

# Slavery, Greece

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Classical Greece has been called one of very few genuine “slave societies” in world history (Finley 1968: 308). That is, slaves were a fundamental part of the Greek economy and their presence affected all aspects of Greek culture.

Our evidence for slavery is primarily literary and epigraphical. For the Mycenaean period, we find brief mentions of both privately owned (*do-e-ro/a*) and sacred slaves (*te-o-jo do-e-ro/a*) in Linear B tablets from Pylos. Homer’s epics yield representations primarily of household slaves, referred to as *dmōs/dmōie* (unfree member of the household), *oikeus* (free or unfree member of the household), and *amphipolos* (female servant waiting on the mistress). Less common terms for “slave” in Homer include *andrapodon* (human war booty) and *doulos* (unfree).

In Classical Greece, there were two main categories of slaves – “chattel” and “communal” (Garlan 1988: chs. 1 and 2) – and most of our evidence for Greek slavery relates to the former. Indeed, conventionally, “Greek slavery” refers to chattel slavery. The chattel slave has been defined in two coexisting ways: as property, from a legal point of view, and as an outsider, from a sociological point of view (Finley 1968). Most commonly, the chattel slave was called a *doulos/doule*; other terms include *oiketēs* (household slave), *therapon/therapaina* (unfree servant), *andrapodon* (slave as property), *soma* (“body”), and *pais* (“boy”), among more vivid appellations (e.g., *mastigias*, “whipping post”). Communal slavery, unlike chattel slavery, entailed the enslavement of a group of individuals either within a community (“intracommunity servitude”) or to an external community (“intercommunity servitude”). A classic example of the former is the fate of debtors in Archaic Athens before the reforms of Solon in 594/3 BCE (see SOLON). For the latter, best attested are the Helots in Sparta (see HELOTS); other intercommunity slaves are

catalogued in the lexicographer Pollux’ list of statuses “between slave and free” (3.83).

Most scholars believe that the demand for chattel slaves in Greece preceded the supply (Finley 1998: 135–60). In Athens, demand arose after Solon abolished debt bondage, hence inciting “the advance, hand in hand, of freedom and slavery” (Finley 1982: 115). Chattel slaves were acquired primarily through Mediterranean trading networks, initially from Scythia and increasingly from Asia Minor in the Classical and Hellenistic periods. Augmenting the regular supply of slaves were those captured in war or, less frequently, by pirates (Finley 1982: ch. 10). The number of chattel slaves in ancient Greece, either at any given time or in any given polis, is nearly impossible to ascertain due to lack of evidence (see DEMOGRAPHY, HISTORICAL (ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN)). For Classical Athens, scholars have ventured estimates (themselves varying over time) from twenty thousand to more than one hundred and fifty thousand, with most guesses falling somewhere in the middle (Fisher 2001: 34–6).

Chattel slaves were engaged in all sectors of the Greek economy, from agriculture, mining and quarrying, manufacturing, commerce and banking, to domestic service (Finley 1982: ch. 6). Slaves involved in commerce and banking often had considerably more “freedom” and privileges than other chattel slaves, sometimes working and living apart from their masters. Scholars debate the extent of slave involvement in agriculture, particularly in Classical Athens: some hold that slavery was little used on farms in Attica, whereas others argue that agricultural slavery was widespread. Most scholars favor a moderate version of the latter position (for a good summary, see Fisher 2001: 37–47). This debate is significant for its larger ramifications about the relationship between slavery and the Greek economy (see ECONOMY, GREEK).

In theory, chattel slaves had very few legal rights. In Classical Athens, they had no claims to property, and, with a few exceptions, no

independent procedural capacity: they could not be a plaintiff or defendant (except in specific suits in the fourth century), and could not be a witness except under torture (*basanos*) (see TORTURE). They had no legally recognized family relationships, lacked the public rights and duties of citizens, were restricted from many (but not all) religious festivals, and played a small, but sometimes pivotal, role in the military. A master could essentially treat his slave as he wished; Plato's *Laws* (776B–778A), Xenophon's *Oikonomikos* (13), and pseudo-Aristotle's *Oikonomika* (1244a23–b22) urge the judicious use of punishment and rewards to elicit proper slave behavior. Evidence from Greek comedy, especially Aristophanes, illuminates the degree to which slaves were whipped, fettered, tattooed, and otherwise corporally violated (duBois 2003) (see CORPORAL PUNISHMENT).

Some chattel slaves (and also some communal slaves) were lucky enough to be freed. Manumission could be secular or sacral (or both) in nature. Secular manumission encompasses acts conducted by masters – including verbal declarations, testamentary manumission, and fictive “sale” of a slave to a third party – as well as those conducted by the *polis* in return for military service or informing. Sacral manumission entails either the release of a slave in a god's presence, or the fictive “sale” or “consecration” of a slave to a god, with the understanding that the god would make no use of his or her rights of ownership. Despite his newfound freedoms, however, the freed slave occupied a precarious legal and social position, being at risk of re-enslavement and stigmatized for his servile

past (Zelnick-Abramovitz 2005) (see MANUMISSION, GREEK AND ROMAN).

Although the institution of slavery was for the most part taken for granted, we find hints of criticism rooted in the idea that slavery was a product merely of law or convention, not of nature. Aristotle, likely responding to opposition of this sort, argues in his *Politics* (1253b1–1255b40) for the existence of the “natural slave,” for whom slavery was not only natural but also beneficial (Garnsey 1996).

SEE ALSO: Agriculture, Greek; Banks; Mines, mining, Greek and Roman; *Oikonomika* (treatise); *Oikonomikos* (treatise).

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