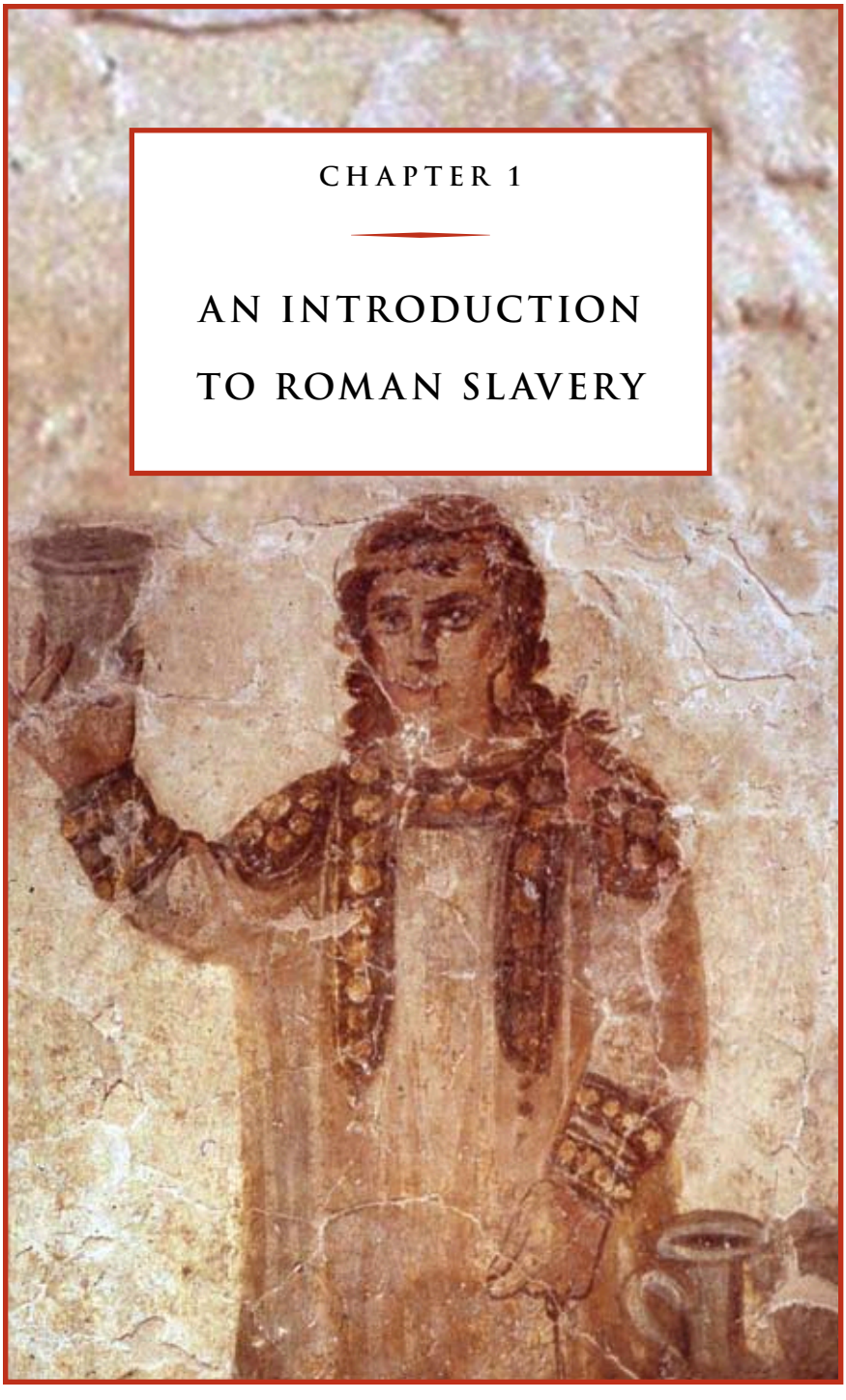


CHAPTER 1

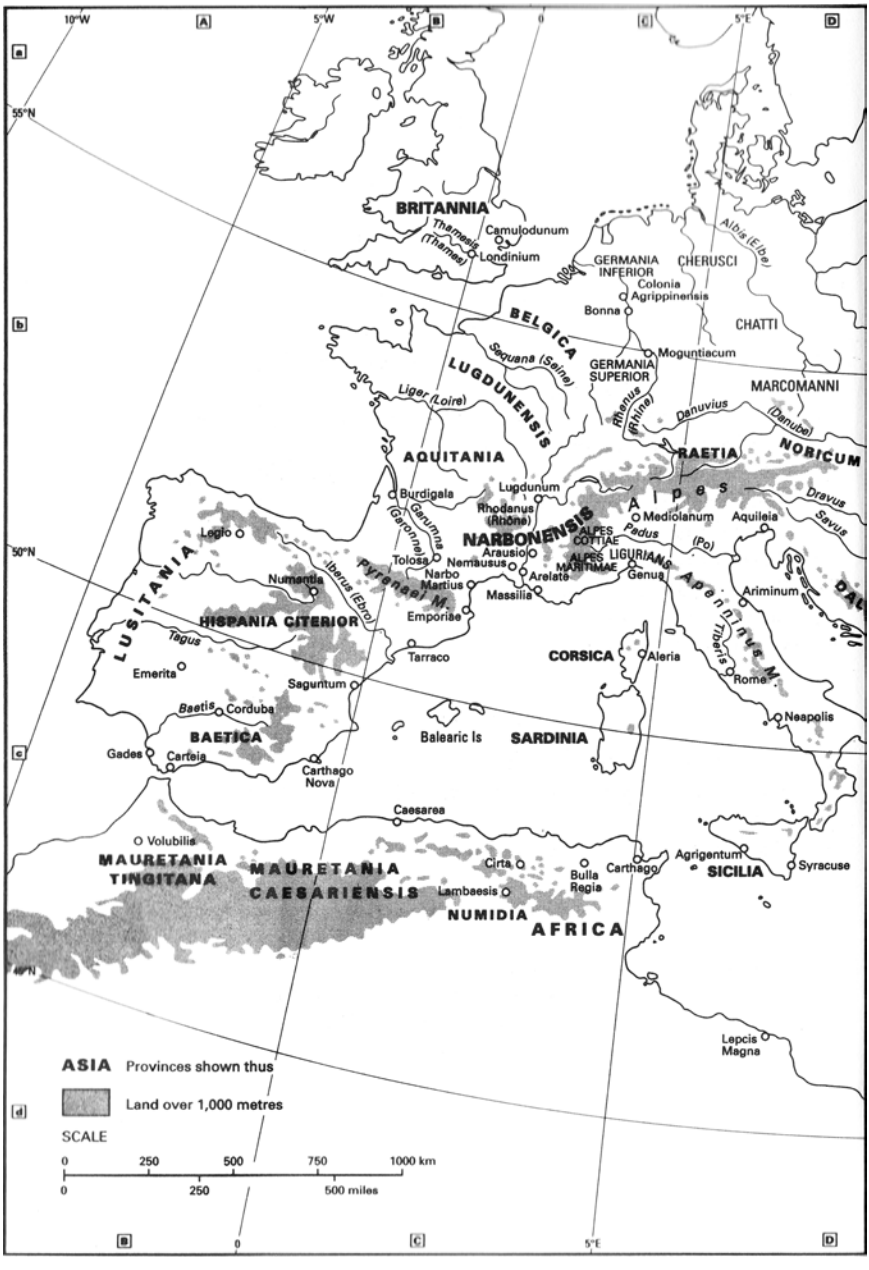
AN INTRODUCTION TO ROMAN SLAVERY

> Trafficking in persons is modern-day slavery, involving victims who are forced, defrauded or coerced into labor or sexual exploitation. Annually, about 600,000 to 800,000 people – mostly women and children – are trafficked across national borders which does not count millions trafficked within their own countries. … People are snared into trafficking by many means. In some cases, physical force is used. In other cases, false promises are made regarding job opportunities or marriages in foreign countries to entrap victims. … Human trafficking has a devastating impact on individual victims, who often suffer physical and emotional abuse, rape, threats against self and family, passport theft, and even death. But the impact of human trafficking goes beyond individual victims; it undermines the safety and security of all nations it touches. (United States Bureau of Public Affairs, Washington, DC, May 24, 2004)

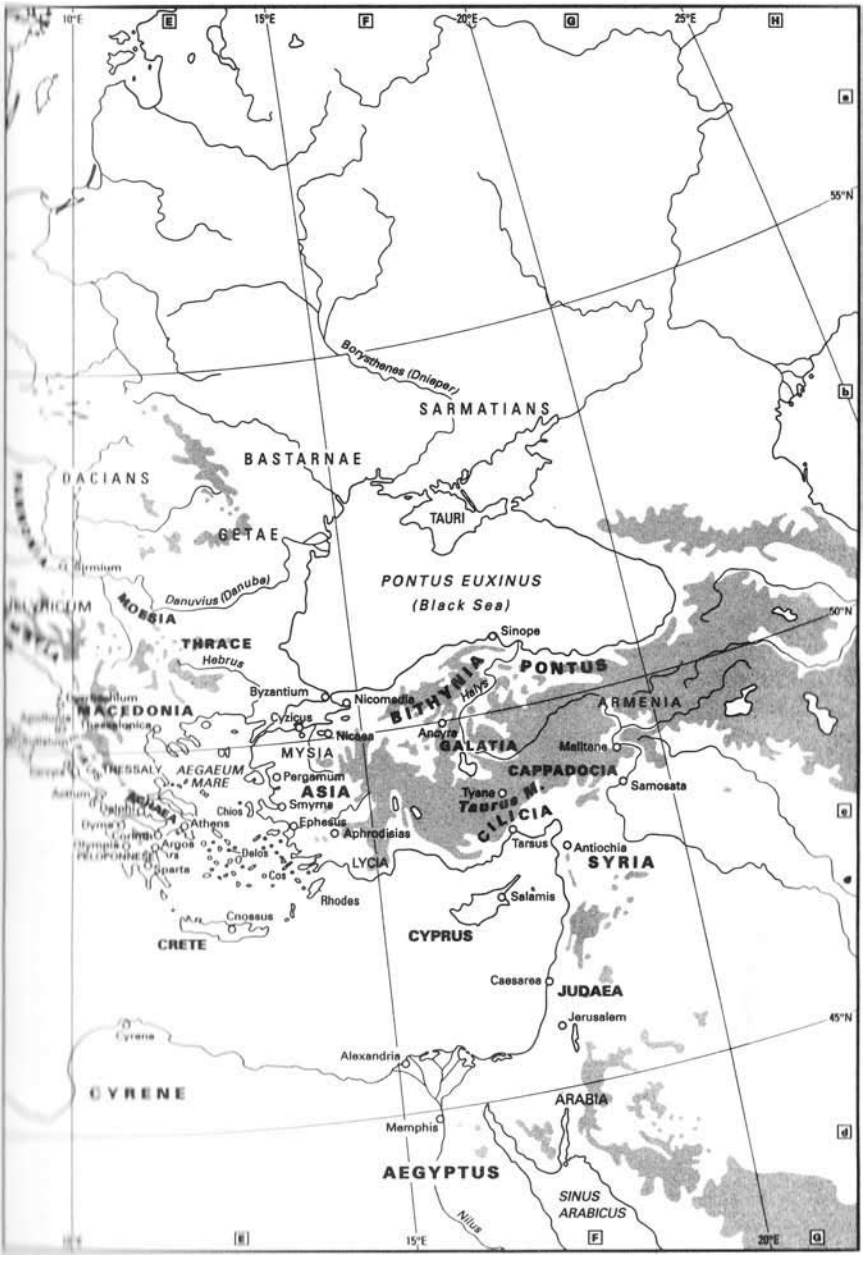
> The primary distinction in the law of persons is this, that all men are either free or slaves. Next, free men are either *ingenui* (freeborn) or *libertini* (freedmen). *Ingenui* are those born free, *libertini* those manumitted from lawful slavery. (Gaius, *Institutes* 1.9–11, trans. F. de Zulueta, second century CE)

On May 24, 2004, the Bureau of Public Affairs of the United States Department of State released a report entitled "The Facts about Human Trafficking." The facts include a firm assertion that slavery hurts the men, women, and children who are enslaved and "the safety and security of all nations it touches." Slavery is labeled a "crime," the slaves "victims," and those who enslave others "criminals." By

Map 1. Roman Italy. (From J. A. Crook, A. Lintott, E. Rawson, eds. *The Cambridge Ancient History,* Vol. IX, 2nd ed., Cambridge, 1994, map 2, p. 42)



Map 2. Roman Empire. (From A. K. Bowman, E. Champlin, A. Lintott, eds. *The Cambridge Ancient History,* Vol. X, 2nd ed., Cambridge, 1996, map 1, pp. xvi–xvii)



contrast, the ancient Roman jurist Gaius assumes that slavery is a part of Roman law. For the Roman lawyer, slavery is not a crime, and the enslaved are not victims; rather, as Gaius and other Roman jurists make clear, slavery, although not "natural," is a part of the law of nations. Natural law applies to all animals, not only human beings, but it concerns little more than the union of male and female, procreation of children, and their rearing. Everything that has to do with human culture and society – the state, property, commerce, and war – is covered by the law of nations. All peoples have their own laws, but the law of nations, including slavery, is common to all. In our terms, everybody does it: all nations have slaves, and there is nothing remarkable about slavery.

In North America and Europe today, we acknowledge that although there may be slaves in our world, we do not live in a slave society. We assume that slavery must be stamped out, that slaves must be freed. People who are sold in the early twenty-first century live in a world where there is an outside to slavery – although it is easier for us to know this than it is for a child sold to a brothel. Similarly, for slaves in the nineteenth-century American South, there was a free North and a public movement, abolitionism, that campaigned against slavery, calling it a wrong. Moreover, the Atlantic trade in African people was abolished in the United States in 1808 and in England in 1807, and, in the latter, slavery itself was abolished in 1833. For slaves living in the Roman world, there was no outside – no place without slavery and no movement that declared slavery wrong. Slavery was a normal part of life, and this was true not only for the Romans but for every neighboring ancient culture.

This ancient world and the men, women, and children living within it, both free and slave, are the subject of *Slavery in the Roman World*. The book has three goals. The first is obvious: to teach something about Roman slavery and the lives of Roman slaves to those unfamiliar with the topic. The second reaches beyond slavery itself: to understand Roman history and society, for slavery, its history, and its terms shaped every part of Roman culture. Last, I hope that thinking about Roman

slavery will help us to think about the meaning of freedom in our present.

Rome and Roman: Slave Societies and Slaves in Society

To begin to describe the significance of slavery in Rome, I turn first to the terms used throughout this book – Rome and Roman, slavery and slave society. "Rome" refers to a place, a city on the Tiber River, and to the ancient state, one of many in Italy. By the mid-third century BCE, the Romans controlled the states and peoples of Italy south of the Po River. By the end of the second century BCE, Rome had conquered an empire and ruled overseas territories from the city of Rome (Maps 1 and 2). "Rome" and "Roman" are also used quite frequently to refer to the society and culture of the state of Rome. By the early first century BCE, this included people from all over Italy: they held citizenship in the Roman state, had adopted Roman social and cultural practices, and spoke Latin. In the first century CE, Roman citizenship was extended to individuals, peoples, and cities in Rome's overseas provinces, many of whom, like the Italians before them, had adopted Roman culture in a process called romanization. They, too, can be included in the terms Rome and Roman. In this book it will be clear from the context where Rome means the city, the state, or the society and where Roman refers to the culture and practices of Rome wherever they were lived out. For the most part, the focus of this book is on the heartland of the Roman empire, Italy, and parts of the western half of the empire.

Equally important is the term "slave society" and its distinction from a society that has slaves. In either case, the issue is chattel slavery: individual human beings are owned as property and treated as commodities that can be used, bought and sold, willed, given, or lent. Generally, historians define a slave society in quantitative terms: How many slaves? What proportion of the population were slaves? If the proportion of slaves is set at over 20 percent of the population, only five

slave societies have existed in human history: ancient Greece, ancient Italy, and, in the modern period, the United States, Brazil, and the islands of the Caribbean. Many other societies have had chattel slaves but not in such numbers. In recent years, the number of slaves in the Roman empire and the proportion of slaves in the empire's population has been a subject of intense debate. Historians of ancient Rome lack the sources available to modern historians, so these numbers must rely on careful estimates and demographic models. The historian Walter Scheidel, whose work has been influential in the debate, estimates that slaves made up 10 percent of the empire's population – six million out of a population of some sixty million (a figure Scheidel calls a "lower limit"; 1997). However, as he and other scholars have argued, we must take account of geographical location and chronology in estimating the slave population. By the late first century BCE, in Roman Italy, the heartland of empire, slaves numbered 1 to 1.5 million out of a population of 5 to 6 million, or about 20–30 percent (Scheidel 2005). And it seems certain that these slaves were spread unequally throughout Italy itself. There were slaves in many other parts of the Roman empire but not in these numbers and perhaps, more importantly, not in the same "location" in the Roman economy.

Numbers are not the only or even the most important qualification of a slave society. M. I. Finley, the prominent social historian of ancient Greece and Rome, especially of ancient slavery, observed: "an assessment of the place of slaves in a society is not a matter of their totals, given a reasonably large number, but of their location, in two senses – first, who their owners were; secondly, what role they played, in the economy but not only in the economy" (1980: 80–81). In Roman Italy, although not in the entire Roman empire, slave labor produced most of the income of the wealthy by laboring on their farms and estates. There were free peasants and small landholders in the countryside, many of whom also added to the income of the rich as tenants and seasonal laborers. Slavery was only one form of dependent labor in the Roman world. Yet in one way the labor of slaves was critical for the elite: they served their owners as servants, administrators, financial agents, and

1. Funerary altar of Quintus Socconius Felix, Rome, c. 50–100 CE. A husband and wife in formal dress lie side by side on a dining couch behind a small table with drinking cups on it. Three long-haired boys dressed in elegant tunics (probably slaves) wait on them. One boy holds a jug, another a towel, and the third a garland. They signal both the wealth and taste of their owners. (Felbermeyer, Neg. D-DAI-Rom 1963.0755)

secretaries. As pointed out in Chapter 5, these domestic servants produced social status, not income, for their owners. They allowed their owners to live nobly: they took care of their owners' physical needs, symbolized slaveholders' social status, and, as property, displayed their owners' wealth (Figure 1). Even after slaves were no longer the major component of the rural labor force, slave domestic servants continued to display their owners' preeminence (Figure 2). In ancient Rome, then, elite wealth, status, and leisure were all built on the labor and lives of slaves.

These concerns lead to a consideration of Roman culture – society's values, attitudes, and ways of seeing itself and others. The ownership of slaves was an expression of power because owners exercised almost total control over their human property. As an expression of power – even a model of domination – slavery had an importance beyond its economic significance. Thus, for example, it became a useful metaphor for the

2. Painting of a wine server, Rome, first half of the fourth century CE. The painting from a building on the Caelian Hill dates to a period when slaves were no longer the primary work force on rural estates, although they continued to serve as domestic servants of all sorts. This servant, with a cup in one hand and a sieve in the other, has long elaborately curled hair and wears a fancy tunic decorated with circles and stripes and embroidered in red and gold. Servants like this man served to express the luxury, wealth, and hospitality of their owners. (Museo Nazionale, Photo: Soprintendenza Archeologica delle province di Napoli e Caserta)

lives of senators who felt disempowered by the rule of the emperors, especially bad emperors. Because slavery was considered a degrading condition, Roman satirists, poets, philosophers, and historians could label an individual or a behavior servile when they wanted to denigrate someone or some act. In short, slavery shaped the Roman mentality.

Slavery as Social Institution, Experience, and Lived Reality

Questions about the numbers of slaves, their roles in the economy, their place in Roman society, and the effects of slavery on Roman values and attitudes involve slavery as an institution. "Institution" means an organization of roles that include conduct – how people should behave or are imagined to behave. It refers, too, to a system of practices and ideas that are socially sanctioned and maintain the continued existence