1   Introduction

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1.1.   What do we mean by slavery?

Slavery is often described as an institution, but logically prior to this it is a power relationship, whereby some human beings exercise effective control and exploitation over others. As we suggest in the Preface, that does not in itself distinguish it from other types of exploitation, and the study of slavery necessarily implies multiple approaches taken together.[1] Slavery thus has both social and economic dimensions as well as legal, and indeed it usually coexists with other possible relationships of subordination, from which it may or may not be sharply distinguished. Societies differ in how and to what degree slavery is institutionalised: ancient states typically regulated slavery as part of their overall control of the population, through taxation and maintenance of order, as well as through their legal systems. And even within a single slave system, slavers may use the institution for a wide variety of purposes, while the enslaved may by various means negotiate circumstances that vary from any theoretical norms. The combination of the agency of both slavers and enslaved means that slavery might have greatly different effects depending on place and time. In the societies documented in this volume, we can observe this variation most closely in the texts of the Roman Imperial period, but it is at work throughout.

From the New Kingdom onwards, slaves figure in legal documents that transfer ownership, including sales, but we do not have any evidence of slavery as a focus of legal and governmental regulation until the Ptolemaic and Roman periods (see particularly **5.2**). Indeed, the earliest evidence from the pharaonic period tends to illuminate the hierarchical relationship between dependent persons and those who controlled their labour and productivity, rather than use technical terms for the legal status of the dependents or even a sense of ownership (**2.4**). In fact, dependence is a central theme in Chapter 2, as it was a major structuring element in pharaonic society, perhaps more than in any succeeding period. And yet it is clear that at least by the first millennium there are sales of people that are genuine property transactions (**3.1**), and the Aramaic sources confirm this

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[1]   We owe much to Vlassopoulos 2021, who gives a helpful historiography of the study of ancient slavery as well as laying out a properly historical approach, or rather combination of approaches.

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fact (**3.3.1**). To delineate the exact parameters of this change in the position of slavery will be one of the major themes of the book.

Before we begin to do so, however, we need to acknowledge that even to talk about slavery imposes a concept of human relations that reflects the experiences and values of numerous world societies over the past several millennia – concepts, experiences, and values that ancient peoples cannot be assumed to have shared. An ideology of equality – something prevalent, if hardly universal or uniform, in modern societies – was not one shared by most people before the last few centuries. However repugnant slavery and other forms of dependence are to modern sensibilities, we cannot assume that they were equally repellent to ancient minds. There is certainly evidence from pharaonic Egypt of a positive view of dependent status, even of active seeking of it (**23**), because the alternatives were worse. It is hard to know how far such evidence is coloured by the filter of the views of the possessing classes, a caution that extends to a high proportion of all our evidence for antiquity. But it is likely that processes of socialisation created societies in which hierarchy was widely accepted as a fact of life and valued as an element of stability (**2.3**). On the other hand, slavery itself is not generally seen as a positive status for those enslaved (e.g. **3.3**).

In this Introduction, we aim to sketch a number of the main questions about slavery that arise both from the texts presented here and from the broader scholarly literature about slavery and dependence. Our goal is not a synthesis of the subject, which remains a vast area of lively controversy, but a statement of themes that the reader will want to keep in mind in reading the chapters that follow, along with some basic information that may help in interpreting the documents. (More help is provided by a section 'Aids for the reader' and a Glossary at the front of the book.) We have also tried to give a sense of the questions that do not readily find answers in the documents and other evidence available to us, and why that might be the case. It will become apparent that this documentation is highly variable from one period to another, with different types of evidence informing us about some subjects and not others at different times (compare, e.g. **7.3.1** and **7.4.1**). A common theme in the documentation across periods, however, is the difficulty of seeing slavery from the perspective of the enslaved. Most of our texts were produced by the wealthier and more powerful parts of their societies. Even when we see behaviour that suggests slave agency at work, we almost always see it from the point of view of the masters or of state institutions that the ruling class controlled. All attempts to come to a balanced view of slavery are doomed to frustration by this bias in the evidence. Nonetheless, it is important to keep looking for signposts to the values, aspirations, and actions of the enslaved, which can sometimes be found by reading the documents against the grain. That is one reason why a collection of ancient texts has a value beyond any synthetic account.

One pointer to the variability of slavery is the terminology used to refer to slaves. It will quickly become apparent that a recurrent theme in our texts is the difficulty of pinning down the meaning of words for 'slave' and 'free', not to mention statuses that do not easily correspond to those concepts. Modern vocabulary is highly shaped by the heritage of Greek and Latin terms, particularly the precision of Roman legal terminology. But even in Greek there are terms that seem to reflect a dependent relationship much more than a legal status, and the same is true in other languages ranging from Hebrew to Coptic (e.g. **4.1.2**, **7.3.2**). In early pharaonic Egypt it is not even clear that there was any distinct concept of freedom or a word for 'free' (**2.2.5**). But by the New Kingdom the term *nemehu* is used in contrast to *bak* in a fashion that suggests an absence of dependence, except on the king, and *nemehu* is still in use for this purpose in Egyptian-language texts of the Ptolemaic period (**5.5** and **174**). In the Aramaic sources, too, we find vocabulary for freedom (**3.3.7**). Direct translation is thus difficult, and where it is uncertain we have tried to indicate the ancient terms in parentheses after the translation. This is perhaps visually distracting, but we believe that many readers will find these indications helpful as they try to form their own views about situations and texts. They may also discern more clearly the seemingly recurrent process through which terms for 'slave' are replaced by new euphemisms, which in turn become too stark and are succeeded by new ones (see e.g. **3.2.1**, **5.5**). And in the multilingual society of Egypt from the first millennium BCE on, influence from one language on another needs to be considered (again, e.g. **5.5**).

Until the publication of Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982) forty years ago, slavery was most commonly defined in legal terms: the slave is a human being who is also an item of property, the possession of another person (or persons). This definition ultimately stemmed from Aristotle's concise formulation, 'A slave is an animate piece of property' (*Politics* 1253b32). Such a definition works reasonably well, as Patterson acknowledges, for societies with legal systems that have clearly developed notions of property and ownership rights, particularly ancient Rome and the areas influenced by Roman legal thinking, including Roman and Late Roman Egypt. Patterson, however, suggests that the concept of property is too open-ended to be useful from a cross-cultural perspective and that it fails to differentiate adequately what rights are specific to slavery as opposed to other interpersonal power relationships, such as the rights of employers over their workforces.[2] This critique of a property-based definition is valuable for orienting scholars' focus away from primarily legalistic approaches

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2   Lewis 2017a. Lewis's defence of property-based definitions of slavery is persuasive. The right to labour, among others, is also a form of property. But property is not by itself a sufficient description of slavery.

to slavery, and towards emphasising also the intrinsic violence and dishonour produced by slavery, not only for the slaves and slave owners themselves, but that indirectly permeate the entire society to which they belong (see in more depth **1.5** below). Nevertheless, Patterson's approach has come in for criticism as being too directed at finding an essential character to slavery across societies – that is, for being ahistorical.[3] It also oversimplifies the notion of what constitutes property.

The status of the slave has an innate ambiguity of being simultaneously a person and an object belonging to another person; we see this in the Roman legal handbooks, which discuss slavery under both property law and the law of persons. From this ambiguity stems the central paradox of slavery: however insistently slaves are treated as chattels, much of their value and usefulness as property derives from the fact of their personhood, with the capacity, when required, to take the initiative and think for themselves, and to form relationships, both with other slaves and with their masters and their families. All these aspects our book seeks to explore in depth (again, see **1.5** below). Indeed, the monetary value of a slave was to a considerable degree dependent on this capacity for agency.

Another aspect of this paradox is whether slaves are regarded as intrinsically incapable of exhibiting moral qualities or not. If they were not, the prevalence of manumission in Roman society becomes problematic.[4] We must be alert for cases throughout our sources where slaves' moral qualities are presupposed or alluded to, whether in positive or in negative terms, or, conversely, where they are thought not to exhibit the capacity for moral judgement. The pharaonic sources originating in the office-holding population, for example, treat slaves in the same way as they do the mass of the lower strata of the population. These sources privilege the maintenance of a proper hierarchy but they do not assign slaves a lower character than other dependent groups.

Patterson's approach also eliminated the unfortunate notion that only five true slave societies have existed in world history, a view that drove a conceptual wedge between Greece and Rome and the rest of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, not to speak of many other societies in the global history of slavery.[5] While one purpose of our book is to trace how Egypt absorbed Greek and Roman practices regarding slavery, including – among other fundamental changes – the significant increase in the number of slaves as a proportion of the population, the book will equally highlight some elements of long-term continuity, and parallels and resemblances between one period and another, especially in relation to the

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3 See the trenchant remarks of Vlassopoulos 2021, esp. 7–9, 30.
4 Mouritsen 2011: ch. 2 '*Macula servitutis*: slavery, freedom, and manumission'. The relatively low status and political disabilities attached to freedman status diminished in subsequent generations.
5 Cf. Lewis 2017b: 206 n. 64.

slave trade and sources of slaves (see **1.4** below), and occupations (**1.7** below). Even such areas as the religious life of slaves and naming practices display long-term continuities where the evidence allows us to chart this.

Recently Kostas Vlassopoulos has argued that Aristotle's treatment of slavery as a relationship of property was not in fact the standard ancient Greek understanding of slavery, which held that it was a relationship of dominance. This explains why the words *doulos*, *douleuein* ('slave', 'to be a slave'), etc. are frequently applied to the subjects of empires, whether of Athens or Persia, and even to a person's subjection to the power of uncontrollable emotion; these usages, Vlassopoulos argues, are not metaphorical, but expressive of conditions under which huge discrepancies of power deprive people of their autonomy, their *eleutheria* (for more on the vocabulary of slavery, see **1.3** below).[6] Thus *doulos* and its cognates can encompass not only chattel slavery but serfdom and other forms of unfreedom and dependence involving one person's subjugation to another. But as we shall see, the force of *doulos* and the contexts in which it is used evolve, and we cannot apply the traditional understanding of the classical texts to later evidence without critical scrutiny.

1.2.   Slavery and other forms of dependence

One of this book's main themes is thus the exploration of the varied forms of subjugation involved in ancient Egyptian slavery. What do we mean by slaves and dependents, and how do we distinguish them from other forms of personal dependence or subordination? The Roman jurist Gaius (*Inst.* 1.9) said that 'The principal distinction in the law of persons is that all persons (*homines*) are either free or slaves (*servi*)'; but in practice, as opposed to law, even in Roman society there existed a range of situations and relationships, and in the earlier periods treated in this book we cannot apply Roman conceptions of status, let alone those of more modern slave societies, without question.

We will therefore want to keep in mind this fundamental question: What is distinctive about slavery, and how does it shade into other forms of exploitation?[7] At the same time, this question is itself problematic in periods for which we have no normative or theoretical sources; the distinction may be a modern obsession the Egyptians did not share. Although slaves characteristically have no contractual

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6   Vlassopoulos 2011. Compare the use of *doulos* in the late antique papyri when addressing social superiors, which strictly is also more than just a metaphor (**6.1**); this usage is seen already with *'bd* in Aramaic, **3.3.1**. Similarly, the use of slave vocabulary in describing the relationship of humans to a god embodies the same relational element (e.g. in Hebrew, **4.4**).

7   On theories of exploitation, see de Ste Croix 1981. For a long-term approach to the interaction of slavery and other forms of exploitation, see Eltis and Engerman 2011: 1–21.

agreement with their masters or stipulated cash remuneration for their labour, in some circumstances, such as debt slavery, they do enter into an agreement, and in any case they receive rations for their sustenance. Such contracts are to be distinguished from labour contracts entered into by free persons, and yet they may at times seem very similar.[8] Labour contracts may have clauses requiring the employee to stay with the employer (the Greek *paramone*), making their situation seem less than entirely free. On the other hand, slaves are also sometimes allowed some working capital and remuneration for their labour, building up a personal fund the Romans called *peculium*. Slaves might, moreover, live and work somewhere other than the owner's home or estate, particularly in wealthier households with far-flung properties (see **138**). In any case, it was usually in the master's interest to keep slaves alive and fit for productive work. Some slaves may therefore have achieved a better standard of living than many free wage workers or peasants.

Ancient societies had a vast array of other forms of exploitation and dependence. A full exploration of these situations would take us too far afield, but we list here a number of them to help the reader see just how pervasive such relationships were.

–   Work imposed on the population at large or on a large part of it (*corvée* labour), often with exemptions for privileged classes. This labour was typically limited to a particular task or a specified period of time and did not change the legal status of those performing it, but like most labour by enslaved persons it was not compensated. The requisitioned labour of the early Umayyad caliphate, although imposed more selectively by quotas on villages, belongs to this category (see **7.3.4.4**).

–   The labour of prisoners (both criminals and prisoners of war), especially in mines and quarries (**5.4**). This might be time-limited, at least for some (there is evidence in a papyrus of 209 CE (*SB* I.4639) for the release of convicts after five years). But some prisoners of war were enslaved, and the distinction between these and prisoners serving limited terms is not always evident.

–   Work by dependent tenants. Tenants in Egypt occupied a wide variety of statuses in different periods, including in the pharaonic period (**2.4**), some of them protected by government action (particularly the royal farmers (*basilikoi georgoi*) of the Ptolemaic period), and yet we can find slaves in the position of tenants (e.g. the Syrian *paides* and their families working for

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8   Contracts for 'perpetual' servitude that are in fact time-limited pose this conundrum in a direct way; see **71–75** for the complexities.

Zenon, see **5.3**). A special problem is posed by the registered cultivators (*georgoi enapographoi*) in the Byzantine sources (see **7.2**).

– Labour carried out under work contracts. Although nominally free, this can shade into virtual slavery at moments where the power relationship between employer and employee is so strongly in the employer's favour that the employee has almost no freedom of action. The institution of obligatory residence (*paramone*), referred to earlier, was often involved in such unbal–anced relationships (see **6.9**).

– Debt slavery in various forms.[9] Debt bondage results from pledging oneself (or one's child, wife, or slave) to secure a debt: the creditor does not acquire full ownership rights over the debtor or substitute, but only the person's services until the debt is paid off, whereupon the arrangement ceases. *Par-amone* represents one form of debt bondage. But when free persons are legally permitted to secure loans on their own person, or that of their child or wife, and the loan cannot be repaid, the creditor(s) can seize the debtor as their slave, acquiring full property rights over the debtor without time limit, to sell or otherwise use as they wish. This sort of enslavement for debt was abolished in Athens by Solon, and it is absent from the Aramaic sources (**3.3.2**). Diodorus (1.97.3) claims that it had already been abolished in Egypt by Bocchoris, but this may not be historical (see **3.1** with **93**).[10] It was permitted in Ptolemaic Syria after 260 BCE only for debts to the Crown (not private debts: *C.Ord.Ptol.* 22, **133**), but this ordinance stems from a particular historical circumstance, and it is not clear just how far it had gen–eral applicability or was in force in Egypt. It seems clear that enslavement for debts to the Crown was also practised in Egypt under the Ptolemies.[11] Enslavement as a result of non–payment of debts incurred between private individuals is more controversial, but this also seems to have existed, even if restricted by the protection of some groups within the population.[12]

– Self-sale and sale or leasing of children is known, and in practice the ap–prenticing, pledging, and leasing of child labour merge into one another.

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9 See below, **2.9**, **3.2.1**, **3.3.2**, **5.3**, **5.4**, **6.3**. For the distinction between debt bondage and enslavement for debt, see Harris 2002; see also Westbrook and Jasnow 2001, esp. chs. by Jasnow and Manning. The distinction suggested by Harris is not always tidy. If the debt bondsman could not clear the debt, the one could slide into the other. Unless (as in the laws of Hammurabi, and in Jewish law) the law prescribes a time limit after which the debt becomes void, the debt bondsman risks slipping into permanent servitude, *de facto* if not juridically.

10 Markiewicz 2005, 2008.

11 Bieżuńska-Małowist 1974: 37.

12 Bieżuńska-Małowist 1974: 38.

Such forms of dependency may be prompted by debt, but not necessarily.[13]
A special case is formed by self-sale to a temple or other forms of binding
of the self to a temple, as in the case of 'sacred slaves' (*hierodouloi*) and 'de-
tainees' (*katochoi*) (see **166–167**, **173–174**). In late antiquity we find donations
of children, or self-sales, to monasteries, raising interesting questions about
whether these are functionally equivalent to earlier forms of temple de-
pendence, or just superficially similar (see **7.3.4.3**).

– Finally, the obligations created by slavery did not entirely end with the
freeing of a slave through emancipation. Freedmen and freedwomen were
recognised as having a distinct status under the Greek and Roman legal
systems, but it is not to be assumed that this was the case in other periods.
Emancipation was normal in Roman Egypt, but again this cannot be tak-
en as normative in other periods, even the Ptolemaic. The Greek term for
freedman (*apeleutheros*), equivalent to the Latin *libertus*, does not appear in
the papyri before the reign of Augustus, and there is no alternative Greek
term for 'freedman' in the Ptolemaic period. (Comparative studies distin-
guish slave systems which allow frequent emancipation as 'open', as opposed
to 'closed'; cf. **1.8** below.) And in most cases freed slaves did continue to owe
some services to their former masters, who were now, in Roman terms,
their 'patrons'.[14] There are signs that newly freed persons and their for-
mer masters sometimes held conflicting ideas as to what those duties were
(*P.Oxy.Hels.* 26). The situation after the Arab conquest was again different,
and the nature of the relationship between patron and client (*mawlā*) was
very distinct from its Roman counterpart (**7.4.5**).

1.3.   Calling a slave a slave – or not: vocabularies of slavery and dependence

The texts of which we give translations in this book use a wide variety of words
to refer to slaves and other dependents. As we have said, we cannot assume that
these words have meanings and semantic connotations identical to those of 'slave'
or any other English word. Nor can we take it for granted that the meanings of
these terms were unchanged over centuries of use in their own languages. Some
words may even have been useful because of their lack of legal precision. Outside
of certain legal documents, exact terminology was usually unimportant to those
who wrote our texts. Readers will find that questions of terminology are raised in

13 Ramin and Veyne 1981; Vuolanto 2003. Cf. the ninety-nine-year service contract of a woman in **168**,
     and the controversy over whether this constitutes a kind of self-sale.
14 For Greek freedmen and freedwomen, see Zelnick-Abramovitz 2005.

each chapter. These should not be seen as technical diversions from the substance: terminological issues are substantive ones. Some words are used as synonyms for others, either for other words in the same phase of the language, or for words in different languages (e.g. Demotic Egyptian or Coptic compared with Greek). We will also try to bring out how both preferences for particular terms and their various meanings change over time, and to see what influences drive this evolution, including the contemporary use of other languages.

Even within a single language, the chronological development of the use of terminology can be very complicated. It is not always immediately evident whether this variation over time reflects fashions in usage or substantive change in society. Some words certainly have multiple possible meanings; of these the most important in Greek is *pais*, which can mean 'slave' or '(male) child' and is found hundreds of times in the Greek papyri.[15] *Hemhal* in Demotic and Coptic has a similar valence, like *puer* in Latin and, indeed, 'boy' in English in some contexts. Even the normal technical term for 'slave', Greek *doulos* and its variants, has a complicated history in the papyri: though not uncommon in the Ptolemaic papyri, it occurs less frequently than less formal terms such as *paidarion*, *pais*, and *paidiske*; but from the start of the Roman period and for three centuries, it overwhelms all alternative words for slave, contributing to the impression scholars have formed of the explicitness of our evidence for slavery in the Roman period. In the fourth and fifth centuries, the vocabulary becomes more evenly mixed again. But this shift may reflect not so much a change in meaning or in the prevalence of slavery as a reflection of different rates of production and survival of particular types of documents: one term may have been perceived as appropriate for legal documents or official declarations, when others served in more informal contexts where legal precision was unimportant. From the fifth century CE on, an increasing number of occurrences are semi-metaphorical (see n. 6 above), expressing the writer's social inferiority in relation to the master (*despotes*), a phenomenon not limited to Greek. But the legal sense does not disappear: even in the seventh century we find literal meanings of *doulos* in legal contracts (for example, the sale of a Nubian slave, **247**).

Where legal precision is not essential, writers may use vocabulary that emphasises a dependent relationship rather than status. As we have seen, this phenomenon can be observed in all of the periods and languages covered in this book. Words for favoured slaves, moreover, may downplay the element of servitude; examples are Greek *threptos*, normally meaning a child rescued from abandonment and brought up in the household, typically as a slave, or *therapon* ('server'). The Greek term *oikogenes* ('house-born') in the papyri is commonly used to

15 Quenouille 2012.

identify a slave's origin factually, without any value-laden connotations; in this respect it stands in contrast to the Latin use of *verna* for house-born slaves, which expresses a closer emotional bond than other terms.[16]

Latin had a means of identifying slaves without using any explicit word for their status: it simply gave the name of their owner in the genitive (possessive) case immediately after the slave's name. This practice came into occasional use in Greek in the earliest years of Roman rule and can be found from time to time in Roman-influenced contexts. For example, in **182** (26 BCE, Soknopaiou Nesos), we read with strings of genitives that someone 'has leased a cow from Anteros, (slave) of Gn. Pompeius Poros'. And in *BGU* 4.1118 (22 BCE, written in Alexandria), 'from Aesop son of Eros (slave or freedman) of Caesar'. As the second example suggests, we cannot always be sure if the construction refers to a slave or to a freedman, omitting the proper Greek term for a freed person, *apeleutheros*. In general, however, we may take such constructions as referring to slaves. Because Greek used the genitive construction also for giving the name of a person's father (or mother), care is needed in distinguishing owners from parents. Much simpler possessive constructions can also refer to enslaved persons in an informal fashion, as in *P.Oxy.* 76.5100 (136 CE, Oxyrhynchos), a private letter that mentions a letter to be conveyed to the governor (*strategos*) of the Prosopite nome 'through your Aithiopian',[17] with 'slave' understood. Where we are dealing with private letters, rather than legal documents, status terms were in any case unnecessary, and enslaved persons could be referred to only by name, leaving us searching for clues to their status (e.g. **7.4.1**).

1.4.   Sources of slaves

In most cases, slaves are referred to in our texts (of all periods) without any indication of how they came to be enslaved. But sales and registrations of slaves usually supply at least information about previous ownership, and for the Roman period, census declarations are also useful. There has been much controversy over the relative quantitative importance of the various sources of slaves in different periods; what is most certain is that this must have varied considerably from time to time and even episodically within the different periods covered here. The most irregular source was surely capture in war, which was intermittently of great

16 Rawson 2010. For the meanings of *threptos*, see Zelnick-Abramovitz 2005: 175, summarising A. Cameron.
17 We use 'Aithiopian' rather than 'Ethiopian' because the Greek word did not refer to people from the area of modern Ethiopia, but to people from the area south of the first cataract of the Nile in general.