

CHAPTER I

Approaching Slavery in Ancient Greece
Motivations, Methods and Definitions

At some date in the fourth century BCE, a slave laboring in a metal-casting workshop engraved (or had someone engrave for him) a short letter on a piece of lead. The letter reads:

Lesis sends [this letter] to Xenocles and his mother, [asking] that they not overlook at all the fact that he is perishing in a foundry, but that they go to his masters and find a better situation for him. For I have been handed over to a thoroughly wicked man, and I am perishing from being whipped. I am tied up. I am treated like dirt . . . more and more!¹

This letter is exceptional in that it provides direct access to the voice of a slave who lived almost two and a half thousand years ago. As we shall see, such direct evidence is exceedingly rare.² We learn in this letter that Lesis is a slave whose masters have put him to work in a metal-casting workshop where he is treated so brutally that he believes he will die.³ Lesis writes to his mother, presumably also a slave, and Xenocles, her partner, asking that they approach his masters and find new employment for him.

The letter raises many questions. Most generally, we might ask whether Lesis' situation is typical of slaves in ancient Greece.⁴ Notable features of Lesis' condition are that he seems to have more than one master, and that he is being rented out to work in a metal-casting workshop. Moreover, he is treated brutally, whipped and tied up (Fig. 1.2). We might further wonder

¹ Trans. E. Harris (2004) (with slight modifications).

² Other examples are questions put by slaves to the oracle at Dodona (Eidinow 2007, 100–104) and an ancient graffito scratched on a rock in Attica by a shepherd who was probably a slave (Langdon 2015, 53; with Lewis 2018, 121 n.59).

³ Fischer (2012, 118) suggests that Lesis' treatment is strongly reflected in a scene on a fifth-century vase from Locris. The vase (Fig. 1.2) shows a pottery workshop in which a figure is tied up (suspended?) with ropes around his neck, foot, hands and even his penis.

⁴ I follow Harris, in accepting that Lesis is in fact a slave. Not only is the use of the word "master" indicative of a master-slave relationship but also the use of the whip is characteristic of slavery. Jordan (2000) followed by Maffi (2014) doubts that Lesis is a slave, while Harris (2004) and Harvey (2007) argue for this interpretation.



Fig. 1.2 Fifth-century vase depicting a figure tied up (suspended?) and beaten (?) in a pottery workshop. Black-figure skyphos from Exarchos, Lokris. Athens, National Archaeological Museum A 442. Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Archaeological Resources Fund.

whether slaves typically labored in manufacturing workshops or were employed primarily in other sectors of the economy; for example, in agriculture and domestic service. Similarly, we might ask whether Lesis' overseer at the workshop was a particularly "wicked man," as Lesis claims, or whether such brutal treatment was typical. Finally, we might wonder whether Lesis was literate. Did he actually write the letter that he "sends" to Xenocles and his mother, or did he find someone else to write it for him? Given that teaching slaves to read was illegal in some slave-owning societies (e.g., the American South), this question broaches the larger issue of whether slaves were literate in ancient Greece.

These are just a few of the issues raised by this exceptional document. But these queries provide an entry point into some of the big questions that this book aims to answer. In particular, we will ask what it was like to be a slave in ancient Greece, and how the experience of slavery in ancient Greece was different from or similar to the experiences of slaves in other times and places. Key questions here include how individuals became enslaved, how they worked and lived, and the nature of their relations with other slaves – as well as their masters. As far as possible, this book will attempt to answer these questions from the point of view of the slaves themselves rather than from that of their masters. This aim, however, raises

a crucial methodological challenge since most of our sources derive from slave-owners rather than slaves. This is a challenge that I address in more detail below.

Before proceeding further, however, it is necessary to specify more precisely the chronological and geographical scope of this study. The term “ancient Greece” is a general one that can refer to a broad span of time from the great palace cultures of the Late Bronze Age (c.1500–1200 BCE) to the kingdoms of the successors of Alexander the Great (c.323–30 BCE). Within this time span, ancient Greek culture spread across a huge swath of territory from southern Italy and Sicily to Egypt and the Middle East. While slavery existed in all of these times and places, the focus of this study will be on the society of the ancient Greeks as it existed in the classical period – that is, roughly 500–300 BCE – in the city-states of mainland Greece and the islands and coasts of the Aegean Sea. The reasons for this choice are pragmatic. This is the period and these are the places for which we have the best evidence and therefore for which we can understand the workings of slavery best.

A central question that this book poses is the question of the degree to which slave labor contributed to what we identify today as the culture and society of ancient Greece. This question can be posed in two ways. On the one hand, we might ask to what extent was the labor of slaves crucial to the prosperity that allowed free Greeks the leisure to engage in politics, warfare and the intellectual and artistic pursuits for which they are so famous? In other words, we might ask whether any of the well-known features of ancient Greece would have been possible without the labor of slaves, including Athenian democracy, the Spartan army or the literary and philosophical works of intellectuals such as Sophocles and Aristotle?

Another, equally important way of posing the question is to ask what direct contribution slaves made to the culture that we tend to attribute to the (free, citizen) Greeks? Here we might ask, who painted the vases that sit in our museums as prime examples of the artistic achievement of the Greeks? Who carved the stones that adorn the architectural wonders of the ancient Greeks? Were these products of free labor, the labor of enslaved groups or a combination of both? As we will see, in each of these areas – and even in relation to the literary and intellectual culture of Greece – slaves made a significant direct contribution. In asking these questions, moreover, this book aims not only to bring to the foreground the central role of slaves in almost every sphere of Greek culture and society but also to underscore the ways that the

achievements of Greece are inextricably tied to a system of brutal exploitation.

That said, a key argument of this book is that slaves themselves were active in shaping the conditions of their enslavement. While forceful control by others was obviously the most fundamental aspect of the slave condition, this study shows that slaves were very resourceful in exploiting whatever opportunities existed for improving their situation. The most important such opportunity, as we shall see, was the dependence of slave-owners themselves on the slaves' labor and – most crucially – slave-owners' frequent need to acknowledge their slaves' human capacity for rational self-direction (paradoxically, the very thing that the ideology of slave-ownership attempts to deny). This book, therefore, will examine not only the most well-known types of slave resistance such as flight and rebellion, but also the myriad ways that slaves maneuvered to improve their conditions by exploiting some of the tensions and contradictions within the system of slavery itself.

The chapters of this book will address these questions and many others. Like most historical questions worth asking, however, the answers are complex and must be approached by recognizing the diverse experiences of slaves in ancient Greece. Generalizations *can* be made, but they should not be allowed to obscure the startling range of experiences of slaves in the ancient world. This book will therefore tread a fine line between highlighting some fundamental features of slavery in ancient Greece, and giving the reader a sense of the rich diversity of experiences of individual slaves both within particular Greek city-states and across the Greek landscape. Some of this intriguing complexity can be grasped by the following sample of a few aspects of slavery in ancient Greece that may be surprising to some.

- Slavery was not primarily based on notions of racial difference, and the Greeks enslaved their fellow Greeks, along with other ethnic groups.
- Some slaves lived and worked independently from their masters and were able to keep a portion of their earnings. Some of these slaves even accumulated considerable personal fortunes.
- Some slaves were publicly owned by the state and performed important civic roles. For example, publicly owned slaves were responsible for ascertaining the authenticity of coins used in the marketplace and others served as a police force to keep public order.
- Some slaves escaped their masters by seeking asylum in religious sanctuaries and either becoming “slaves of a god” or requesting sale to a new master.

Why Should We Care?

5

This list of some features of slavery in ancient Greece is not comprehensive, of course, and is certainly not intended to diminish our understanding of the cruelty, violence and inhumanity of slavery. We will have plenty of opportunity to observe the brutality of Greeks towards their slaves in the chapters that follow. What the list does do, however, is to caution us against simplistic readings of slavery in ancient Greece that emphasize its violence without doing justice to the complex relations between slaves and their owners. It is altogether appropriate to feel moral outrage at the hypocrisy of the ancient Greeks, who championed freedom in their political discourse yet denied it to many members of their own communities. Yet, frank acknowledgement of the failings of Greek society must be carefully contextualized and balanced with an examination of all the evidence in its perplexing diversity.

Why Should We Care?

Why should we care about slavery in ancient Greece, beyond intellectual curiosity at best, or mere antiquarianism at worst? In fact, there are two principal reasons why we should strive to understand the role of slavery in ancient Greece.

The first reason is closely related to the point made above about the diversity of the slave experience. Slavery is an important aspect of the history of ancient Greece, and by ignoring it not only do we fail to provide a complete picture of Greek society but we also risk giving an unduly positive (or negative) representation of it. Long gone are the days when scholars heralded the “glory that was Greece,” yet ancient Greece still occupies a privileged place in history. What if, as hypothesized above, the great achievements attributed to the free Greeks were underwritten by the brutal exploitation of other human beings? Even if we do not discount these achievements because of their entanglement with an unjust and inhumane system of unfree labor, nevertheless, acknowledgement of slavery puts ancient Greece in a more balanced historical perspective. As Keith Bradley, an historian of ancient Rome, puts it:

Ancient societies depended on slave labor. It does not follow that what is admirable from the past is any less admirable; it simply means that the price of the admirable – an incalculable degree of human misery and suffering – is given its full historical due.⁵

⁵ Bradley 1994, 181.

6 Approaching Slavery in Ancient Greece

A second reason for studying ancient slavery is that it provides a useful point of comparison and contrast to better-known slave societies such as those arising from the transatlantic slave trade. While there are considerable similarities between ancient slave societies and their more recent counterparts, the differences are as illuminating as the similarities. For example, while in the American South in the nineteenth century, racial ideas were the primary mode of distinguishing free from slave, the Greeks (as we have already mentioned) were in fact rather indiscriminate in subordinating individuals and groups to slavery. Indeed, they frequently enslaved one another – that is their fellow Greeks – and often found their largest sources of slaves among fellow Europeans and peoples inhabiting the broadly defined region of the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. These peoples were often not visibly different from Greeks in skin color and other physical features, and their submission to slavery, as we shall see, was not primarily justified along racial lines.⁶

The larger point for current purposes is that the example of ancient Greece illustrates the diverse ways that slavery was justified in historical societies, and shows that biologically based racist thought is not a given in slave owning societies. Indeed, although nineteenth-century race-based slavery looms large in modern historical consciousness, it is in fact the exception rather than the norm among historical slave societies. Recognition of the various forms of discrimination that have underwritten slavery in historical societies, moreover, allows us to better understand and acknowledge the shifting contours of discriminatory thought in our own times. As Benjamin Isaac puts it:

Racism has been with us for a long time and in various cultures, adopting various different shapes. It continues and will continue to be with us. If we recognize only one variety that belongs to a restricted period, we may fail to recognize it as it emerges in altered guise.⁷

In other words, the study of slavery in ancient Greece can contribute to contemporary discussions of racism by illustrating some of the myriad ways that constructions of difference have been used to justify the unequal distribution of power in society. Moreover, as we shall see, the patent artificiality of these ideological structures in ancient Greece, and the ways that they changed over time, are an important reminder of the

⁶ This is a controversial claim, and the evidence is complex. For further discussion, see below and Chapter 4.

⁷ Isaac 2004, 3.

susceptibility of all societies – including our own – to patterns of prejudicial thought. We will return to this point in Chapter 6.

Sources and Methods

A key question in the study of slavery in ancient Greece is one of evidence. Apart from a few sources such as the letter from the slave with which this chapter began, there are no first-person accounts of slavery surviving from ancient Greece. We have no Solomon Northrup or Harriet Jacobs from Greek antiquity.⁸ What we *do* have are the material remains and literary works produced by the free-citizen population, and – an important qualification – usually the most elite strata within the citizen population. As we shall see, while evidence of slavery is very scant in the material record, slaves and slavery appear in literature with considerable frequency, confirming the impression of the pervasiveness of slavery in ancient Greece. Yet, as we might expect, neither do these depictions give a complete account of slave life nor are they written from a slave's perspective. How, then, can we study the lives of slaves given that our primary informants are free Greeks who had no particular interest in recording the experiences and perspectives of slaves? A few examples will illustrate the difficulties of grasping the slaves' experience from ancient Greek literature.

In his epic poem *The Odyssey*, Homer provides a portrait of one of Odysseus' few loyal slaves, the swineherd Eumaeus. Although this poem predates classical Greece by a few centuries and therefore reflects a form of slavery that was in some ways distinct from those of classical Greece, the figure of the slave Eumaeus will serve to illustrate the methodological issues at stake in understanding slavery from literary sources.⁹ When we first meet Eumaeus in Book 14 of the poem, he is desperately longing for the return of his master from the Trojan War. In a brilliant deployment of dramatic irony, Homer constructs a scene in which Eumaeus bemoans the absence of Odysseus in the presence of Odysseus himself. The latter, of course, is disguised as a wandering beggar in order to avoid the risk of being murdered on his return by the suitors of his wife, who believe him long dead. In this scene, Eumaeus speaks of Odysseus as if he were a loving father, and laments the loss of the benefactions that he believes that Odysseus would have granted him on his return.

⁸ For these and other first-person accounts of slavery in the modern era, see Gates 1987; Andrews and Gates 2000; Yetman 2002; Northrup 2013.

⁹ For a recent discussion of slavery in the Homeric epics (eighth–seventh centuries) that emphasizes continuities with classical Greece, see Lewis 2018, 107–24.

Indeed, the gods prevented the return of the man
 who would love me kindly and would have given me property,
 the sort that a benevolent master gives his slave
 – a house and a plot of land, and a much-wooded wife –
 who toils a great deal for him.¹⁰

Contrary to what we might expect, Eumaeus not only seems to accept the necessity of working as a slave for Odysseus, but even praises Odysseus for his generosity and kindness. Later on in the story, Eumaeus makes several general criticisms of his fellow slaves, noting their tendency to shirk work and behave reprehensibly.

Slaves, when their masters cease to have power,
 No longer want to do their fair share of work,
 For, far-thundering Zeus takes away half of the excellence
 of a man when the day of slavery overtakes him.¹¹

It strikes the reader as odd that such criticism of slaves is put in the mouth of a slave, albeit a loyal one. As scholars of ancient slavery, we might ask if such words are a genuine reflection of the voice or perspective of slave, or if they better represent what Homer and his fellow free Greeks wanted to believe about slaves?

These passages are most often interpreted as a reflection of the paternalistic ideology of slave-owners who wished to encourage a submissive attitude among their slaves.¹² This ideology included the notion that slaves not only needed rational direction from their masters in order to live productive and satisfying lives, but that their hard work and loyalty would ultimately be fairly rewarded. On this reading, the passage is a very partial reflection of the system by which slaves were controlled. As we shall see in Chapter 5, although a system of rewards was utilized by slave-owners to incentivize hard work among their slaves, it existed alongside a system of deprivation and punishment that played an equal or perhaps even greater role in extracting labor from slaves. On this interpretation, Eumaeus is a character thoroughly shaped by the needs of Homer's slave-owning audience, and certainly not a reflection of the perspectives of real slaves concerning the conditions of their servitude.

On the other hand, it is possible, of course, that Homer's character Eumaeus was created to appear historically plausible and thus recognizable to Homer's audience. Accordingly, we might conclude that Eumaeus is representative of a certain group of hardworking and loyal slaves who

¹⁰ 14.61–65. ¹¹ 17.320–23. See below n.23. ¹² See, for example, Thalmann 1998, 13–107.

willingly accepted their slavery in return for the promise of concrete rewards. Furthermore, one could even detect an attempt, in Eumaeus' first speech, to shape the institution of slavery in ways that were beneficial to slaves. By articulating an ideal image of a benevolent master, while not questioning his subordinate status, the character of Eumaeus encourages his master to provide benefits that come very close to the perquisites usually reserved for the free – a family, house and land of their own. Furthermore, by suggesting that this treatment is the proper way that a master should reward a loyal slave, Eumaeus' character may reflect the strategies of actual slaves to shape the system of rewards by which, at least in part, they were controlled.¹³ If this interpretation is correct, then, we see in this passage an example of the slave agency that I highlighted as a theme of this book.

But which of these two interpretations of the passage is more plausible? Let's look at a few more examples before answering. At the beginning of Euripides' tragic play *Medea* of 431 BCE, the male slave-tutor of Medea's children addresses Medea's slave-nurse as "the possession of my mistress" and asks the slave-nurse why she is so upset. The nurse responds by saying that "good slaves are disturbed by the misfortunes of their masters and feel it in their hearts."¹⁴ The Greek word for "possession," *ktēma*, is a term that usually denotes movable property – furniture, money, livestock and, of course, slaves.¹⁵ We might wonder, nevertheless, whether an actual slave – rather than a slave character in a play written by and for free Greeks – would address another slave with such an impersonal and dehumanizing form of address? Did some slaves openly accept and affirm their status as property or does this word choice express the slave-owners' perspective on slaves as mere pieces of property? As we shall see in more detail shortly, Aristotle, a free and leisured Greek intellectual, provides perhaps the most blunt expression of this conceptualization of slaves as property when he classifies slaves as "living tools" (ὄργανα ἔμψυχα) and "animate property" (κτῆμα ἔμψυχον).

Returning to Euripides' play, we might further question the nurse's dictum that "good slaves" sympathize with the sufferings of their masters. Again, we must ask whether this saying expresses a slave's perspective on slaves or only what slave-owners wished to believe about (or encourage in) their slaves? Alternatively, we might speculate that both the form of address

¹³ For the shaping of slavery to create a "living space" for slaves, in ancient Greece and modern slave-owning societies, see Forsdyke 2012, 37–89; Bergad 2007, 165–201; and Chapter 5.

¹⁴ Euripides, *Medea* 49–55. See also Plato's *Laws* (776–77) where contrasting depictions of slaves are presented – slaves as loyal and slaves as deficient in rationality and moral character.

¹⁵ Isaeus 5.43.

and the dictum represent the ways that actual slaves might address one another, *but only as they would speak in the presence of slave-owners themselves*. That is to say, this form of speech represents what the political scientist James Scott calls the “public transcript” – namely, the ways that subordinate individuals speak in the presence of their superiors in order to put on display their submission to the existing power structure.¹⁶ When slaves speak among themselves, Scott posits, they express a much more critical attitude towards their masters and the institution of slavery. While there are no free characters on the stage when the two slaves speak to one another in the play, it is reasonable to consider the audience of free Greeks watching the play as the target of this form of subordinate speech. On this interpretation, then, the slave-tutor and slave-nurse provide a window on to a particular slave strategy – the performed deference that was aimed at securing rewards for slaves from masters.

Whichever interpretation we choose, we are once again confronted with the problem of literary evidence that is produced by and for free Greeks. How are we to decide which, if any, of this material is realistic and which is a product of the slave-owners’ fantasies, desires and ideological needs?

A final example comes from the Athenian comic playwright Menander. In his fourth-century play *Aspis*, or “The Shield,” Menander depicts a loyal slave named Daos. When Smikrines, a free character, tries to solicit the slave Daos’ help in his scheme to marry his niece – who is due an inheritance of land – Daos demurs in the following way:

Smikrines, this saying appears to me
 To be thoroughly worth meditating upon:
 “Know who you are!” Permit me to obey it
 and refer to me those matters which are
 appropriate for a good slave.

Daos then lists the knowledge that is appropriate for a slave, and again refuses to play a role in matters that are above his pay grade. These matters include marriages and their resulting inheritances of land and other goods.

I am able to demonstrate that the seals are on the goods,
 and show you the contracts my master made
 with some men while abroad. These things, if someone
 should command me, I will expound them one by one:
 where they were made, how, and with what witnesses.
 Concerning a piece of land, Smikrines, or, by Zeus, an heiress,

¹⁶ Scott 1990. For further discussion of Scott’s ideas, see Chapter 5.