

Slavery, ancient Near East

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Slavery was the ownership of people, and that is known throughout ancient Near Eastern history, at least as early as the Early Dynastic III period, around 2500 BCE, where unnamed persons were bought to work in the great households. Though slaves were always a factor in Mesopotamian society, they were never very numerous and always constituted a perquisite of the rulers and other rich people and were not a major source of agricultural or manufacturing productivity (Chavalas 1997, Snell 1998).

Slaves appeared in court in the Ur III period, 2112–2004 BCE, and their testimony was accepted by the court, but their claims to freedom were never admitted (Falkenstein 1956–7: numbers 30–42). The families of murderers were punished by being forced to become slaves (Falkenstein 1956–7: number 41). Or one could become a slave to pay a debt; such slavery was of limited duration, in Hammurabi's laws from 1750 BCE, three years. Foundlings were also enslaved, and the children of a slave mother and slave father were slaves.

Slaves were sometimes kidnapped from the eastern mountains, now in Iran. Earlier the north of Mesopotamia, called Subartu, supplied slaves (Snell 2003).

The ancient Near East began the Near Eastern descent system; one free parent made the child free, and descent for slaves was not necessarily through the mother (Patterson 1982). In Hammurabi if the owner fathered a slave girl's child and acknowledged paternity, the child was treated like any free heir. If the father did not acknowledge the child as his, the child was not an heir but was free from claims put forward by the heirs. The slave mother, just

because of having borne the master's child, was also to be free (Roth 1997: 170–1).

Slave prices for the Old Babylonian period show a correlation with other goods and services, until there was a drastic rise late in the period. Prices hovered around 15 shekels of silver, or about 12.5 grams for each slave (Farber 1978).

Slaves worked in household service and agriculture, but they did not work together in large numbers. In Late Babylonian times, 605–330 BCE, there were state and temple slaves as well as the much more common slaves owned by private persons. Some of them amassed wealth and power as land manipulators and lenders and owned slaves themselves, but they and their families could nonetheless be sold, for enormous sums (Dandamayev 1984).

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