

Slavery, Late Antiquity and Byzantium

PETER SARRIS

Slavery was a fundamental feature of both Late Antique and Byzantine economy and society, with the distinction between free (*liber*) and slave (*servus*) standing at the heart of social perceptions. For the ubiquity of slavery in this world, it is worth noting that slavery in both an urban and rural context is entirely taken for granted not only in the *Institutes* and *Digest* of JUSTINIAN I, but also in the imperial enactments edited and reworked for inclusion in the THEODOSIAN CODE and the *CODEX JUSTINIANUS*. The prominence given to issues pertaining to slavery in legal works of an instructional, jurisprudential, and responsive character, respectively, is a good indication of the centrality of the institution. So, for example, in a law of 369 CE, it is decreed that if a landowner is convicted of a criminal offense, a full description (*plena descriptio*) of his property must be drawn up detailing “how many slaves – both urban and rural” his estate comprises (*CT* 9.42.7). The use of slaves in agricultural contexts is recorded in both the epigraphic record for western Asia Minor in the late fourth century and the papyrological record for Egypt in the late sixth. It is also worth noting that the Byzantine agricultural treatises – extracts of which survive in the *GEOPONICA* – assume an active role for slavery in agriculture (*Geoponica* 2.1), and slaves feature prominently in the late seventh- or early

eighth-century text concerned with rural life known as the *Farmer’s Law* or *Georgikos Nomos*. There is every sign, therefore, that the use of slaves as agricultural laborers was widespread. At the same time, the papyri record slaves to have been used as administrators and agents in urban and rural contexts alike, and the use of slaves as private armed retainers (*servi armati*) is recorded in the legal and narrative sources (*CJ* 9.12.10). The use of slaves as both administrators and laborers necessarily meant that, in abstract terms, slavery was more a question of social status than of economic class, but for most Byzantine slaves slavery was associated with a state of chronic insecurity, a total absence of rights, and extreme dependence on their owner. Not for nothing did condemnation to slavery remain one of the most extreme punishments at the disposal of the Late Antique or Byzantine state, signifying the “social death” of the offender concerned (*Inst.* 1.16).

SEE ALSO: Agriculture, Byzantine; Slavery, ancient Near East; Slavery, Greece; Slavery, Pharaonic Egypt; Slavery, Rome.

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