliantly critiques these words (nt. 2, *supra*, p. 22):

> Finley had presented the spectrum of statuses as an approach of universal applicability, given the range of rights and privileges and the diverse ways in which they were distributed among various groups. He was now arguing, however, that the spectrum of statuses only applied to the Near East and to the societies with slaves which existed in archaic Greece and Rome and re-emerged from late antiquity onwards; for classical Greece and Rome, the simple and single distinction between slave and free constituted a convenient rule of thumb. The corollary of this amazing statement is that the research strategy delineated by Finley in the very same article is inapplicable to classical Greece and Rome.

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[12] D. Kamen, *Status in Classical Athens*, Princeton, 2013. For critical assessments of Kamen's approach, see J. Trevett, 'Review: Status in Classical Athens', *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 02.35 (2014) and P.A. Davies, 'Articulated status in ancient Greece: status (in)consistency as a new approach', *Cambridge Classical Journal* 63 (2017), 29-52. See also my forthcoming article, C.J. Joyce, 'Status polarities in Classical Athens', *Mnemosyne* 78 (2025), pages yet unknown, in which I argue that a unilinear spectrum of statuses is simplistic and that a more realistic model is to envisage a prism of interlocking polarities.

[13] M.I. Finley, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*, New York, 1982.

Vlassopoulos goes on to explain Finley's self-contradiction as a function of what he saw to be most at odds between Greece and Rome, on the one hand, and the ancient Near East, on the other, which was the discovery of freedom and democracy. Under the autocratic regimes of the Near East, all were, in a political sense, slaves; the polarity between 'slave' and 'free' only starts to make sense if a concept of what it means to be free exists in the first place. Thus, in those long epochs of antiquity where freedom was not a political reality, the sense of a slave as someone who did not have the same rights and freedoms as someone else breaks down. As David Lewis (nt. 2, *supra*) has observed, this is to confuse distinct senses of freedom and slavery and to disregard the polysemy (spectrum of nuanced meanings) of those terms.

But there is a more devastating objection to Finley's paradigm, which is that it hinges on the *a priori* supposition that Greece, Rome, and the Near East were hermetically contained areas of economic activity which did not influence one another in any significant way. As Lewis points out, this supposition is undocumented and difficult to entertain (nt. 2, *supra*, p.2):

> [I]n the field of economic history the notion that the classical world and Near East were hermetically sealed zones characterized by completely different economic practices has been rejected (which is not to downplay the fact that some significant differences did exist). The sweeping language of 'modes of production' has been all but abandoned, and today's scholars are far more interested in documenting and explaining regional economies in all their complexity (including connections with surrounding regions) than branding vast swathes of territory as characterized by this or that mode of production. Furthermore, a plethora of studies has been devoted to the cultural cross-pollination between the Greek world and the Near East: scholars now readily admit that myth, literature, science, and art in Greece all drew on Near Eastern materials and ideas. Other studies have shown that many of the institutional features of the Greek world that were once thought distinctive— such as city-state culture or democratic government—have Near Eastern antecedents.

Lewis rightly emphasises that the ancient Mediterranean world, for most of its history that we can reliably document, was an interlocking web of economic, political, and cultural activity, and that this should discourage modern efforts artificially to envisage 'Greco-Roman' antiquity as a homogeneous politico-cultural entity *sui generis* without internal variation through time and place and lacking external influence and cultural dialogue. The fashion for Greco-Roman 'exceptionalism' has its roots in older racialised theories that cannot be plausibly sustained and which founder when heed is taken of the vast trading links which Greece and Italy maintained with the ancient Near East as early as archaeology attests.

2. Slave societies vs. slave-owning societies.

The greatest political theorist of Greece, Aristotle, wrote on slavery thus (*Pol.* 1. 1353b23-33):

> ἐπεὶ οὖν ἡ κτῆσις μέρος τῆς οἰκίας ἐστὶ καὶ ἡ κτητικὴ μέρος τῆς οἰκονομίας (ἄνευ γὰρ τῶν ἀναγκαίων ἀδύνατον καὶ ζῆν καὶ εὖ ζῆν, ὥσπερ δὲ ταῖς ὡρισμέναις τέχναις ἀναγκαῖον ἂν εἴη ὑπάρχειν τὰ οἰκεῖα ὄργανα, εἰ μέλλει ἀποτελεσθήσεσθαι τὸ ἔργον, οὕτω καὶ τῷ οἰκονομικῷ. τῶν δ' ὀργάνων τὰ μὲν ἄψυχα τὰ δὲ ἔμψυχα (οἷον τῷ κυβερνήτῃ ὁ μὲν οἴαξ ἄψυχον ὁ δὲ πρωρεὺς ἔμψυχον: ὁ γὰρ ὑπηρέτης ἐν ὀργάνου εἴδει ταῖς τέχναις ἐστίν): οὕτω καὶ τὸ κτῆμα ὄργανον πρὸς ζωήν ἐστι, καὶ ἡ κτῆσις πλῆθος ὀργάνων ἐστί, καὶ ὁ δοῦλος κτῆμά τι ἔμψυχον, καὶ ὥσπερ ὄργανον πρὸ ὀργάνων πᾶς ὑπηρέτης.

> Since therefore property [literally, 'acquisition' = ἡ κτῆσις) belongs to the household and the act of acquisition [= ἡ κτητικὴ] part of the domestic science [= τῆς οἰκονομίας, whence our word, 'economy'] (for without these necessities, both life and the possibility of a good life would be impossible), and since it would be required for defined crafts to be availed of certain instruments, if it is intended that the work should be fulfilled, in such a manner also is it for domestic science [in Greek, 'economy']. Among instruments are numbered both inanimate and animate (for example, for a helmsman a rudder is a lifeless and the look-out man a living instrument; for the servant is in the guise of an instrument for crafts). In like manner is a possession an instrument for life. The slave is a living possession, and every suborn an instrument of instruments. [my translation]

In Aristotle's conception, a slave was no more than an article of property, to be used, traded, sold, and discarded at the discretion of the master. Elsewhere in *Politics* I, Aristotle likened the master-slave relationship to that which existed between a tyrant and his subjects in the most degenerate type of polity, which, for Aristotle, was tyranny.

Notwithstanding the definition of the slave as property, many modern scholars have rejected the definition on the grounds that the Greeks did not have an articulated understanding of property comparable to modern (post-Roman) definitions. Ellen Wood has written:

> The often ambiguous shadings of meaning in the spectrum between dependent labourer, tenant, and freeholder reflects the complicated spectrum of conditions and tenures typical of smallholders in many parts of the world. This is especially true where there is no concept of 'absolute' private property but rather various shades of conditional property; where there is no clear dividing line between outright ownership and mere possession or occupancy; and where there is no rigid dichotomy between property and propertylessness of the kind that exists in modern capitalist society. The indeterminacy of peasant conditions and tenures would have been especially characteristic of classical Greece, which, before the

development of Roman property law, had no clear legal conception of ownership at all.[14]

The notion that Greek antiquity lacked a concept of property rights has its roots in the political theories of Marx and Durkheim, who argued that the communal ownership of primitive societies survived among the slave societies that succeeded them.[15] The doctrine is seriously problematised by the assumption that Greece and the societies of the ancient Near East were 'pre-legal'. Those assumptions have been systematically refuted in more recent decades by Carlo Pelloso and Edward Harris, who have demonstrated that the concept of the rule of law was present in Greece from earliest times. Elsewhere, I have argued that political reconciliation at Athens was possible because of the rule of law.[16] To quote from Pelloso's 2013 article:

> [T[he conceptual foundations of the Greek legal experience do not seem to draw on the judge and his authority, on the legal procedure and its rituals, but, rather, on the individual and, from an eminently substantive point of view, on his or her complex set of rights, duties, powers and freedoms. Being part of a system, that is in the ancient order of θέμις, at first means entitlement to δίκαι, i.e. to 'substantive positions'; 'procedures' are just over-structural and secondary devices aimed at protecting the claims previously recognized to the members of the system as such.

As Pelloso argues, from the foundation of the polis, the notion of subjective rights, including the right to property, was there. More recently, Mirko Canevaro and Linda Rocchi have written:

> In its overarching concern with *time* [honour] and *timai* [honours], Athenian law appears to be capable of prioritising, depending on the context, either rights or duties, or both. If the laws about property or about violence impose duties indirectly through the definition of rights, other laws (such as those on the conduct of officials and that on *hybris*) protect rights indirectly through the definition of standards of honourable conduct.[17]

These scholars, among others, reject *ex cathedra* statements that the idea of 'rights' enforced by law was not a real, lively, and organic concept in Archaic and Classical Greece.

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[14] E.M. Wood, *Peasant Citizen and Slave: The Foundations of Athenian Democracy.* London, 1988, 75.

[15] Thus, Lewis, *supra*, nt.2, 31.

[16] C. Pelloso, 'The Myth of the Priority of Procedure over Substance in the Light of Early Greek Epos, in *Rivista di Diritto Ellenico*, 3 (2013), 223-274; E.M. Harris, *The Rule of Law in Action in Democratic Athens*, Oxford, 2013; C.J. Joyce, *Amnesty and Reconciliation in Late Fifth-Century Athens: The Rule of Law under Restored Democracy*, Edinburgh, 2022.

[17] M. Canevaro and L. Rocchi, 'Greek Subjective Rights? Justice, Legal Discourse, and Institutions, in C. Ando, M. Canevaro, B. Straumann (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Rights. I. Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2023.

In an influential discussion in 1961 of property and its legal definition, Antony Honoré laid out ten essential principles for property ownership.[18] In turn, these were: (1) the right to possess; (2) right to use; (3) right to manage; (4) right to income; (5) right to capital (meaning the right to alienate property); (6) right to security; (7) transmissibility (meaning that property can outlive the lifetime of the owner); (8) absence of term; (9) prohibition of harmful use; (10) liability to execution (meaning that under some defined circumstances, property can be taken away from the owner). Lewis treats democratic Athens as a test case to show that though not every requirement spelled out by Honoré was met in the Athenian legal system, nevertheless an examination of the laws on slavery indicate that slaves under Athenian law were treated much as property, in the classic legal definition. For instance, the courts sanctioned fines on those who tried to deprive owners of their slaves, a good example being Theocrines, fined 500 drachmas ([D.] 58.19). Owners could use and abuse their slaves at will (Ar. *Vesp.* 441-3; Pl. *Leg.* 6.776d-e; 777a; X. *Oec.* 3.4), though it also seems from scattered literary references among ancient historical writers that social convention often restrained masters from behaving towards their slaves with total disregard for what was due (X. *HG* 5.3.7; Hdt. 1.137). Slaves could be chained (X. *Mem.* 2.1.16; Ar. *Ran.* 1508–14; *Vesp.* 435; *Plu.* 276; Ar. fr. 871 K-A; D. 18.129). Female (and male) slaves could raped or prostituted (Lys. 1.12; Ar. *Pax.* 573, 1138; *Ach.* 273; X. *Oec.* 10.12; Hyp. 3.24). It is open to question whether a slave could be killed with impunity. One passage in Antiphon (5.47) implies that this was illegal, but there are other ancient passages which suggest that if a master did kill a slave, he could rid himself of the pollution of homicide by ritual cleansing (Ant. 6.4; Isoc. 12.181; Pl. *Leg.* 9.868a). Slaves could be hired out to third parties (X. *Vect.* 4.14; [X.] *Ath.Pol.* 1.17; D. 27.20; 28.12; 53.20; [D] 59.20; Is. 8.35; Theophr. *Char.* 30.17; Crat. fr. 171 K-A ll. 73–4; Hyp. 1A fr. 4.1). Slaves sometimes were allowed to work independently for money (*apophora*), but if granted, this privilege lay wholly at the discretion of the slaveowner (Aeschin. 1.97; Theophr. *Char.* 30.15; Men. *Epitr.* 378–80; And. 1.38; [X.] *Ath.Pol.* 1.11). Slaves at Athens were alienable ([D.] 53.6; Hyp. 3.23–8; Men. *Sam.* 380–2; X. *Mem.* 2.5.2). Slaves could be manumitted at the will of their masters (Aeschin. 3.41-44). Slaves were generally punishable exclusively by their masters ([X.] *Ath. Pol.* 1.11), though there were extenuating circumstances under which others could beat slaves if they trespassed on their rights ([D.] 53.16; Ar. *Ach.* 271–6). Masters could be deprived of slaves only if a third party won a judgment against them ([D.] 47.52-3. Slaves could be bequeathed in wills, meaning that they were transmissible and under absence of term (Aeschin. 1.97; D. 27.9; 45.28; D. 48.12; D.L. 5.13; 54; 62–3; 73). Slaves could be confiscated if put up as security in business transactions (*IG* II² 2747; 2748; 2749; 2751; *SEG* 51.162; 54.256).

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[18] A.M. Honoré, 'Ownership', in A. G. Guest (ed.), *Oxford Essays in Jurisprudence*, Oxford, 1961, 107–47.

The Attic orators leave little doubt that though modern definitions might not in every sense have been matched in antiquity, property as a legal concept was there in the ancient world long before it was ever formally defined. Lewis concludes (nt. 2, *supra*, pp. 54-5):

> [I]t is clear that [Athens] had a working concept of property, even if [it] did not do us the courtesy of formulating this concept into an abstract jurisprudential theory… We noted…Wood's claim that the Greeks had no concept of ownership. But the falsity of this view is clear once we shift our attention from trawling the works of Plato and Aristotle for abstract formulations and pay closer attention to the position of slaves as revealed by the laws of Athens and the arguments of Athenian litigants in real court cases… It is crucial to see this problem in the light of practices rather than in terms of theoretical abstractions. It is highly unlikely that the average man on the street in a modern European nation state can produce an abstract theory of ownership of the sort ventured by Honoré. It does not follow, however, that this somehow prevents him from inter alia buying and selling, reporting theft to the authorities, taking out an insurance policy on his property, or inheriting the property of his deceased relatives. The focus on abstract theories of slavery and property has distracted many scholars from the fact that Athenians had a pragmatic, empirically informed concept of slavery that they understood from their everyday dealings and encounters with the law.

This point must apply not only to private law, but to the concept of democracy also. As I have argued elsewhere in my examination of the Athenian Reconciliation Agreement of 403 BC:

> Even though Athenians did not, as far as we know, refer to a tract comparable to the American Declaration of Independence, which expressly stated and laid out the purposes for which their democracy was founded, nevertheless their democratic literature is infused with abundant references to political and moral principle.[19]

That is not to deny the sizable and marked differences between ancient and modern concepts of democracy, one of the most important of which was the absence of any known Bill of Rights in the ancient world that was applicable to all humanity, not just to the citizen body. The same point is however transferable: the fact that there is no known tract expressing the principled intentions for which democracy in the ancient world was set up, this is not to deny, at the same time, that such principles were applied and actualised through concrete legal institutions.

Whilst disavowing the prevalence of slavery as an institution *sensu stricto* throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, Finley nevertheless acknowledged that at the height of their respective dominances as imperial powers, Athens and Rome

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[19] See Joyce, *supra*, nt. 16, 14.

met the definitional requirements of slave societies. In *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*, he wrote (p.120-1):

> If one examines the various law codes of the ancient Near East, stretching back into the third millennium B.C., whether Babylonian or Assyrian or Hittite, the central fact is the existence of a hierarchy of statuses from the king at the top to the chattel slaves at the bottom, with rules—in the penal law, for example, — differentiated among them. Translators often enough employ the term 'a free man', but I believe this to be invariably a mistranslation in the strict sense, the imposition of an anachronistic concept on texts in which that concept is not present. It is enough to read the commentaries appended to the translations to appreciate the error: each such rendition required the most complex contortions in the commentary if the various clauses of the codes are not to founder in crass inner contradictions once 'free man' has been inserted. What the codes actually employ are technical status terms, which we are unable to render precisely because in our tradition the hierarchy and differentiation of statuses has been different. Hence, for example, careful Hittologists resort to such conventional renditions as 'man of the tool', which may not be very lucid but has the great advantage of not being downright misleading. The English word 'slave' is a reasonable translation of one such status term, but it is then necessary to emphasise the fact that slaves were never very significant and never indispensable in the ancient Near East, unlike Greece and Rome.

Finley constructed a binary opposition between the Greco-Roman world on the one hand, and the non-Greco-Roman on the other, the first as 'slave societies', the second 'societies with slaves'. On that understanding, the societies of the ancient Near East, alongside those of the Archaic (pre-Classical) Greek world, were closer to being feudal than those of Classical Greece and Rome, which depended on slave labour as a primary means of wealth generation.

Finley's case encounters five objections (see Lewis, nt. 2, *supra*, p. 82):

> First, Finley sets up the contrast between Greece and the Near East in too simplistic a fashion: Greek society can, of course, be viewed from the vantage point of property law, in which case all individuals were indeed either slave or free. But it can also be seen in terms of a much wider conglomeration of status groups with juridically prescribed rights and obligations. The two approaches are not mutually incompatible: they simply view the situation from different perspectives. Second, the idea that Near Eastern status terms were blurred…rests on their allegedly indeterminate meaning; but…it is rather the case that Near Eastern slave terminology is, like the Greek terminology of freedom and slavery…, polysemous [having multiple nuanced meanings]: it can be used in more than one context, and its meaning shifts accordingly. In this respect, there is no fundamental difference between the Greek and Near Eastern worlds. Third, the 'blurring' of status boundaries asserted by Finley does not tally with the evidence of Near Eastern

legal documents: individuals in Near Eastern societies could make razor-sharp status distinctions between different juridical groups, and there was no conceptual blurring of one group into another whatsoever. Fourth, terminology for freedom did exist in the ancient Near East, although its usages were not identical to those of its Greek equivalent. Fifth, Finley represented the development of the conceptual division of society into free men and slaves in a deterministic sense: not only is the economic importance of slave labour both a necessary and sufficient condition for this conceptual development, but there is a mechanical causal connection established between economic conditions and their alleged conceptual consequences.

To paraphrase, the problem with Finley's analysis is that it assumed exactly what it needed in the first place to prove. If it is to be asserted that the concepts of freedom and servitude were Greek, as distinct from Near Eastern, creations, as many Classicists have contended, there need to be clear demonstration of this from the available evidence. Lewis's magisterial treatment of slavery in the ancient world has shown that the familiar concepts of 'slave' and 'free' were not culturally limited, and that though the Near East did not develop in a political sense what came to be understood in Greece as democracy, the notion of freedom, as distinct from an enslaved condition, was as much part of its vocabulary as it was of Greeks and, subsequently, Romans.

In line with those observations, simplistic linear models often take little heed of the social frameworks in which given categorical polarities operated. Athenians could and often did draw nuanced distinctions between the different legal categories which did not commit them necessarily to a binary conception of privilege versus underprivilege or non-privilege:

Legal status was always defined against that which it was not. Though it might be said that to be a metic [resident alien] was better than to be a slave and worse than to be a citizen, the sense of advantage and disadvantage always needs to take account of the special legal framework of reference in which those comparisons operate. As the discussion below shows, it is impossible to set any of these juridical categories on a horizontal scale. The picture which emerges is not of a unilinear scale but of multi-dimensional prism of polarities, where the axes of relationship were often perpendicular and interlocking. More importantly, every polarity of status was set up against that of the free male citizen, so that among the deprived statuses, the question to address is not how (e.g.) slaves stood in relation to metics, or metics in relation to *nothoi* [bastards], but how each of those deprived categories stood in relation to citizens. In the case of slaves, what they lacked was freedom and personal rights; in the case of metics, political rights; in the case of *nothoi* rights to property (if born of a non-engyetic [non-betrothed] union) and political rights (if born of an ethnically mixed union). Privation in all

cases has a common reference point of opposition, even if the ways it operated differed from one category to the next.[20]

Status distinctions that cut across the slave-free divide were recognised. Wealthy slaves, like Pasion or Phormion, were socially both higher and lower than poor male citizens who, *qua* citizens, possessed legal and political rights that were denied to slaves and metics, but if poor, may have been materially far more disadvantaged than wealthy or influential persons who belonged to different (and, in the eyes of the law, lower) legal statuses.

What is demonstrable in Greek antiquity is demonstrable also in the ancient Near East. The idea that the later lacked a clear legal or juridical terminology of distinction between slave and free originates with William Westermann, who famously wrote in 1955 (pp. 42-3):

> In sharp contrast to this clarity of differentiation between those completely free and those who were enslaved, with a special term for 'freedman' (ἀπελεύθερος) and regulations which provided the freedman group with legal directives, stands the blurring and overlapping of these social classifications in the Egyptian and the Semitic languages... the cuneiform signs for 'slave' meant, literally, a 'man from the mountains', that is, a captive from an alien land. The same indefiniteness prevailed in the early development of the Egyptian language in the use of the term b'k, to the point that the Egyptologists still disagree as to the exact status of the persons thus designated. The Hebrew word 'ebed suffers from the same vagueness, its application ranging through 'slave' or 'servant of the Lord' in the phrase 'ebed Jahwe, to the titular epithet describing a high military or civil official as 'ebed el malek, 'servant of the king'.[21]

Westermann's distinction between Greece and the Near East is vulnerable to the objection that it assumes that the former always asserted the free/slave distinction in a binary and legalistic way, whereas the world of the Levant and beyond applied it with greater nuance. As Lewis has shown (nt. 2 *supra*, pp.57-79), this dichotomy is simply incorrect: Greek is perfectly capable of using the terms 'free' and 'servile' in a polysemous fashion without that necessarily implying that the Greeks lacked a legal concept of slavery which meant being the property of another. Again, to quote Lewis (nt. 2, *supra*, pp. 84-5):

> In Hebrew, עבד [meaning something akin to 'lord'] does have a basic legal meaning, but it can be used in polite discourse to express deference to a social superior, or indeed man's relation with God. Akkadian slave terminology is used in a similar manner. For instance, the Assyrian word *urdu* denotes someone who is a slave in the property sense; but it can be used in situations of social deference,

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[20] See Joyce, *supra*, nt. 12.
[21] W.L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, Philadelphia, 1955.

where individuals can be described as the *urdu* of their superior. This state of affairs has engendered some debate among Assyriologists about the precise meaning of the word, but as Ahmad, Postgate, and Baker have shown, the simple fact is that the word is polysemous, and context generally makes clear which is implied.

Experts in the Hebrew and Akkadian languages have shown that just as Greek could use terms in a polysemous fashion, this was not vastly different from the Near East. However, Lewis also cautions that there are still some important differences: it is not infrequent in Hebrew to find individuals address social superiors as 'my lord' (אדני, Gen. 42:10), whereas in the Greek world we never find the term for master (δεσπότης) used in this non-technical way.[22]

The cultural expectation that the language of law might in given contexts be applied in non-legal circumstances was thus common to Greeks, Romans, Jews, Akkadians, and other ancient peoples. Criticising Finley's hard-and-fast cultural divide between Greeks, Romans, and the peoples of the ancient Near East, Jack Goody (*The Theft of History*, p. 58) has written:

> Since an institution approximating to slavery existed in the other societies he [Finley] mentions [the ancient Near East], whether or not it can be considered 'basic' or 'dominant', it seems inconceivable that there was no recognition of the difference between slavery and its absence, even if there was not a single noun to designate it. While slavery has been present among the groups with whom I worked in northern Ghana, there was no specific word used to describe being free; nevertheless people had no difficulty whatsoever in making the distinction between a 'slave' (or 'pawn') and other people.[23]

To illustrate the point, a cuneiform document dating from 548 BC, in Babylon, following the sack of Jerusalem, reads:

> A court examination was conducted before the judicial officer, important men, and the judges of Nabonidus, king of Babylon. They presented their case, and (the judges) heard their testimony. (The judges) had the document read aloud (that demonstrated) the slave status of Bariki-ili, who had been purchased, pawned, (and) given as part of a dowry to Nupta daughter of Gaga, between the 35th year of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and the 7th year of Nabonidus, king of Babylon, (and which demonstrated that) Nupta had later legally transferred him together with a share of the house and slaves to her son Zababa-iddin and to her husband Iddina. Whereupon they said the following to Bariki-ili: 'you have

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[22] As pointed out by E.M. Harris, *Democracy and the Rule of Law in Classical Athens*, Cambridge and New York, 2006, 278-9.
[23] J. Goody, *The Theft of History*, New York, 2006.

instituted a complaint, maintaining, "I am a free man." Show us (the document relating to) your free status.[24]

As Lewis notes (p. 87), '[c]ontrary to the notion that "servile status" was a blurred affair among eastern peoples, this document attests to an eminently practical and workmanlike ability to make clear legal distinctions between slaves and free persons'. It cannot be maintained, with Westermann, Finley and others who have followed their lead, that sharp juridical distinctions between slave and free were the exclusive preserve of the Greco-Roman West.

In what remains of this paper, I survey the slave systems of the Greek world in the Archaic and Classical periods. In line with Lewis, on whose expertise I principally draw, I will conclude that the cultural assumptions about slaves in those geographical zones, far from being at odds with those of Greeks and, later, Romans, encountered significant overlap and similarity.

3. The slave systems of Archaic Greece, Sparta, Crete, and Athens

The best guides to the societies of early Greece are the poems of Homer and Hesiod. Though of course poets and not historians, these authors have been the focus of wide discussion among scholars keen to outline the social and moral framework of the societies to which they alluded. In a much-discussed passage from Book XIV of Homer's *Odyssey*, Eumaeus the swineherd describes to Odysseus, who has returned to Ithaca incognito, the estate of his master (Hom. *Od.* 14.100-4):

> δώδεκ᾽ ἐν ἠπείρῳ ἀγέλαι: τόσα πώεα οἰῶν,
> τόσσα συῶν συβόσια, τόσ᾽ αἰπόλια πλατέ᾽ αἰγῶν
> βόσκουσι ξεῖνοί τε καὶ αὐτοῦ βώτορες ἄνδρες.
> ἐνθάδε δ᾽ αἰπόλια πλατέ᾽ αἰγῶν ἕνδεκα πάντα
> ἐσχατιῇ βόσκοντ᾽, ἐπὶ δ᾽ ἀνέρες ἐσθλοὶ ὅρονται.

> On the mainland he has twelve herds of cattle; as many flocks of sheep, as many droves of pigs, as many dense herds of goats both foreigners and native pasture men feed. Here, all eleven packed herds of goats feed on the boundary, and goodly men watch over them. [my translation]

Edward Harris (n. 8, *supra*, p. 360) has calculated that to manage an estate of this magnitude, as many as 700 male labourers would have been required. This is hardly animal husbandry at a level of bare subsistence. Already, from the earliest evidence we have for surplus wealth in Archaic Greece, we are dealing with wealth on a scale that could not have been managed by a small or insignificant labour force. Of course, the poet does not clarify that the labour force consisted of slaves, but the reference to

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[24] *Nbn.* 1113. Translated by M. Dandanaev, *Slavery in Babylonia. From Nabopolassar to Alexander the Great (626–331 BC)*, Chigaco, 1984, 441.

foreigners (ξεῖνοί) at line 102 would indicate that the farm was managed both by native workers who may have been voluntarily contracted, and foreign imports who, as we would normally expect of the ancient world, were probably slaves.

Odysseus's estate is much larger than this even. There is testimony throughout the *Odyssey* to the husbandry of cereal crops and trees. To quote Lewis (n. 2, *supra*, pp. 115-6):

> Odysseus' household is full of barley, bread, and wine as well as meat (*Od.* 1.144–9; 2.290): all are produced from his estate. When he approaches his town house in Book 17 of the Odyssey, the disguised Odysseus is saddened to see his faithful old hound Argos sitting atop a manure heap dying (*Od.* 17.300). This manure has been collected from mules and oxen and will be spread on the fields by Odysseus' slaves (*Od.* 17.297–9). The cereals grown in these fields in this labour-intensive manner are ground into flour by twelve slave women in Odysseus' house (*Od.* 20.105–8) and then baked into bread. In fact, although Eumaeus and his fellow slave swineherds subsist off piglets (*Od.* 14.80–1), they also have an ample supply of bread and wine (*Od.* 16.51). Animal husbandry and cereal farming go hand in hand on Odysseus' estate. The estate also contains orchards, which are looked after by Odysseus' aged father Laertes and his small group of slaves. These men work intensively, whether digging (*Od.* 24.226–7) and tending the trees (*Od.* 24.244–7) or gathering stones for constructing retaining walls for the orchard (*Od.* 24.222–5). The orchard itself contains figs, grapes, olives, and pears (*Od.* 24.245–7). When Odysseus was a child, we are told that Laertes led him through the orchard and gave him a number of the trees to name and keep for himself: thirteen pear trees, ten apple trees, forty fig trees, and fifty vines (*Od.* 24.340–3). These trees represent only a portion of the orchard managed by Laertes. And if we return to the town house itself, the fifty slave women therein, in addition to grinding cereals, undertake a wide range of domestic tasks (*Od.* 20.147–54). Of particular note is textile production: they labour at spinning and weaving alongside their mistress Penelope (*Od.* 21.350–2). Odysseus' estate thus represents a powerful productive unit and produces a wide variety of foodstuffs and textiles.

In an iconoclastic treatment of economy in early Greece, Hans van Wees pointed out that the wealth of Odysseus far surpasses the material needs of the household.[25] His observation was important, because it showed that Finley's view of the early economy and society of Greece as being essentially based around subsistence farming was incorrect; large gangs of slave workers were required to work the land. What was true in the case of animal husbandry was true also for cereal production. There was no way that farming on such a large scale was possible without substantial numbers of agricultural workers, either free contractors or slaves.

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[25] H. van Wees, *Status Warriors: War, Violence and Society in Homer and History*, Amsterdam, 1992, 52-3.

A similar picture emerges from the poems of Homer's rough contemporary, Hesiod. Though the scale of farming which Hesiod describes is not on the grand spectrum as what we can glean from Homer's *Odyssey*, it nevertheless illustrates a diversified system of animal and cereal husbandry which could not have relied solely on the labour of the owning family:

> Hesiod describes the diversified practices of a medium-sized mixed farm: it has cattle and mules (*Op.* 46; 405–6; 435–6; 451–4) as well as sheep (*Op.* 308; 786–7), arable land used for growing grain (*Op.* 441–7; 571–81; 597–600), and a vineyard (*Op.* 571–3). This mix of arable farming with animal husbandry is thus similar to what we find described in Homer, only on a much smaller scale. Hesiod does not propose that the farmer should work this land by himself. Several passages show that, just like the Homeric *basilees*, Hesiod presupposes ownership of slaves and access to hired workers. He begins his instructions on farming by advising Perses to buy a slave woman (*Op.* 405–6). For ploughing and sowing, he recommends men of forty years of age who will not be distracted by their peers (*Op.* 441–7). When ploughing, he advises Perses to have a slave with a mattock follow the sower and cover up the seed (*Op.* 469–71). In midsummer, the slaves are to build shelters in which they are to dwell in the winter months (*Op.* 502–3). When harvest season comes, he exhorts Perses to rouse his slaves and sharpen the sickles (*Op.* 571–3), and later the slaves are to winnow the harvested grain (*Op.* 597–9). The slaves are to be apportioned monthly rations (*Op.* 765–8). Once the harvest has been stored away, Hesiod recommends turning out one's hired man (*thes*) and getting hold of a serving girl (*erithos*) who does not have a child in tow (*Op.* 602–3). [Lewis, nt. 2, *supra*, pp. 117-8].

As the great *Works and Days* of Hesiod shows, there was a significantly complex and diverse system of economic interaction at play even among the middle-ranking farmers of Archaic Greece. Himself from Boeotia in central Greece, Hesiod gives advice to his readers on how to manage an estate. Writing in hexameters, he borrows from Homer the metre of epic but uses it for a different purpose, to construct a didactic poem in which basic moral norms and values are set out. To modern tastes, the idea of putting a farming handbook in the language of epic verse might at first glance look strange and alien, but it is worth remembering that probably the majority of people in Greece in Hesiod's day, even among the wealthier segments of society, were still illiterate and required a mnemonic channel in which the norms and values of their society could be conveyed. The Greeks lacked a Bible, but the poems of Homer and Hesiod were as close as they got to producing a body of literature which enshrined the aristocratic values of a landed class of warriors and noblemen who ruled the communities they inhabited.

The Spartan system of helot slaves is somewhat unique in the Greek world, in that under the Spartan rules, helots – meaning slave farmers who worked the agricultural land in Messenia – could be beaten by other Spartiate citizens who were

not their owners. As Stephen Hodkinson points out, this reflects a communalist backdrop in which the Messenian helots were treated as property of the entire Spartiate citizenry.[26] Unlike other parts of the Greek world, manumission of helots happened at the disposal not of individual owners but of the state (Pl. *Leg.* 4. 704-5). Lewis (nt. 2, *supra*, pp. 137-8), phrases the paradox of Spartan helotage thus:

> We are thus faced with an unusual fact: whilst Sparta was more heavily reliant on slave labour than any other Greek society…, she could not have imported many slaves to 'top up' the helot population, which instead relied more or less entirely upon natural reproduction. It was thus vital to plug any gaps that might represent a potential drain on servile manpower. Since the provision of an adequate slave labour force was so crucial to the whole edifice of Spartan society, the state took unusually intrusive measures to curb the potential of slaveholders to alienate their helots and thus shrink the slave workforce.

We know, in fact, of other places in the Greek world where the state intervened quite heavy-handedly to prevent sale and trade of slaves: in Thessaly (Northeast Greece) and in Heraclea Pontica on the Black Sea (*FGrHist* 424 F 1; 87 F 8). In Athens also, even in the Classical age, measures were taken to limit the export of foodstuffs (D. 34.37; 35.50–1; 58.8–9). On the large-scale dependence of Sparta on helots in the Classical age, we can rely on figures supplied by the fifth-century BC historian Thucydides, who in passing (8.40) refers to the enormous scale of helot farmers kept by the Spartan state. Though helotage was certainly different in kind from the more typical forms of slavery found in other parts of Greece, it would nevertheless be a mistake to think of it as other than a form of slavery, even if there were salient legal anomalies:

> Helotage was certainly different in many ways from the form of slavery found in Attica; not least, its linguistic uniformity implies major differences in structural organization and strategies of slave supply. This is only problematic to the historian who thinks of Athenian slavery as somehow characteristic of Greek slavery in general. But an approach that is informed by comparative study of slavery should be more aware of the myriad forms that slavery can take in different periods and places, and should not be dogmatically tethered to familiar paradigms such as Athens, Rome, or the US South, viewing everything else as odd or aberrant. [Lewis, nt. 2, *supra*, p. 146].

As stated above, no slave system is ever going to adopt a uniform method of organisation or mode of social or economic interaction. That is not, however, a reason to deny that in a loose sense, helotage at Sparta did not conform to many, if not the majority, of the characteristics of slave systems exhibited in other parts of the Mediterranean world.

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[26] S. Hodkinson, *Property and Wealth in Classical Sparta*, Swansea, 2000, 187-208.

Sparta was not the only society in Archaic and Classical Greece to practise helotage. Another important example of the practice was the island of Crete. In a famous discussion from the *Politics* (2.1269a34-b12), Aristotle wrote:

ὅτι μὲν οὖν δεῖ τῇ μελλούσῃ καλῶς πολιτεύεσθαι τὴν τῶν ἀναγκαίων ὑπάρχειν σχολήν, ὁμολογούμενόν ἐστιν: τίνα δὲ τρόπον ὑπάρχειν, οὐ ῥᾴδιον λαβεῖν. ἥ τε γὰρ Θετταλῶν πενεστεία πολλάκις ἐπέθετο τοῖς Θετταλοῖς, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τοῖς Λάκωσιν οἱ εἵλωτες (ὥσπερ γὰρ ἐφεδρεύοντες τοῖς ἀτυχήμασι διατελοῦσιν): περὶ δὲ τοὺς Κρῆτας οὐδέν πω τοιοῦτον συμβέβηκεν. αἴτιον δ' ἴσως τὸ τὰς γειτνιώσας πόλεις καίπερ πολεμούσας ἀλλήλαις, μηδεμίαν εἶναι σύμμαχον τοῖς ἀφισταμένοις διὰ τὸ μὴ συμφέρειν ταῖς καὶ αὐταῖς κεκτημέναις περιοίκους, τοῖς δὲ Λάκωσιν οἱ γειτνιῶντες ἐχθροὶ πάντες ἦσαν, Ἀργεῖοι καὶ Μεσήνιοι καὶ Ἀρκάδες: ἐπεὶ καὶ τοῖς Θετταλοῖς κατ' ἀρχὰς ἀφίσταντο διὰ τὸ πολεμεῖν ἔτι τοῖς προσχώροις, Ἀχαιοῖς καὶ Περραιβοῖς καὶ Μάγνησιν. ἔοικε δὲ καὶ εἰ μηδὲν ἕτερον, ἀλλὰ τό γε τῆς ἐπιμελείας ἐργῶδες εἶναι, τίνα δεῖ πρὸς αὐτοὺς ὁμιλῆσαι τρόπον: ἀνιέμενοί τε γὰρ ὑβρίζουσι καὶ τῶν ἴσων ἀξιοῦσιν ἑαυτοὺς τοῖς κυρίοις, καὶ κακοπαθῶς ζῶντες ἐπιβουλεύουσι καὶ μισοῦσιν. δῆλον οὖν ὡς οὐκ ἐξευρίσκουσι τὸν βέλτιστον τρόπον οἷς τοῦτο συμβαίνει περὶ τὴν εἱλωτείαν.

It is a fact that everyone agrees upon that if a *polis* is going to be well governed there must exist leisure from necessity; but it is not easy to ascertain the manner in which this is to be made manifest. For the Thessalian *penestai* often attacked the Thessalians, and the helots did the same against the Lakonians (for they are like enemies continually lying in wait for their misfortunes). Among the Cretans nothing of this sort has come to pass. The reason for this is probably that the neighbouring *poleis*, even when at war with each other, never ally with the deserters since it is not profitable as they themselves have their own perioikic population, whereas the neighbours of the Lakonians are all enemies: Argives, Messenians, and Arcadians. With the Thessalians, the *penestai* were originally rebelling because the Thessalians were still fighting with their neighbours: Achaians, Perrhaiboi, and Magnesians. It seems that, other issues aside, the issue of supervision is difficult, that is, the manner in which it is necessary to deal with slaves: for if they are unrestrained, they are insolent and think of themselves as worthy of being on a par with their masters, whereas if they live laborious lives, they plot against them and hate them. It is therefore clear that those who deal with their helot system in this manner have not discovered the optimal approach. [tr. Lewis, nt. 2, *supra*, pp.148-9).

Aristotle criticises the helot system on the grounds that it was prone to insurrection. On this score, however, he cites Crete as an exception. The reason helotage works on Crete, he claims, is that because Crete was isolated by the sea, its cities followed similar patterns of social and political organisation, and it would not have been profitable for cities to stir up trouble with a neighbour if similar problems could be created within their own territorial domains.

Aristotle's statements have come under the lens of scrutiny in modern times, not least because they generalise about the political communities on Crete when more recent studies of the local inscriptions of the Cretan cities have revealed considerable political diversity.[27] The best known city on Crete is Gortyn, from which we have surviving a handsome twelve-column inscribed text (*IC* IV 72) dating from c. 450 BC, about a century before Aristotle. The laws from Gortyn yield two words for slave (*woikeus* and *dolos*). There has been a significant body of debate as to whether these two terms were synonymous, or instead denoted different statuses of 'unfree'. In a study of Cretan inscriptions, however, Stefan Link proved in 1994 by linguistic comparison across a range of inscribed materials that the two terms denoted the same idea of 'slave', and that the notion of a 'spectrum of unfree statuses' at Gortyn was difficult to entertain on the strength of the available evidence.[28] The implication is that the Cretan city about whose social and legal institutions we know the most, Gortyn, deployed a binary polarity between slave and free. There just is not enough evidence to posit a multi-status society which, outside particular social norms and conventions, nuanced that distinction beyond a binary conception.

This recognition, in turn, casts doubt on the model of Finley, who suggested that outside imperial Athens, Greek societies were basically feudal. To quote Lewis (nt. 2, *supra*, p. 164):

> Although there was variation from one Cretan city state to the next in terms of structural detail, some broad similarities can be noted for the island as a whole…We need not suppose that citizens of the Cretan city states were prevented from engaging in any occupation other than warfare, as was the case at Sparta; but their lifestyle did require a high degree of leisure, and scholars are right to connect this with the existence of slave populations that bore the brunt of productive work. It is highly likely, then, that the forty-nine Cretan *poleis* known to modern scholars were all, in a Finleyan sense, 'slave societies'. Like Sparta, the reason why this appellation has not been applied to Crete does not lie in disagreement over the role of dependent labour in its economy: scholars have long agreed on the fundamental role of dependent labour in maintaining the position and strength of citizen classes in both regions. Rather, the failure of scholars to notice that the Cretan cities (and Sparta) were slave societies stems from the common tendency to label their dependent populations as 'serfs'. The meagre evidence we possess for classical helotage…provides us with no grounds to suppose that we are dealing with anything other than a slave population; the much more detailed rules from Gortyn show that, from a comparative perspective, we are certainly dealing with slaves, not serfs or some other mysterious status 'between free men and slaves'. Although slavery in Sparta and Crete differ profoundly on a structural level from Attic slavery (and from each other), all three regions present slave systems in which the legal status of the enslaved as property

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[27] See further P. Perlman, 'One hundred-citied Crete and the "Cretan politeia"', *CP* 87 (1992), 193–205.
[28] S. Link, *Das griechische Kreta*, Stuttgart, 1994.

displays fundamental similarities, albeit with local differences where the standard rules on slave ownership were tailored to meet the needs imposed by local imperatives.

The problem has, in large measure, has been linguistic. Because Spartan helots could not be bought and sold in the same way that slaves in other parts of the Greek world could, it has been thought in the past that helotage did not fall under the category of slavery in the traditional Marxist sense, but resembled serfdom comparable to the feudal systems of the Middle Ages.

In a more recent study of the role of slaves on Crete, however, Lewis (nt. 2, *supra*, pp. 157-165) has shown that all those assumptions about helotage that derive, in large measure, from Finley are broadly inaccurate. In the case of Crete, it would seem from the evidence for residential patterns that the helots dwelt at close quarters with their masters, which suggests a mode of servitude more familiar to slave than to feudal societies. This was less true in the case of Sparta. Lewis refers to this distinction to explain why on Crete, very few documented helot revolts have surfaced in the record, whereas in Sparta, where helot revolts are more commonly attested, there was greater geographical distance between the slaves and their masters, and for that reason Sparta required an elaborate machinery of oppression which was less necessary on Crete because of the patchwork communities of helots and masters.

But the most obvious reason why helotage on Crete was a form of slavery, and not serfdom, consists in the fact that helots could be bought and sold (*IC* IV 72 VII 10–15; cf. *IC* IV 41 and IV 5–17). Legal redress was provided if a slave was damaged by a third party (IC IV 47 10–16), which indicates that helots were seen in the eyes of the law as property. Slaves who took refuge in temples were obligated to inform their masters (*IC* IV 72 I 39–49). If someone was found in the illegal possession of a helot, he could be fined (*IC* IV 72 I 1–14; 24–35). Wills could incorporate livestock and human capital (IC IV 72 V 39). Owners were liable for the actions of their slaves (*IC* IV 47.1–10; *IC* IV 72; VII 10–15; cf. *IC* IV 41). When the inscriptions are studied together, the impression emerges that the relationship between helots on Crete and their masters fulfilled many of the theoretical requirements spelled out by Honoré as to what can qualify as property. The inscriptions document a right to capital, right to security, absence of term and transmissibility, and prohibition of harmful use. Even if all the theoretical criteria were not met, the overriding sense is that Cretan helotage was a subspecies of slavery.

The best evidence for slave systems in the Greek world comes from Classical Athens. Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* lays out rules for the management of the household, but it is less an 'economic' document (despite its title) and more an ethical treatise spelling out the social and moral norms by which masters could run their affairs. To quote Lewis (nt. 2, *supra*, p. 174):

Xenophon's tract presupposes that the workforce on a rich man's farm will be made up of slaves, including a slave overseer, a detail that matches up to the claim in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Oeconomica* that slaves can be divided into two categories, workers and overseers (1344a25–6). We learn from Aristophanes' *Knights* (947–8) that a slave in a managerial role (the poet uses the verb ταμιεύω) might wear his master's signet ring, the seal of his authority in conducting transactions. We should note, however, that it was generally the mistress of the household who kept track of accounts and issued instructions to slaves, and that slaves in managerial roles may have been as much beholden to their mistress as to the household's *kyrios* (Xen. *Oec.* 9.15; cf. Ar. *Lys.* 18).

Though Xenophon provided relatively few practical guidelines for how an estate should be managed, his tract presupposes that slaves were a normal component of everyday business. Importantly, it shows that textile manufacture depended largely on the workforce of women. We know from independent sources of the wide prominence of sweatshops in fourth-century Athens. As Lewis (nt. 2, *supra*, pp. 177-8) states:

Athens' burgeoning demand for a wide variety of commodities, paired with its commercial links to wider markets in the Aegean and beyond, created a profitable niche for the manufacture of all manner of goods. Our sources preserve evidence on various kinds of manufacturing enterprise. We have already noted the knife and furniture workshops held by Demosthenes' father and the shield manufactories of Cephalus and Pasion. One might also mention the shop of bronzesmiths (or carpenters) owned by Sophocles' father (Vita. Soph. 1); the aulos manufactory owned by Isocrates' father (Dion. Hal. *Isocr.* 1 P. 534; [Plu.] *Mor.* 836e; Strattis fr. 3 K-A); Lysicles' shop of shoemakers (Plu. *Per.* 24.6; schol. ad Ar. Eq. 739 and 740); Aeschines of Sphettus' unguent-making shop (Lys. fr. 1 [Thalheim]); the tanneries of Cleon and Anthemion (Xen. *Apol.* 29); and the pottery of Cephalus of Collytus (schol. ad Ar. *Eccl.* 253). Xenophon mentions several well-known figures who made their money from similar enterprises: Nausycides of Cholargus, who owned a mill; Cyrebus, who owned a bakery; and Demeas of Collytus and Menon, both owners of cloak-making businesses. These shops were all manned by imported barbarian slave labour (Xen. *Mem.* 2.7.6: οὗτοι μὲν γὰρ ὠνούμενοι βαρβάρους ἀνθρώπους ἔχουσιν).

The prevalence of those sweatshops was one of the effects of Athens' imperial interests and the vast quantities of surplus wealth which empire generated. Mining and quarrying were prevalent also, especially in the vicinity of Laurium, where the rich vein of silver which fed Athens' bullion supply from the early fifth century BC may have been worked by up to 35,000 slaves.[29]

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[29] For a modern overview of the calculations and figures, see T. Rihll, 'Skilled slaves and the economy: The silver mines of the Laurion' in H. Heinen (ed.), *Antike Sklaverei: Rückblick und Ausblick. Neue Beiträge zur Forschungsgeschichte und zur Erschließung der archäologischen Zeugnisse*, Stuttgart, 2010, 203–20.

In the case of Athens, even Finley had to admit that it qualified in all practical senses as a slave society, as distinct from a 'society with slaves'. But what is also very significant is that though slaves were deployed extensively in mining, much of Athens' food consumption depended on imports from outside, which meant that the reliance upon local slaves working the fields was less pressing in Attica (the surrounding countryside of Athens) than it was either at Sparta or on Crete. Lewis (nt. 2, *supra*, p. 180) summarises the role of slaves in Athens thus:

> Athens' relatively well-developed and diverse economy enabled its elite to draw on a wider variety of revenue sources than their Spartan or Cretan counterparts. Our evidence shows that a typical rich man would not (so to speak) have all his eggs in one basket, but rather a portfolio of several kinds of investment. Various considerations influenced how he would structure his sources of income: profit versus risk was certainly a consideration; another was ease of supervision, with the majority of those with investments in the Laurion mines living in close proximity to the mining district. Slavery was thoroughly enmeshed with most of these ventures, especially farming, mining, and the ownership of craft workshops. But the importance of money lent at interest as well as the rental of real property—interests in which slave labour played a less decisive role—should not be neglected. In sum, Athens certainly qualifies on the Finleyan definition as a 'slave society', but Athenian elites leant less completely on slave labour than their Spartan and Cretan contemporaries.

If Finley was prepared to admit that Athens at the height of her power was a 'slave society' in the Marxist sense, the logical conclusion must be that societies elsewhere in Greece which did not enjoy the same levels of foreign import of foodstuffs and other luxury items as Athens, and therefore relied more heavily on an indentured workforce, were slave societies *sensu stricto*.

4. Conclusion

This paper has argued, in line with the findings of Lewis and Vlassopoulos, and against those of Finley and Meyer, that the polarity between 'slave' and 'free' attested in the New Testament was much more than a theoretical distinction. In every real sense, the polarity was applicable in the social, economic, and legal structures of ancient Greece and the world beyond. The result is that the picture of the ancient world as one in which economic production depended in large measure upon the labour of slaves, as suggested in the eighteenth century by Hume and Smith, is essentially correct. This is not to deny that other status polarities operated. However, just as the New Testament scripture was able to nuance the sense of 'slavery' to refer to a metaphorical (non-literal) state of bondage under some circumstances, polysemy should not entail that the original binary opposition between slave and free was not real and operative. Language has a range of implied meanings and nuances, and as in English, in Greek

it was possible to apply the language of slavery figuratively to refer to a condition that was not necessarily legally or juridically packaged. Yet, at the heart of this, the slave/free distinction was stark and dominated the political, legal, and social landscape of the ancient Greek world for most of its history.

Reference note:
All relevant bibliography has been supplied in the footnotes. All references to ancient literary and inscribed texts follow conventions outlined in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. References to journals and periodicals in footnotes follow conventions outlined in *L'Année Philologique*.