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Edited by Keith Bradley and Paul Cartledge

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this volume, the first in a series of multi-authored works examining the institution of slavery throughout human history, is to survey the history of slavery in the ancient Mediterranean world. It begins with an overview of slavery in the ancient Near East, then quickly moves to its principal concern, the history of slavery in the societies of ancient Greece and Rome. In these societies slaves were regularly used as primary producers in the key economic activities of agriculture, mining and manufacturing. As domestic servants and administrators, they also provided their owners with a multitude of services. In competitive social and political contexts, they were sometimes simultaneously items of conspicuous display.

The scale of ancient slave-owning varied from period to period and from place to place. In certain instances, especially in classical Athens and in Roman Italy of the Late Republic and Principate, it became particularly prominent. But despite fluctuations of scale, slavery as a concept was never altogether absent from ancient Mediterranean life. Ideologically, members of society were divided into two broad categories: those who were free and those who were not. As the Roman jurist Gaius stated, attributing the coercive authority that slave-owners exercised in the second century AD to universal standards: ‘The principal distinction in the law of persons is this, that all human beings are either free men or slaves’ (*Institutes* 1.9). For Greeks and Romans throughout their history, slavery was a defining and distinctive element of culture.

Across time and place slavery, or ‘unfreedom’, took different forms. Debt-bondage, helotage, temple slavery and something akin to serfdom are all attested. But the form with which this volume is chiefly concerned is chattel slavery, the most extreme form of unfreedom in antiquity, in which the slave was conceptualised as a commodity, akin to livestock, and was owned by a master who had full capacity to alienate his human property, by sale, gift, bequest or other means. For the slave the result was a state of social death in which all rights and sense of personhood were denied. The appearance of this form of slavery in the ancient Mediterranean has led to the dominant modern view that Greece and Rome offer the first examples in world history of what can be called genuine slave societies. Precisely

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how and when those societies arose, and how they should be understood to be genuine, are matters of ongoing debate, to which the contents of the volume contribute in various ways. But if a single origin for the practice and maintenance of chattel slavery in antiquity can be identified, it lies in the right of victors in warfare, endemic to the ancient world, to dispose of the defeated as they saw fit: to free, hold to ransom, or kill them; or to retain them in a state of servitude as long as they wished. Slavery in antiquity can be regarded accordingly as a cultural manifestation of the ubiquitous violence in society that incessant warfare typified, bringing into being social relationships in which absolute power was exercised by some over others whose lives had been spared after military conquest.

If the volume illustrates how deeply embedded slavery was in the life of the differing societies that made up the ancient Mediterranean world, over long intervals of time and across a vast geographical space, it equally makes clear that there was never any sustained opposition to slavery. The question may well have sometimes been asked whether slavery was justifiable; and some communities, that of the Essenes for instance, were said not to have practised slave-owning. But the question was academic only, and the communities concerned were few and exceptional. It remains a fact that as far as can be seen, no movement advocating an end to slavery ever appeared in the ancient world. To those today who live in societies that regard the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century as an integral element of a progressive democratic legacy, this may seem difficult to understand, especially in view of the rise in late antiquity of Christianity, a religion that was open to all members of society, slaves as well as free, and whose religiously levelling character could be assumed, in principle, to have had socially ameliorative consequences. In its Protestant forms in later history, Christianity was of course a mainstay of the modern abolitionist cause. But ideas of improving social change were not characteristic of the ancient world, and if the new religion had any effect at all, it was to reinforce, not to challenge, traditional social structures. Christianity did not make a difference to slavery in antiquity, and in the absence of any notion of universal freedom or of comparable rights and privileges as understood in the modern Western liberal tradition, slavery in the ancient Mediterranean world never became a problem.

The chapters that make up the volume are of two types. Some give chronological surveys of the development of slavery in particular periods or places. Others treat topics or themes. The overall organisational aim has been to allow the centrality of slavery in ancient Mediterranean life to emerge from diverse but interrelated perspectives: historical, cultural, legal, archaeological, demographic and, occasionally, comparative. Inevitably the conclusions reached are based on sources that represent almost exclusively the views and interests of the slave-owning sectors of ancient society, not

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of those who lived in slavery. Many slaves and former slaves in the ancient Mediterranean world were literate and may well have written about their experiences of life in slavery. But if so, nothing of substance has survived, and the emergence of a slave literature of the kind familiar from the history of New World slavery seems not to have been a prominent feature of the history of ancient slavery. Nor apparently were slave-owners much concerned to write works about slavery or individual slaves that would now allow direct views of the institution's material conditions to be seen and a servile perspective perhaps to be glimpsed. There were occasional exceptions. Caecilius of Caleacte wrote a work on the history of slave rebellions in Sicily, and Hermippos of Berytus a work on slaves who achieved eminence in learning. Both authors had once perhaps been slaves themselves (*RE* III, 1.1174–88; VIII, 1.853–4). Again, however, their books have not survived, and altogether the slave's view of slavery remains elusive. Each chapter in the volume includes a synthesis of modern research on its topic, but authors have been encouraged to present their own opinions and to write free from theoretical or ideological constraint. As in many multi-authored works, approaches and methods vary considerably, but the volume as a whole provides a comprehensive introduction to its principal subject. *The Cambridge History of World Slavery* is a response to the enormous interest scholars have shown in the history of slavery in the last generation. This volume reflects the attention to slavery paid by historians of the ancient Mediterranean world.

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## CHAPTER 1

## SLAVERY IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

DANIEL C. SNELL

## DEFINING SLAVERY IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The study of the ancient Near East, the modern Middle East from Iran to Turkey to Egypt, has been pursued in the last two centuries in societies of Europe and the Americas that have themselves been mired in industrial slavery. Scholars of the ancient region have consequently been quick to point out that nowhere do we see the kind of mass exploitation that we find since the sixteenth century of our era. Some have tried to deny that there even were slaves in the ancient Near East and have suggested that we should not call some of the dependent people slaves.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that there were other kinds of dependency in the ancient Near East besides slavery, and ancient law-givers and others who reflected their societies were not concerned clearly to define lowly statuses that they took for granted. But there is no question that persons could be and were bought and sold from a very early period, such transactions fitting with a traditional definition of what slavery is. Patterson (1982), however, questions whether this is sufficient. He argues that in societies with a wide range of documentation, a more general component of the lives of enslaved peoples was systematic dishonour from the enslaving group. He speaks also of natal alienation, meaning that the enslaving group went to lengths to deny the actual family relationships of the enslaved and to create a new subservient identity for them, engineering their social death to their former lives in freedom.

The evidence from the ancient Near East is usually not detailed enough to say anything about dishonour, how it was felt or sometimes even whether it existed. But we do know that those who found themselves enslaved frequently had their names changed; foreign names especially seem to have been replaced by more local ones, and female slave names especially seem to belong to a distinctive category borne only by slaves.<sup>2</sup> This has the function for us of obscuring the origins of the enslaved, but for them it had the function of deracinating them and re-creating them as little Mesopotamians of

<sup>1</sup> Adams 1966: 103.    <sup>2</sup> Harris 1977: 48–9; Baker 2001: 23.

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low status. If we read carefully the records about slavery across the three millennia covered by cuneiform-using societies, it is repeatedly clear that there were instances of the self-conscious imposition of social death and of dishonour. And if we cannot agree absolutely on terminology, it is nonetheless clear that the institutions that gave elites power in Mesopotamian cities seem to have been where dependent people were concentrated.<sup>3</sup>

It is legitimate therefore to compare instances of oppression in the ancient Near East with later phenomena. For slavery we have many archival texts, texts that were meant to be kept only for a brief time to fend off disputes about ownership. These are usually laconic and structured simply, with little unnecessary detail. Their point usually is to name living witnesses who would be able to confirm the agreement of the parties concerned. So these lists of names were much more important to the participants than any elaboration of exactly what was and was not permitted, and usually we hear nothing of the thoughts of the sold person.

We also have legal collections made mostly by kings. These were probably not codes in a modern sense of collections of rules intended to be enforced in a jurisdiction. But they may have been resolutions of the community that sketched out examples of correct human behaviour and the justice that could be dispensed by human rulers. They appear to have been teaching texts rather than documents from the practice of law.<sup>4</sup> And yet they are invaluable as a sketch of the possibilities envisioned within their societies. They notoriously did not define their terms, but they do show how people were supposed to interact. And that allows us to examine the norms of these societies in ideal times, which admittedly may never have existed.

There are chance references to slavery too in letters, especially between officials. And in royal propaganda there is sometimes mention not usually of real slavery, actual people who were demeaned and could be bought and sold, but of political subordination decried as slavery.<sup>5</sup> Although this does not help us understand how slavery worked, it does help us see what people's attitudes were towards it; everywhere it was a sorry state to be avoided at all costs.

The appearance of slaves in literary texts is more limited and not as suggestive as in the categories just named. But again the slave was a social type that sometimes had to be dealt with in texts copied for scribal education in the cuneiform tradition.

Beyond that tradition, the evidence of slavery is more patchy and best understood in light of evidence from better-documented societies. And yet in Egypt and in the North-West Semitic-speaking areas of the Syrian and Palestinian coast, there is evidence for something like the ancient Near Eastern practice of slavery. The Hebrew Bible passed down texts copied

<sup>3</sup> Adams 1966: 103–4.<sup>4</sup> Finkelstein 1961: 103.<sup>5</sup> Snell 2001: 75–6.

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over generations that purport to refer to the first millennium BC, and though there is little doubt that scribes updated them in copying, they may frequently represent early conditions. As evidence is more scarce, there is of course more leeway to impose one's own preconceived notions on it.

#### THE INVENTION OF SLAVERY

Although it is from the ancient Near East that we have the earliest writings, we can be sure that they do not attest to the origins of slavery. We believe those go back much further into the past, before the rise of societies organised as states, to simpler polities that have been called chieftaincies. These were conglomerations of village farming communities united by a belief in their common descent and organised in a loose way by leaders known for their wealth, their generosity, and their abilities to compel people to do what they wanted. The areas controlled might vary, and the relation of chieftaincies to the state is probably not possible to define with absolute clarity. We may say that a state is an organisation that theoretically at least is not directly tied to the personality of the leader, but a chieftaincy was.<sup>6</sup> When the chief died, all possibilities were open; his son or successor might be able to take over his role, but that was negotiable and might not in fact be negotiated. Chieftaincies were better and more efficient at waging war than simpler societies, but also at arranging peace.<sup>7</sup>

Apparently all such societies, and even nomadic groups,<sup>8</sup> had slaves. It is not known why these polities generated slavery, and though there is a growing literature on chieftaincies, there is almost nothing recent that considers the connection to slaves. The guess is that, though there were certainly conflicts in simpler societies between neighbouring villages that might lead to war and bloodshed, the need to continue peaceful relations after war minimised the temptation to exploit prisoners of war and led to prisoner exchanges as conditions of peace. But societies organised on a larger scale could afford to ignore the sensibilities of a village of people who had been enemies. The greed to acquire more hands to do work overcame the need to establish a stable peace, and the prisoners were retained. It stands to reason, though the evidence is weak, that the first such prisoners were women, since enemy men were likely to be killed or, as we shall see below, otherwise mutilated. Men were a continuing threat, especially those who had been skilled at war. But women, it may have been felt, could be subdued, raped and exploited more easily, and they might be folded into the polity as secondary wives. Chieftaincies could never be concerned to exploit too many people in this way, and all would have been used in domestic capacities, serving as amenities for the leadership related to the

<sup>6</sup> Service 1975: 293.<sup>7</sup> Service 1975: 271.<sup>8</sup> Nieboer 1900; Sáenz 1991.

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chiefs. The women might run away, but not if they were from a distant village, nor if they were pregnant or already had children in the community.

In Mesopotamia itself there is no physical evidence of slavery in early periods. But the suggestion has been made that the Ubaid period (5500–4000 BC) may have seen changes that corresponded to chieftaincy organisations.<sup>9</sup> The main evidence is the creation of public buildings, usually understood as temples, within the rather small settlements we find exploiting irrigation along the rivers of southern Iraq.

In the earliest texts we find signs that probably mean ‘slave’ and ‘slave girl’; one later became a sign for ‘mountain’ and ‘foreign country’. Another came to mean ‘woman’. There were also other signs that cannot be interpreted because they later dropped out of the system. The earliest texts had groups of somewhat more than fifty almost equally divided between men and women.<sup>10</sup> A later form of the sign for ‘slave’ in Sumerian had a sign for ‘man’ with a sign for ‘mountain’ worked into it, and in fact many slaves appear to have been caught in the Iranian foothills and brought to the Mesopotamian plain.

The later Sumerian word for ‘slave’, *arad*, is either the same or directly derived from the Akkadian word, *wardum*.<sup>11</sup> The mountains may not be far away from that word either, since there is a possibly related Akkadian verb meaning ‘to descend, to go down’, though that might be taken socially, not physically. Others have sought an etymology from Sumerian words for ‘man’, *ur*, and ‘woman’, *eme*, showing up in later Sumerian as *geme*, ‘(working) girl’.<sup>12</sup>

Speculation on etymology does not bring us back to the origins of the terms, but there were several other ways of referring to slaves. One was to list them as ‘head, male’, or ‘head, female’.<sup>13</sup> This tells us nothing about origins, but it is the way animals also could be counted, and it probably was meant to reduce slaves to animals. Another early term is ‘blind ones’, literally ‘eyes do not see’. Perhaps the word originated in the often posited practice of killing male prisoners of war but preserving female prisoners for work and reproduction, while mutilating some few others. Blinding is known from the slaves of the Scythians as a way of keeping slaves from trying to escape.<sup>14</sup>

In early times slaves were sometimes referred to as *subur*, connecting them to the country called Subar, the northern reaches of Mesopotamia. The idea that this alone shows that chattel slavery itself was imported from the north seems unlikely in light of comparative material.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Porada, Hansen, Dunham and Babcock 1992: 87; Stein 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Gelb 1982. <sup>12</sup> Krecher 1987. <sup>13</sup> Gelb 1982: 89.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor 2001: 38. <sup>15</sup> Gelb 1982: 89–90.

<sup>10</sup> Vajman 1989.

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Another term that appears from the Old Babylonian period on (2004–1595 BC) is *subaru* ‘lad, young one’. That word may imply nothing about slave status, but sometimes it is obvious that slaves were meant. One letter writer begs, ‘Please take my lads along and sell them.’ And another notes silver ‘for the price of an ox and a lad’. Another letter advises, ‘There is no lad worthy of any trust.’<sup>16</sup> In the same vein later periods refer to the slave as *qallu*, a word probably related to notions of lightness, unimportance, and inferiority.<sup>17</sup>

## STATE AND CORVÉE

As the Mesopotamian city-state remade its environment and attempted to irrigate more and more land, it did so not by organising slaves but by compelling peasants living nearby to work on the canals as forced labour. This involved giving them rations and direction, though it may not have involved much physical punishment. People subject to this corvée – *dullu* ‘forced labour, misery’ in Akkadian, *dusu* ‘basket’ in Sumerian – may have been marched some distance from their homes and set up in camps. But the obligation probably fell during agricultural off-seasons and did not last more than a month or two. Through all Mesopotamian history corvée was an important power of the state, always more important than slavery. And it is not obvious that corvée labourers were necessarily viewed as dishonoured.<sup>18</sup> Scribes and officials too sometimes were called upon to do corvée, and corvée workers and their labour were not sold. Still, the meticulous labour texts from the Ur III period (2112–2004 BC) show that small numbers of workers attempted to run away.<sup>19</sup>

## UR III SLAVES IN COURT

Texts from southern Mesopotamia document the ‘final judgements’ of courts in a couple of cities. Twelve of the texts show results of cases in which slaves tried to dispute their slave status, and their arguments reveal some details about slave life we would not otherwise have known. In one case the court reaffirmed the slave status of a woman who had run away with her daughters from her master. The master held the slaves as punishment since their husband and father had murdered the master’s father, a court musician. The runaway had spent most of her life as a free woman and had been a slave only for five years. She clearly knew how to pass as free, and perhaps some of her old friends had harboured her, since she eluded her master for a time.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Gelb *et al.* 1956: E 232.<sup>17</sup> Gelb *et al.* 1956: Q 64–6.<sup>18</sup> Sharashenidze 1986.<sup>19</sup> Snell 2001: 48–54.<sup>20</sup> Falkenstein 1956–7: no. 41.



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A more typical case involved a slave who argued that his father had been freed more than fifteen years previously. But the current master produced witnesses who affirmed that they had seen the father receive rations from the household, apparently implying that he must still have been a slave. It was not clear if the father had been living away from the household and perhaps paying a fee to the master and so appearing to be a free craftsman. The son may have been confused about the status of the father, but the court was also stacked against him.<sup>21</sup> There was no legal barrier to a slave's appearing in court at least to argue his case for freedom. This society divided up the roles of slaves as things and as persons differently from the societies influenced by Roman law with which we are more familiar.

A few cases show that there was a recognised class of freedmen who had lower status than the freeborn but could claim to be locals by birth. The freedman was not, however, a 'son of the city', with political rights, but simply a 'free son'.<sup>22</sup>

## PRICES

'Blind ones' were cheaper than 'heads' in the Early Dynastic period (c. 2400 BC), once costing fourteen shekels of silver versus twenty,<sup>23</sup> but prices could vary. The shekel was a weight of about 8.33 grammes, and sixty were sometimes the equivalent of a month's wage for an unskilled worker. Silver was paid by breaking it and weighing the pieces. In the Old Akkadian period (2334–2195 BC), a letter writer asked for two slaves in exchange for his fifteen shekels, though both were to be 'young and beardless', and so perhaps cheap.<sup>24</sup> Ur III (2112–2004 BC) slave prices varied from two-thirds of a shekel to fifty-five, but most were under ten shekels.<sup>25</sup> In the Neo-Babylonian and later periods (605–333 BC), prices ranged from nineteen to more than a hundred shekels.<sup>26</sup>

From the Old Babylonian period (c. 2004–1595 BC), we have a number of documents that allow us for the first time to study price changes over time. As in the Early Dynastic period, male slaves cost about fifteen shekels of silver. But there were fluctuations. Since we have several other commodities priced in the period, we can see that the inflation in slave prices corresponded to an inflation in other prices, especially in the reign of one of the Old Babylonian kings, Abi-eshuh (1711–1684 BC), whose loss of territory may have affected his city's ability to procure grain and slaves.<sup>27</sup> The availability of slaves from northern Mesopotamia fell off under the later kings of Babylon, probably because of the rise of the state of Mitanni

<sup>21</sup> Falkenstein 1956–7: no. 34. <sup>22</sup> Westbrook 2003b.<sup>23</sup> Nikol'skii 1908: 293. <sup>24</sup> Michalowski 1993: 45, text 58.<sup>25</sup> Falkenstein 1956–7, 1: 88–90. <sup>26</sup> Dandamaev 1984: 200–95. <sup>27</sup> Farber 1978.

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in what is now northern Syria.<sup>28</sup> There is advice in an Old Babylonian letter about selling ‘lads’:

So long as the lad is not fine looking, don’t consider buying him. Also the slave-girl . . . so long as she is not fine looking and is small, don’t consider buying her . . . We bought two slave girls for a third mana three shekels [23 shekels or 11.5 each]. Since they were thin, no one bought them. I have arranged that they now appear in good health, and I shall sell them. Don’t pay attention to the low cost and buy no slave not fine looking. As long as a slave or a slave girl does not look fine, don’t consider buying them!<sup>29</sup>

## HAMMURAPI’S VISION

From early in the Old Babylonian period, we have two monumental texts that show how slavery worked in theory. The Edict of Ammisaduga, king of Babylon *c.* 1626 BC, decreed the remission of some kinds of debt, probably in response to an agricultural crisis. Although the king ordered that free people who had been enslaved for debt should be freed, he was careful to note that other slaves were not to be freed at all. The edict may have been thought of as a ‘freedom edict’, but it did not apply to regular slaves.<sup>30</sup>

The other and much more famous document is Hammurapi’s so-called code which recorded about 282 ‘decisions of justice’, some of which dealt with slaves. While we must warn that the connection of the text to practice is remote, the code does allow us to see fairly clearly ideas about justice, and sometimes we can see underlying social practices.<sup>31</sup>

Probably the most enduring of those practices is the Near Eastern descent system, in which a marriage between a free person and a slave resulted in a child of free status. In the code it was obvious that this way of reckoning descent was not applied without exception. If the father never acknowledged that the child was his, the child would not divide the inheritance with free half-siblings but would nonetheless be free. If the father had acknowledged the child, at his death the child inherited a portion equal to any other offspring, and the slave mother became free.<sup>32</sup> This way of proceeding became the most common manner of tracing descent since it was assumed by Islamic law.<sup>33</sup> Its practice meant that female slaves usually could count on their children’s being acknowledged and on their own being free if they had children with their masters. At Old Babylonian Mari, enslaved women actually changed their names at the birth of their free child, perhaps to commemorate this eventual change in status.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> van Koppen 2004: 23.      <sup>29</sup> Kraus 1964: text 139, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Pritchard 1969: 526–8, paragraph 21.      <sup>31</sup> Westbrook 2003a: 12–13, 16; Roth 1997: 76–142.

<sup>32</sup> Roth 1997: 113–14, paragraphs 170–1.      <sup>33</sup> Juynboll 1974: 3.      <sup>34</sup> Charpin 2003.