

FROM THE SYSTEM TO THE PERSON: BECOMING A SLAVE IN A 'NON-SLAVING ZONE'

Do sistema à pessoa: tornando-se escravo em uma “zona de não escravização”

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ABSTRACT

This short article offers a commentary on Joly & Knust's paper *Ancient Slavery in Mediterranean Perspective: A Proposal of a Global Approach*. I applaud the authors' plea for a diachronic, holistic approach to slavery in the ancient Mediterranean, but suggest that we would be unwise to dispense entirely with Moses Finley's notion of genuine 'slave societies'. I argue the case for a greater focus, in all work on Roman slavery, on 'natural reproduction'; that is, on the extent to which the slave 'supply' was replenished using children born to enslaved woman. I employ a monument from Roman Britain—the tombstone of Regina—to explore the nature of the 'internal' slave supply, and the lived experience of it.

KEYWORDS

Finley. Roman slavery. 'Natural reproduction'.

RESUMO

Este pequeno artigo oferece um comentário sobre o artigo de Joly & Knust, *Ancient Slavery in Mediterranean Perspective: A Proposal of a Global Approach*. Aplaudo o apelo dos autores por uma abordagem diacrônica e holística à escravidão no antigo Mediterrâneo, mas sugiro que não seria sensato dispensar inteiramente a noção de Moses Finley de genuínas 'sociedades escravistas'. Defendo o caso de um foco maior, em todo o trabalho sobre a escravidão romana, na 'reprodução natural'; isto é, na extensão em que o 'suprimento' de escravos era reabastecido usando crianças nascidas de mulheres escravizadas. Utilizo um monumento da Grã-Bretanha romana — a lápide de Regina — para explorar a natureza do suprimento 'interno' de escravos e sua experiência vivida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES

Finley. Escravidão romana. "Reprodução natural".

In this fascinating paper, Fabio Joly and José Knust make a welcome contribution to the debates currently circulating around Moses Finley's formulation of the 'slave society'. Reading their article has given me real food for thought and required me to revisit and re-evaluate an old friend: Finley's *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (Finley, [1980], 1998). There is much that I agree with in Joly and Knust's paper, and some things that I do not: but undertaking this commentary has been a very rewarding experience. I hope the authors find something of value in my thoughts on their work.

Joly and Knust centre their analysis on the two Mediterranean settings in which, according to Finley, 'genuine' slave societies once emerged—Classical Greece and Imperial-era Rome. They argue that rather than envisaging the existence of two, independently created Greek and Roman 'slave societies', we should think in terms of a cohesive Mediterranean slave system, comprising a first slavery which persisted from the ninth to first centuries BCE, and thereafter a second slavery, spreading across the entire Roman Empire and carrying with it metropolitan understandings of the slave as property (chattel).

I agree wholeheartedly with Joly and Knust's insistence that whenever scholars of the ancient world discuss 'Roman' slavery we need to keep firmly in mind the *reach* of Rome, and the migration of its metropolitan systems and practices of slavery across its wider Empire: this is an important and insightful point to bring to the ongoing critique of Finley's model. That said—and as Joly and Knust themselves note—one of the most revealing characteristics of recent critiques of Finley's concept of the 'slave society' has been a notable reluctance to dispense with the idea entirely. To use an English idiom, there seems to be an underlying worry that if we jettison Finley's argument entirely, we risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I share that worry. Why? Let us put aside for the moment all the problems with 'slave societies' so ably articulated in recent years by Lenski and Cameron (2018), Lenski (2018), Vlassopoulos (2016), and now by Joly and Knust themselves, to ask a fundamental question. What lay at the heart of Finley's binomial differentiation between genuine 'slave societies' and 'societies with slaves'? The answer is this: Finley understood that wherever and whenever it existed, intensively practiced chattel slavery *differed* in important ways from other forms of slavery. The passage that Joly and Knust quote from Neville Morley (2011, p. 248) captures that difference beautifully from the point of view of Roman slave owners. These were men who lived in a world in which, to quote Harper and Scheidel (2018, p. 96) 'slavery was a basic fact of life like death and taxes'; men who looked out from the comfort of homes tended entirely by unfree workers onto cityscapes and rural landscapes in which the enslaved were ever-present. Decades of archaeological research across all of Finley's five proposed 'slave societies' (Ancient Greece and Rome, the early modern Caribbean, the Southern states of the USA, and Brazil) also seeks to capture what these societies shared: not by focusing on the perspective of slave owners, but by recovering something of the life experiences of the millions who endured chattel slavery. In short, Finley's bathwater contained a fundamentally important diachronic baby; one that still resonates for scholars of chattel slavery—and not only with reference to the ancient world.

Returning to the Mediterranean, the distinction that Finley drew between 'societies with slaves' and 'slave societies' was envisaged not only as qualitative, but as sequential: that is to say, Finley proposed that in a small number of settings, the former was succeeded by the latter. Whilst the chronology and rationale Joly and Knust propose for the transition from a 'first' to a 'second' Mediterranean slave system differ markedly from Finley's proposed transition from 'societies with slaves' to 'slave societies' in Greece and Rome, their model is, in other respects, not so far from Finley's after all. Over time, they suggest, epichoric (localised) practices of social bondage across the Mediterranean world interacted with, and were gradually subsumed into, a single intensive, panchoric monolith: chattel

slavery, as practised in Rome and enshrined in Roman law. Joly and Knust, following Vlassopoulos (2021), wisely advocate a diachronic approach to Greek and Roman slavery, but in suggesting that ancient slavery is ‘still almost exclusively studied synchronically’ they do not give Finley the credit he deserves here. Finley’s ‘slave societies’ were characterised as such via an explicitly diachronic comparative lens; one which saw that ancient slavery could best be understood and modelled with reference to chattel slavery as it unfolded in some parts of the early modern Atlantic world, some 2000 years later. Joly and Knust also reference the ‘Atlantic World’ and for these scholars, as for Vlassopoulos (2021, 204), that world is of value to scholars of the ancient Mediterranean in two ways. On the one hand, they suggest, the recent framing of the early modern history of the territories that face the Atlantic as *circum*-Atlantic history exemplifies the kind of broad analytical framework that is needed in the scholarship of ancient world slavery. Within such a thalassocratic framework, Joly and Knust argue, it becomes possible to study facets of ‘Mediterranean World’ slavery not in isolation, but as connected discourses in a diachronic narrative. I completely agree with the authors’ plea for a new diachronic focus in Mediterranean slavery studies. But I think it is important to remember just how much we owe to Finley himself in this regard, and to acknowledge *why* his diachronic analysis extended beyond the Mediterranean itself. At a later point in their paper Joly and Knust do much as Finley did, dipping into the history of Atlantic World slavery to extract a specific phenomenon and a specific point in time. In their case, that phenomenon is the ‘second’ slavery which some historians have argued developed in early nineteenth century USA, Brazil, and Cuba. Joly and Knust leverage this comparison in proposing ‘a ‘second’ Mediterranean slavery, contemporary with, and disseminated by, Imperial Rome. Atlantic ‘second’ slavery, first proposed by Dale Tomich in 1988, remains a much-disputed concept, and this is not the place to revisit the arguments for and against it. But I think it important to emphasise that ‘mass’ slavery, capitalism, and industrialized monocultural plantation agriculture existed in the sugar colonies of the Caribbean and the tobacco-growing states of the USA long before the nineteenth century. Furthermore, whilst the numbers of people living in slavery undoubtedly grew in the early nineteenth century, and whilst new technologies certainly emerged, the core features of plantation slavery as established in the early eighteenth century remained intact.

As Joly and Knust argue, *where* those who lived in slavery originated is a central consideration in any discussion of both Atlantic ‘second’ slavery and of change over time in Mediterranean slavery. With reference to the latter, Finley regarded as a fallacy the idea that late Republican territorial expansion fuelled early Imperial intensive slavery (Finley, 1998, p. 151). In his view, Rome had already become a ‘slave society’ by the third century BCE, more than two hundred years before Joly and Knust’s second Mediterranean slavery is proposed to have emerged from the first. Joly and Knust give the wars and conquests of the Republican era a more formative role in ushering in a new scale of Mediterranean slavery than Finley would have been comfortable with, but they are completely in agreement with Finley—who came to this view in part through his study of the Transatlantic slave trade—that ‘a necessary condition for an adequate supply of slaves is ... the existence, outside the society under consideration, of a ‘reservoir’ of potential slave labour on which the society can draw systematically’ (ibid). In the ancient Mediterranean, just as in the post-Medieval ‘New World’ colonies that forcibly imported African labour, that supply was, for a long time, principally found beyond the borders of what Joly and Knust, following David Lewis (2018) call the Mediterranean ‘slaving zone’. Like Finley, Joly and Knust see this reliance on an external slave supply as a response to the lack or loss of an internal one. Like Finley, they frame that loss as an outcome of the extension of certain rights to the non-elite free populus: the right of citizenship, or the right *not* to be enslaved that was—in theory at least—a benefit of living in a Roman province.

For Joly and Knust, a key factor in the emergence and development of their first phase of Mediterranean slavery was an effort by the city-states to define and then maintain *non-slaving* zones, thereby obliging merchants to establish new, long-distance slave trading routes in the territories fringing their own. But slaves were made in many ways, and I would like to see Joly and Knust give a little more consideration to the part played by ‘internal’ slavery in shaping Mediterranean societies, particularly in their second phase. Joly and Knust suggest that with the rise of the Roman Empire in the first century BCE, the non-slaving zone was pushed ever outwards beyond the borders of what was by this point a vast Empire circling the entire Mediterranean, and (with the conquest of Atlantic-facing Spain, the territories fringing the Black Sea, and Britain), extending even beyond it. The authors concede that the Empire ‘did not become a perfect non-slaving zone in itself’ and note that ‘internal sources such as the sale of children, kidnappings and the internal reproduction of the slave population continued to generate slaves’. But it is the *scale* of what Joly and Knust call ‘internal reproduction’ and Walter Scheidel describe as ‘natural reproduction’ (Scheidel 1997, Harper; Scheidel 2018). That, I suggest, needs greater consideration here.

We must remind ourselves at this point that in Roman law, every child born to an enslaved mother in Rome and its many provinces was born a slave, whatever the status of their father. This ‘natural’ process was far from benign. Slave owners routinely fathered children with enslaved women who were powerless to refuse their attentions, and women of child-bearing age within an owner’s *familia* will have been ‘incentivized’ to produce as many offspring as possible. These children (known as *vernae*) might be put to work within the household itself, or on the owner’s land. Or they could be sold on elsewhere. Much about Roman slavery remains unquantifiable, and the true extent of the ‘internal’ slave population at any point in time in the Roman empire is one of them. But, without getting into the specifics of the kind of ‘numbers game’ that Finley himself so disliked, we may note here that Walter Scheidel has long since made a compelling case, via statistical modelling, that ‘natural reproduction made a greater contribution to the Roman slave supply than child exposure, warfare, and the slave trade taken together and was in all probability several times as important as any other single source’ (Scheidel, 1997, p. 156). Yet for their second Mediterranean phase, Joly and Knust envisage an essentially *diasporic* slavery, within which captives from other lands were moved forcibly over huge distances. Joly and Knust suggest that this was also the case in the ‘second’ slavery of nineteenth century north America. But whilst ‘illegal’ slave trading following the abolition of the British, French and Dutch slave trades certainly brought large numbers of new African captives into North America in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, even larger numbers of enslaved persons were moved forcibly *within* the Americas. This was particularly the case for the southern USA, Cuba, and Brazil. As Borucki and O’Malley 2018 put it in introducing their Intra-American Slave Trade database on the *slavevoyages* website: ‘in the era after the Atlantic slave trade closed, robust domestic trafficking networks emerged to forcibly move people from older slaveholding regions to burgeoning new ones, disrupting enslaved people’s communities in the Americas and severing family ties’ (<https://www.slavevoyages.org/american/about#methodology/0/en/>). It might be productive to envisage something similar for the Roman Empire, particularly in its later stages.

The likelihood that ‘natural reproduction’ played a significant, if admittedly unquantifiable, part in the Mediterranean slave supply does not square easily with Joly and Knust’s argument that long-distance slave trading was a defining characteristic of their second phase of Mediterranean slavery, and that it was facilitated by a networked community of mercantile slave traders pushing beyond an expanding frontier to found new sources of ‘outsiders’; to enslave. All other considerations aside, we might ask where precisely these ‘new frontier zones’ were located, and when. Imperial Rome certainly

acquired new territories, but the rapid territorial expansion of the third and second centuries BC had long since come to an end.

Vernae ('houseborn' slaves) were not the only 'internal' source of slave labour in any given Roman province. It is hard to think of any territory conquered by Rome in which forms of social bondage were not *already* in place long before the legions arrived; and it is even harder to imagine that those indigenes who held others in bondage will have regarded the Roman presence as a fine opportunity to liberate them. Incorporation into the Roman world also brought a host of additional routes by which individuals might be enslaved on their own doorsteps, notwithstanding the provincial status that, in theory, prohibited such an eventuality. For example, enslavement was a common fate for those who rose up against Rome (and there were many such moments, from the Boudican revolt in Britain to the nationalist uprisings in Judea). Individuals could sell themselves or their children into slavery to alleviate debt; criminals could be punished by enslaving them; infant exposure was another likely source of new slaves. And under Roman law, of course the children of all enslaved women would necessarily also be slaves. Put another way, Joly and Knust's 'non-slaving zone' was perhaps a more significant site of the making of new slaves than they acknowledge.

Roman Britain is a useful place for thinking about indigenous slavery within a long-established Roman province. Iron Age Britain did not face the Mediterranean, either geographically or culturally, and textual sources by Greek and Roman authors, whilst exceptionally limited, nevertheless hint at the presence of various forms of indigenous social bondage in the pre-conquest period. 'Slavery' for these people and their descendants might have mutated into the chattel slavery practiced by Rome—or it might not. One of the best-known funerary monuments of Roman Britain (RIB 1065) depicts a freedwoman called Regina who came from the Catuvellauni, a people of southern Britain, and who died in the second half of the second century CE. More than 100 years after the Roman conquest this British-born enslaved woman was freed by her Syrian owner, who then became her husband. Regina died, aged 30, at Arbeia, a fort at the mouth of the River Tyne. Her tombstone carefully records her ethnic origins and depicts her in indigenous British clothing (Carroll, 2012). *How* Regina entered slavery we cannot say, but her monument speaks to physical and social mobility, to ethnicity and memory, and above all to the complexities of having lived in slavery, as an indigene, in Roman Britain.

Regina reminds us that whilst millions lived in chattel slavery across the Roman world, they did not do so in an entirely monolithic way. Put another way, systems and practices of slavery, and the lived experience of chattel slavery across the Roman empire were perhaps less panchoric and more heterogeneous than Joly and Knust envisage. Moses Finley, as Harper and Scheidel (2018, p. 86) put it recently, 'made ancient slavery real'. Regina's tombstone does the same: it reminds us that every enslaved person was exactly that: a *person*, with a unique biography. It is of course entirely understandable, in a discussion as wide-ranging as the one under discussion here that provided here, that the global, the systemic, and the collective should take precedence over the local, and the individual. But Joly and Knust, like all of us who study Mediterranean slavery in different ways, and at different scales, are ultimately endeavouring to keep ancient slavery real, and to enable Regina and the millions who also endured what she did to tell their stories.

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