PART I

The economy of slavery

Introduction

CONQUEST AND CAPITAL: THE PROBLEM OF SLAVERY IN ROMAN HISTORY

The Roman empire was home to the most extensive and enduring slave system in pre-modern history. Slavery has been virtually ubiquitous in human civilization, but the Romans created one of the few "genuine slave societies" in the western experience.[1] The other example of classical antiquity, the slave society of Greece, was fleeting and diminutive by comparison.[2] Stretching across half a millennium and sprawling over a vast tract of space, Roman slavery existed on a different order of magnitude. Five centuries, three continents, tens of millions of souls: Roman slavery stands as the true ancient predecessor to the systems of mass-scale slavery in the New World. We cannot explain the Roman slave system as the spoils of imperial conquest. Roman slavery was a lasting feature of an entire historical epoch, implicated in the very forces that made the Roman Mediterranean historically exceptional. Military hegemony, the rule of law, the privatization of property, urbanism, the accumulation of capital, an enormous market economy – the circulation of human chattel developed in step with these other characteristic elements of Roman civilization.

This book is a study of slavery in the late Roman empire, over the long fourth century, AD 275–425.[3] Throughout this period, slavery remained

[1] Finley 1998 (orig. 1980), 135–60, and 1968. For the usefulness, and limits, of the concept, see chapter 1. For slavery in human history: Davis 2006 and 1966; Hernæs and Iversen 2002; Turley 2000; Patterson 1982.

[2] For Greek slavery: Cartledge 2001 and 1985; Osborne 1995; Fisher 1993; Garlan 1988; Westermann 1955, 1–46.

[3] A selective list of essential contributions to the study of late Roman slavery: Grey forthcoming; Lenski forthcoming, 2009, 2008, and 2006a; Vera 2007, 1999, 1998, and 1995; Wickham 2005a and 1984; Rotman 2004; McCormick 2002 and 2001; Klein 2000 and 1988; Melluso 2000; Nathan 2000, 169–84; Giliberti 1999; Shaw 1998; Grieser 1997; Bagnall 1993; Kontoulis 1993; Samson 1989; De Martino 1988a and 1988b; MacMullen 1987; Whittaker 1987; Finley 1998 (orig. 1980), 191–217; Brockmeyer 1979, 198–235; Dockès 1979; Fikhman 1974 and 1973; Nehlsen 1972; Shtaerman 1964; Seyfarth 1963;

a vigorous institution. The primary spokesmen of the age provide vivid testimony to the importance of slavery. Augustine, bishop of Hippo on the coast of North Africa, could claim that "nearly all households" owned slaves.[4] Eastern church fathers and social critics like John Chrysostom assumed that commercial agriculture, based on slave labor, was the road to riches.[5] Their contemporaries spoke of Roman senators with thousands of slaves toiling in the countryside.[6] The laws, papyri, and inscriptions of the age bear out these claims. An inscription, recently uncovered, lists the names and ages of 152 slaves belonging to a single land-owner in the Aegean.[7] There is not a more concrete, irrefutable artefact of large-scale rural slavery from the entire Roman era. And hundreds of more humble testimonies – a receipt for a Gallic slave boy sold in the east, a reading exercise teaching young boys how to dominate their slaves, a report of a slave who broke down watching his wife being flogged – add historical plausibility and human drama to the story of late Roman slavery.

When and why did the Roman slave system come to an end? These are classic questions, central in the effort to construct grand narratives of transition from antiquity to the middle ages. Did the end of imperial expansion generate a critical deficit of bodies on the slave market, leading inexorably to the decline of the system? Did the contradictions of slave labor force an inevitable crisis in the slave mode of production, ushering in the age of feudalism? This book will answer "no" to both of these traditional propositions. The abundant and credible evidence for slavery in the fourth century sits poorly with any narrative which posits a structural decline or transformation of the slave system before this period. And yet, somehow the slave system of the later Roman empire has always been regarded as a system in decline or transition, separate from the age when Roman society was a genuine slave society, when the slave mode of production was dominant in the heartland of the empire. To understand this enduring tension between the evidence and the story of decline, we must appreciate the way that the grand narratives of ancient slavery were formed, and the assumptions their creators made about the nature of slavery, its causes and dynamics.

Verlinden 1955–77; Westermann 1955; Bloch 1975 (orig. 1947); Ciccotti 1899. See Bellen and Heinen 2003, vol. 1, 254–8, for more bibliography.

[4] Aug. Psal. 124.7 (CC 40: 1840–1): *prope omnes domus*. All Greek and Latin translations are my own, unless noted; for Syriac, Hebrew, and Coptic, I signal the translations I have used.

[5] Ioh. Chrys. In Mt. 24.11 (PG 57: 319); Ioh. Chrys. In act. Apost. 32.2 (PG 60: 237).

[6] Ger. Vit. Mel. (lat.) 18.3 (Laurence: 188–90); Pall. H. Laus. 61 (Butler vol. 2: 156); Ioh. Chrys. In Mt. 63.4 (PG 58: 608); Bas. (dub.) Is. 2.89 (PG 30: 264); SHA, Quadr. Tyr. 12.1–2 (Hohl vol. 2: 230).

[7] Harper 2008; Geroussi-Bendermacher 2005.

Let us, as a thought experiment, imagine two versions of the rise and fall of Roman slavery. The first is organized around the role of *conquest*. Having emerged victorious from the Second Punic War, the Romans looked outward and embarked on a campaign for Mediterranean hegemony that lasted two centuries. In the wake of conquest came slaves, the ultimate spoils of empire. Millions of captives flowed into Italy, chained into gangs and forced to work the plantations of the senatorial aristocracy. The small farmer, the backbone of the citizen army, was forced to take part in ever longer campaigns and found himself gradually displaced by slave-based estates. The countryside was overrun with plantations, a process which triggered spasms of servile unrest in Sicily and then the mainland. When the empire reached its boundaries, the expansion of slavery too had reached its limits. The system gradually folded in upon itself. Natural reproduction stalled the decline but also modified the nature of the slave system, as masters allowed slaves to have families, installed them on plots of their own, and treated them more leniently. By the late empire an alternative form of dependent labor was required, and the state complied in the institution of the colonate, a fiscal system tying rural laborers to the land.

Our second model of Roman slavery is organized around *capital* – shorthand for the networks of property and exchange created by Roman law and the Roman economy. In this account, the Roman conquest of the Mediterranean was a hostile takeover of the world system that Greek and Punic empires had prepared. In the crucial second century, the Romans began to create an economy on an unprecedented scale. Roman roads criss-crossed the landmass from Spain to Syria; the sea lanes were cleared of pirates; the populations on the northern shores of the Mediterranean consumed grain from the fertile fields of Africa and Egypt; cities flourished as never before. Wine became the first of history's great cash crops. Urban markets fostered trade and specialized production. Roman slavery matured not because captives of war glutted the western Mediterranean with cheap bodies for sale, but because this new economy created the ability to consume and exploit slave labor on an unprecedented scale. Far from being decadent by the second century AD, the slave system peaked in the *pax Romana*. In this model, the decline of the slave system is not encoded in its very genesis and is thus harder to explain.

These two outlines are caricatures, and if this book will favor the second interpretation, any ancient historian would admit that there is an element of truth in both accounts. The caricatures are useful, though, because they can help us understand the formation of the consensus that Roman slavery was on its downward slope by the time of the late empire. The first

version of Roman slavery, the conquest thesis, took shape in an era when economic history lay in the future, when legal, military, and moral themes dominated historical investigation.[8] This narrative of Roman slavery would provide the pattern of rise and fall, the default position. Even as the second, economic model has gained a progressively larger place in the way historians think about ancient slavery, the basic trajectory of rise and fall has scarcely changed. So not only is there a tension between the extensive evidence for slavery in the late empire and the thesis of decline, there is a deeper disjuncture between the thesis of decline and the structural dynamics within which historians describe the trajectory of the Roman slave system. In other words, if capital rather than conquest was a motive force in the Roman slave system, then why has the story of decline been written almost exclusively as though the system were a product of martial expansion?

This tension goes back to the nineteenth century, when the plotline of Roman slavery's rise and fall would be recast in economic terms.[9] Max Weber was the axial figure in this turn. In 1896 he offered the classic formulation of the conquest thesis. In Weber's account, the rise of the Roman empire created a system of slave labor which was a direct outgrowth of imperial conquest. Even the control of slave labor was a continuation of war, organized on plantations that were run as army barracks, with celibate male slaves chained together. The end of conquest, then, was nothing less than "the turning point" of ancient civilization.[10] The end of military expansion catalyzed a process in which the slave supply withered, and consequently the price of labor rose. In turn, the slave system began to mutate internally, as slave-owners allowed slaves to form families, and slaves dissolved into the undifferentiated mass of rural dependents. These changes, in step with the development of the colonate, led to the gradual emergence of medieval serfdom. In his article, Weber compassed nearly every argument which would be made for the decline of slavery over the next century, and its influence would be impossible to overstate.[11] His model takes its reading of the evidence, its assumptions of rise and fall, from a pre-existing mold. And Weber's account suggests that conquest moves capital, creating a "political capitalism" that temporarily displaced

[8] Finley 1998 (orig. 1980), 79–134, for the early historiography. Wallon 1847; Biot 1840.
[9] Meyer 1924 (orig. 1898); Weber 1896; Ciccotti 1899. Allard rewrote his work (orig. 1876) specifically to counter the argument that the decline of Roman slavery had economic causes. Specifically the fifth edn., issued in 1914. Mazza 1977, xlii, on this debate between idealism and materialism.
[10] Weber 1896; cf. Meyer 1924 (orig. 1898), 209, when conquest ended, slavery came to a "Stillstand" and then receded.
[11] Mazzarino 1966, 140. Banaji 2001, 24–31, a critical assessment.

the natural, *oikos*-based society; slavery was the core feature of this political capitalism.[12]

In the same period, a detailed Marxist interpretation of ancient slavery was taking shape. Most of Marx's own work on pre-capitalist societies, including Roman history, was embryonic or unpublished; the details were left to Engels and the heirs of the Marxist tradition.[13] The Marxist framework that developed in the late nineteenth century would place Roman slavery within an evolutionary model of development organized around modes of production. The late Roman empire straddled the threshold between ancient slavery and medieval feudalism. Ciccotti, who provided the first full-scale treatment of ancient slavery from a Marxist perspective, identified the putative inefficiency of slave labor as the motor of class conflict which led to the crisis of the slave system.[14] This dogma would remain central in *orthodox* Marxist scholarship on Roman slavery, particularly in the Soviet bloc.[15] In fact it was only within Communist circles that the study of ancient slavery was very active for the first three-quarters of the twentieth century.[16] An enormous body of literature accumulated, little of it edifying, seeking ever finer analysis of the "crisis of the slave-holding order" in Roman history. In this tradition, conquest created slavery; internal contradictions undermined it.

It was only in the 1970s that serious reconsideration of Roman slavery began, informed by new approaches to economic history but also armed with piles of emerging archaeological data. These influences, in conjunction, would allow the first overt discussion of the relative importance of conquest and capital, of politics and economics, in the rise and fall of Roman slavery. This conversation would be caught, cross-wise, in the middle of a broader debate over the relative merits of "primitivist" and "modernist" views of the Roman economy. Finley described the rise of Roman slavery as the result of a structural shortage of labor created by the mass military mobilization of the Italian peasantry and the institutional protections that prevented land-owners from enslaving free citizens.[17] Hopkins gave

[12] Lo Cascio 2009, 331–4, for an insightful analysis.
[13] Hobsbawm 1964. See *The German Ideology* in Tucker 1978, 152, for the adaptation of the conquest thesis by Marx himself, although not published until 1932.
[14] Ciccotti 1899, 305. See Mazza 1977, 1–11.
[15] Criticized already by Finley 1998 (orig. 1980), 206–7. Brockmeyer 1979, 45.
[16] This scholarship is invaluably described in German in Seyfarth 1963, 1–78, and Brockmeyer 1979, 49–66. Shtaerman 1984 and 1964 is the finest product of the Soviet scholarship. Günther 1984; Held 1971. In the west Westermann's positivist *omnium gatherum* appeared in 1955. De Ste. Croix 1981 (endorsing Weber's model at p. 231) and Anderson 1974, for western Marxist approaches.
[17] Finley 1998 (orig. 1980).

the finest statement of this model in a monograph with the revealing title, *Conquerors and Slaves*.[18] Finley was too perceptive an empirical historian to believe that the decline of slavery was a foregone conclusion. He stressed the endurance of the Roman slave system and scrupulously admitted that the study of later Roman slavery remained problematic.[19]

In these same years, scholars in France and Italy began to analyze Roman slavery with the categories of class and capital, but without the dogmatism that had paralyzed Marxist historiography in the Communist bloc.[20] In diametric opposition to orthodox Marxism, the neo-Marxist school situated Roman slavery within the modern, advanced sector of the ancient economy.[21] Slavery was a profitable institution embedded in circuits of exchange-oriented production. This shift, influenced by the contemporary work on the economics of American slavery, has been a sort of Copernican revolution in the study of Roman slavery. Equally fatefully, the neo-Marxist school advanced the debate by making use of archaeological evidence. The most obvious example is the excavation of the villa at Settefinestre, which connected a specific site, and by extension an entire settlement pattern, to the economic forms described by the Roman agricultural writers.[22] The archaeology of trade played a complementary role: the slave mode of production was correlated with the extraordinary distribution of containers which carried Italian wine throughout the Mediterranean in the late republic and early empire.[23] Here it is not just military conquest, but more crucially the conquest of markets which fueled the slave system.

By the 1980s the case for emphasizing capital in the causal framework of slavery was gaining momentum. The death knell for the conquest thesis quickly followed, as for the first time research turned to ask the primary question of whether or not conquest even *could* have produced a slave system on the Roman scale.[24] The answer has been a resounding "no," which continues to echo throughout the discussion. Scheidel has shown that natural reproduction rather than military conquest was the principal source of the slave supply.[25] This research has kindled a serious discussion about the number of Roman slaves; only in recent years have credible figures

[18] Hopkins 1978.
[19] Whittaker 1987 also argued persuasively for the long endurance of the slave system.
[20] Mazza 1986, 1977, and 1975; re-edn. of Ciccotti 1899 in 1977. Carandini 1989b, 1988, 1986, and 1979. Crowned by *Società romana e produzione schiavistica* in 1981. The Besançon colloquia began in the early 1970s, and the study of ancient slavery in France has remained vigorous ever since.
[21] See the synthesis of Schiavone 2000; Carandini 1983; Kolendo 1980.
[22] Carandini 1989b and 1986. [23] Panella 1989, 1986, and 1981.
[24] Harris 1980, was seminal. Roth 2007; Scheidel 2005a, 1999, and 1997; Bradley 2004 and 1987a; Harris 1999.
[25] See chapter 2.

for the dimensions of the Roman slave system been proposed. Based on little evidence, Beloch, Brunt, and Hopkins had produced estimates of the slave population that were fantastically overblown.[26] Downsizing the Roman slave population does nothing to mitigate slavery's significance; rather, it clarifies slavery's role in transforming an ancient economy. The new insights into the scale and supply of the Roman slave population have a dramatic effect on the way we understand the mechanics of the Roman slave system – including the significance of females, families, child labor, etc.[27] And cutting down the slave population to realistic size also reconfigures the way we understand the trajectory of Roman slavery's rise and fall, the measure of decline.

The current wisdom on the Roman slave system might be something like this. The Roman conquest in the second century BC catalyzed an economic transformation of Italy. Conquest augmented a slave supply that was diverse and even in its early phases relied profoundly on natural reproduction as a source of new bodies. The growth of urban markets, the rise of wine as a cash crop, the influx of capital, and heavy demands on the free peasantry created demand for agricultural slave labor in Italy, a need for estate labor which had no precedent on this scale. Within this revisionist narrative of slavery's *rise*, the destiny of Roman slavery has remained vague. As the colonate, at least in its older form as an intermediate stage between slavery and feudalism, has been exposed for the convenient historian's myth that it always was, it is less clear than ever what happened to Roman slavery in the late empire.[28] Old stories die hard. Many propose that Roman slavery was gradually resorbed into an economy where more traditional forms of labor, especially tenancy, dominated. Common is the idea that slaves were allowed families and used like tenants on extensive estates, *latifundia*, as part of a transition from ancient slavery to medieval serfdom.[29] The shades of Marx and Weber still stalk this corner of the past, and the history of late Roman slavery has never broken free of the intellectual coils first imposed by the conquest thesis.

Building on the work that has so profoundly renovated our understanding of Roman slavery's expansionary period, this book tries to re-frame the last phases of Roman slavery. Such a venture requires us to suspend

[26] Hopkins 1978, 8; Brunt 1971, esp. 124; Beloch 1886, 413–16. [27] Esp. Roth 2007.

[28] Which is not to imply that there are not important open questions in the study of the colonate, nor that the fiscal rules bearing upon *coloni* were insignificant in the labor market (see chapter 4). Carrié 1983 and 1982 have been seminal. In general, Sirks 2008; Grey 2007a; Kehoe 2007; Scheidel 2000; the essays in Lo Cascio 1997; Marcone 1988; Eibach 1980.

[29] The significant improvement made to this narrative by Wickham 2005a (a "peasant mode of production," with little extraction of surplus, intervened ca. 400–700, before the re-emergence of a feudal mode) will be discussed below and in chapter 4.

some deep-seated assumptions about the nature and trajectory of ancient slavery, and it is worth identifying at the outset some of the principal turns introduced by this account of late Roman slavery.

(1) We should abandon the presuppositions about slavery's rise and fall planted by the conquest thesis, especially as these assumptions have been quietly embedded in the influential narratives outlined by Marx and Weber. A complete, critical reappraisal of the evidence for slavery is imperative. (2) The slave supply and the relative efficiency of slave labor were important determinants of the slave system, but they were hardly the only ones, and neither was as simple or uni-directional as has often been supposed. What is needed is a comprehensive model based on supply *and* demand, with specific focus on the occupational and demographic structures of the slave system and the institutional properties of slave labor. (3) The pattern of change is not to be described by "transition." With little basis in the evidence, and less conceptual support, evolutionary models of change have dominated the study of late Roman slavery. But Roman slavery did not become medieval serfdom, and late antiquity was not an intermediate stage between antiquity and the middle ages. This book will suggest that a deep rupture runs down the middle of the period known as late antiquity. Mediterranean society remained a genuine slave society into the early fifth century, when finally the underlying structures of demand began to disintegrate in a way that brought an end to the epoch of ancient slavery.

"THE RICH MAN DANCES IN THE SAND!": THE MEDITERRANEAN ECONOMY IN THE LATE EMPIRE

This book is a study of slavery in the territories surrounding the Mediterranean, from AD 275 to 425. At the beginning of this period, the Roman empire was emerging from a half-century of political crisis and monetary chaos – a succession of ill-starred claimants to the throne, constant civil war, and continuous debasement of the currency. But emerge the empire did. The administrative foundations of bureaucratic monarchy were reinvigorated under Diocletian; Constantine added a new capital, a new religion, and a new currency, the gold *solidus*.[30] Historians no longer speak of a suffocating oriental "Dominate," and in fact the late Roman state is now seen as a rather approachable and even responsible, if always severe, public authority.[31] A single empire, under a single civil law, held sway from

[30] On Diocletian, Corcoran 2000. On Constantine, Lenski 2006b. For the currency, Hendy 1985.
[31] Selectively: Kelly 2004; Frakes 2001; Harries 1999; Carrié 1994; Brown 1992; McCormick 1987.

northern Britain to the southern frontiers of Egypt, from Syria to Spain. And yet, a century-and-a-half later, at the end of our period, a new and more fundamental age of crisis would begin in the west.[32] Rome was sacked, and over the next two centuries the western territories of the empire would be parceled up among Germanic successor kingdoms. The eastern empire would remain intact longer, until it too in the seventh century was dismembered by conquerors out of Arabia.

Over the last generation, these pivotal centuries of the human past have been rescued from the pall of "decline" which had hung over them since before the time of Gibbon.[33] The idea of late antiquity, of a vital period between the age of Marcus Aurelius and Mohammed, has cleared the path to reconsider the survival and eventual demise of Roman slavery. It is no longer reflexive to view events and processes of this period as part of a transition from the bright classical past to the dark medieval future. At the same time it must be noted that the creation of an intellectual space for late antiquity has not, thus far, led to a broad reconsideration of slavery. This is understandable, not only because the notion of a mechanistic transition from slavery to feudalism is so alien to the re-conception of the age, but also because the coherence of late antiquity as a period rests on religious and cultural foundations.[34] And yet it is increasingly possible to describe massive structural changes in the material foundations of late antique societies – changes that ultimately shaped the destiny of the slave system.

Slavery is an economic phenomenon, and a history of slavery must be situated within the economic history of the ancient world. Yet anyone who would try to describe the economic foundations of slavery in the fourth century will quickly become aware that the period straddles two distinct but overlapping traditions in the discipline of ancient history. The economic historiography of the high Roman empire has turned on debates about structure and scale; in the late Roman empire the themes of continuity and change dominate.[35] A tradition of inquiry running through Weber and Rostovtzeff asks what kind of economy the Roman empire created. Historians of the late Roman period, from Dopsch and Pirenne onward, have looked to measure the extent of change in late antiquity: how long the east–west trade routes remained open, when a certain city or landscape declined. These traditions have not always been in dialogue, yet a history

[32] Heather 2005; Ward-Perkins 2005.
[33] Esp. Brown 1971. cf. Giardina 1997c.
[34] Though see Brown 1974, for the contribution of Pirenne.
[35] Scheidel, Morris, and Saller 2007b; Pleket 1990. It is symptomatic that late antiquity is missing from the excellent collection of essays on ancient economic structures, Morris and Manning 2005. Late antique discussion about structure is often limited to questioning the "role of the state" or the reversion to "natural economy." Banaji 2001 is illuminating.