

# WHITHER THE STUDY OF ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN SLAVERY? ON JOLY AND KNUST'S SECOND SLAVERY

Para onde vai o estudo da escravidão no Mediterrâneo antigo? Sobre a segunda escravidão de Joly e Knust

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## ABSTRACT

This commentary responds to the critique by Joly and Knust of M.I. Finley's binary concept of 'slave society' versus 'society with slaves', and to their 'new methodological alternative' of a first and second slavery. Whilst agreeing with much of the substance of their critique of Finley, and on the utility of a phasal model of a first and second slavery, this commentary underscores some potential pitfalls of this new alternative; it also highlights several intractable epistemological challenges to understanding slavery on a Mediterranean scale across the *longue durée*, and explores the role of regional histories in contributing to a history of slavery in the greater Mediterranean zone during antiquity.

## KEYWORDS

Slavery. Slave trade. Mediterranean. Roman Empire.

## RESUMO

Este comentário responde à crítica de Joly e Knust ao conceito binário de M.I. Finley de “sociedade de escravos” versus “sociedade com escravos”, e à sua “nova alternativa metodológica” de uma primeira e segunda escravatura. Embora concordando com grande parte do conteúdo da sua crítica a Finley e com a utilidade de um modelo estagial de uma primeira e segunda escravatura, este comentário sublinha algumas armadilhas potenciais desta nova alternativa; salienta também vários desafios epistemológicos intratáveis para a compreensão da escravatura à escala mediterrânica ao longo da *longue durée* e explora o papel das histórias regionais na contribuição para uma história da escravatura na zona mediterrânica durante a Antiguidade.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVES

Escravidão. Tráfico escravo. Mediterrâneo. Império romano.

**1** . I am very grateful for the opportunity to communicate some thoughts in response to Joly and Knust's fine paper, with whose conclusions I am in broad agreement. Not only is their approach compatible with that pursued in the concluding chapter of my 2018 book<sup>1</sup>; it jibes well with research currently underway for a second monograph, provisionally entitled *Doleful Merchandise: Slave Trade and Society in the Ancient Greek World*, which wrestles with many of the problems that Joly and Knust discuss. In this short response I wish to focus on three particular challenges: (i) the heuristic gains and trade-offs that come when using broad classifications (including Finley's idea of 'slave society', but also Joly and Knust's proposed adoption of the idea of a 'first' and 'second slavery'); (ii) the benefits and limitations of a regional approach; and (iii) the epistemological challenge of writing on a Mediterranean scale with a fundamentally lopsided and lacunose historical record.

2. It is hard to disagree with Joly and Knust regarding the limitations of Finley's binary concept of 'slave society' versus 'society with slaves'. Although I would not discard this distinction entirely, its limitations have come sharply into focus in recent years. Arguably, the fatal blow was delivered forty years ago by Orlando Patterson (Patterson, 1982); and *pace* Joly and Knust, the work of Patterson – for all his praise of Finley and effort to play down their differences (e.g., Patterson, 2016, p. 265) – parts ways completely with Finley in two fundamental respects: (i) the question of what constitutes slavery as a technical status category, and (ii) the number and distribution of 'slave societies' in world history. The former move was not, in my opinion, convincing (Lewis, 2016 and forthcoming; cf. Finley, 1980, p. 73 with n. 18; Finkelman, 1985). But the latter was magnificently effective, setting off a mine under Finley's claim that only five true slave societies existed in world history. It took three decades for Patterson's point to become the mainstream view; but the critiques of Lenski, Vlassopoulos and I all owe to Patterson's demonstration decades ago that a serious attempt to gauge the number of 'slave societies' in world history would, even using Finley's own definition of the category, turn up many more than five examples. Subsequent work has revealed further problems, such as the automatic consignment to the 'society with slaves' box of any society for which insufficient evidence for elite income survives (even if slavery really had been crucial to it), the reduction of the full gamut of possible configurations of slaveholding to just two possible classifications (enormous influence or negligible influence – but nothing in between), and the problems with insisting that slave societies *ipso facto* generate a western-style concept of freedom.

Should we, then, replace Finley's idea of 'slave society' with Joly and Knust's idea of a two-phase 'first' and 'second' slavery (which I will call hereafter the phasal model)? The problem is that both these concepts, as heuristic tools, perform completely different jobs. Both can be included in the historian's toolbox, and both have limitations as well as their own particular virtues. The limitations of 'slave society' as a heuristic tool are now clear, but the task that it performed – distinguishing between societies in which slavery played a crucial structural role in the economy and those in which it did not – is not really addressed at all by the phasal model, which (as I understand it) is to do with tracking long-term processes of convergence in slaving practices across an expansive geography. The phasal model really does provide something new and useful, for it studies convergence in relation to slaving practices in a manner that parallels, say, the institutional changes among Hellenistic Greek city-states dubbed 'the Great Convergence' by John Ma (Ma, 2018). Nothing like it has been brought into the debate over Mediterranean slavery before, and it certainly has utility. But

<sup>1</sup> See Lewis (2018, p. 269-290), where my position on slaving zones, the role of trade in integrating regions, the effects of slave-trading supply zones, the consequences of Roman imperial expansion and provincialization on supply chains, etc., aligns closely with that of Joly and Knust.

the phasal model is useful for a different task than that addressed by Finley's 'slave society' model, so claiming that Finley's approach has limitations and should be replaced (rather than just improved, or supplemented, or both) seems to me like pointing out that a hammer is not good at sawing wood, and therefore should be replaced with a saw. But what if we wish to hammer in nails as well as cut planks? Would it not be better to keep both tools, and retain Finley's idea of a 'slave society' in a modified form, such as Lenski's intensification approach (Lenski, 2018) or some variant thereof? Seen this way, the phasal model offers a new and useful tool; but framed as a 'new methodological alternative', it may just mean choosing a new and different set of blind-spots.

3. There is a deeper problem here, though, and that is that any general classification, no matter how useful, will bring heuristic gains but also new blind spots and blinkers. And here Joly and Knust are right to underscore the limitations of well-worn categories (e.g., 'Near Eastern slavery', 'Greek slavery', 'Roman slavery', 'Jewish slavery'). If we probe a little further into the distinction between 'Greek slavery' and 'Roman slavery', the problems come into sharper focus. Thus, Kyle Harper writes:

The Roman empire was home to the most extensive and enduring slave system in pre-modern history. Slavery has been virtually ubiquitous in human civilization, but the Romans created one of the few "genuine slave societies" in the western experience. The other example of classical antiquity, the slave society of Greece, was fleeting and diminutive by comparison (Harper, 2011, p. 3).

Yet the Roman takeover of Greece left much intact – most of the Greeks themselves, most of their cities and laws, and indeed their slave systems, which continued to operate as before (and it is easy to exaggerate the integrative, convergent effect of Roman law – see below). To claim that Greece's slave society ended at Pydna or with the sack of Corinth (or any other convenient cutoff) and thereafter became fully absorbed into 'Roman' slavery makes no more sense than to claim that the Greek *polis* died at Chaeronea. Besides, the tendency of modern historians to end their textbooks on Greek slavery around the time of Alexander is nothing more than a bad habit, one not even mandated by the vicissitudes of survival of the evidence.<sup>2</sup> It seems rather ironic that, despite framing the issue as he does, Harper can reasonably be described as one of the great modern historians of ancient Greek slavery; for his book has more to say on the Greek-speaking East than the Latin West, and his key case study on the economic endurance of slave society into late antiquity concerns the Aegean islands and western coast of Asia Minor (Harper, 2011, p. 163-170). Seen this way, one can argue that there is no fundamental rupture in Greek slavery from its emergence into view in the late Bronze age down to the 1820s AD, only ruptures in the evidence. Nor does the story of slavery in Greece end with the revolution from Ottoman control, for slavery persists in illegal forms down to today. So it is possible to view Greek slavery as an ongoing story of continuity, adaption, and occasional disappearance from the modern historian's view – a view, moreover, that is inevitably segmented by artificial modern periodizations, of which almost nobody who experienced slavery during in this three-millennia timespan had the slightest awareness.

4. The phasal model is not qualitatively different from the well-worn categorizations critiqued above, insofar as it too comes with blind spots. We might consider first the issue of a 'Mediterranean first slavery' commencing in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC. Does the phenomenon really commence then, or simply come into the modern historian's frame of view via the

<sup>2</sup> Nor can I be excused this fault, for LEWIS 2018, explicitly running down to 146 BC, has almost nothing to say on Hellenistic Greece.

documentary habits of city-state cultures? This problem concerns the issue I alluded to earlier, viz. depending on a basically lacunose and lopsided evidence-base for writing a long-term and expansive history of Mediterranean slavery – one that key theoretical works, such as the important essays by Van de Mieroop (Van de Mieroop, 1997) and Vlassopoulos (Vlassopoulos, 2016), help us to think hard about. What, then, happened before the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC in relation to Mediterranean slavery?

On the proto-history of Mediterranean slavery, one of Finley's claims that has, as far as I am aware, escaped proper criticism to date is that 'slavery was a late and relatively infrequent form of involuntary labour' (Finley, 1980, p. 77). That the second half of this claim is an error has been shown by Patterson and others; but the first claim, Finley's idea of slavery as an historically 'late' form of exploitation, replacing earlier 'archaic' forms of bondage, remains stubbornly entrenched. Here is not the place to argue over Solon's reforms or Livy as a source for early Rome; at the very least, comparative considerations enjoin a rethink of Finley's claim on theoretical grounds. Thus, Cathy Cameron's *Captives: How Stolen People Changed the World* (Cameron, 2016) demonstrates how small-scale societies of a sort studied by modern ethnographers – versions of which existed prior to the Bronze Age societies of the Greater Mediterranean and also persisted into historical periods on the periphery of the well-documented societies – can have highly developed systems of slavery. Captive-taking and slave-trading may well, then, have far deeper historical roots in Mediterranean Eurasia than our surviving documentation allows us to see (cf. Testart *et al.*, 2010; Scheidel, 2023). One lesson to be learned from Finley's 'slave society' approach is the dangers of taking absence of evidence as evidence of absence.

A second danger of the phasal model lies in the scope for overestimating the strength of Roman imperialism as a convergent force, underplaying inter-provincial differences, the persistence of local pre-Roman practices, and the capacity of provincials to innovate without relation to the Roman cultural and imperial apparatus. Thus, the comparatively minor role of slavery in the economy of Egypt both before and after Rome's assumption of control in relation to, say, Italy and Greece, is well known. And how much difference did Roman law really make on the ground when local systems of law also remained operative and played a particularly important role in the private sphere (Kantor, 2015)? Some of the most strikingly unusual epigraphical evidence for Greek slavery – such as the dedication inscriptions from Leukopetra and parts of Asia Minor, but also e.g., Anatolian confession texts, seem to have emerged from local cultural contexts rather than being exports from the imperial metropole (Chaniotis, 2018). The phasal model, then, cannot escape a close focus on regions – a subject on which Joly and Knust express some scepticism, and which warrants a closer look.

5. When I wrote in my 2018 book of 'epichoric slavery' (Lewis, 2018, p. 8; 105), I was not introducing so much as adapting and nominalizing an existing analogy introduced by Finley – that is, his comparison between what he took to be a variety of servile statuses and the differing weight and coin standards found across the Greek world (Finley, 1981, p. 140). Joly and Knust are quite right to point out the limitations of 'epichoric slavery', viz. that it deals (for the most part) synchronically with small regions, not diachronically with a wider, Mediterranean-wide canvas. As Braudel put it, 'History can do more than study walled gardens' (Braudel, 1972, p. 22). Where I part ways from Joly and Knust is when they claim that regional approaches are doomed to focus on internal, endogenous factors; and here, Carlo Ginzberg's defence of microhistory supplies the crucial objections. Focusing on the small-scale is not to ignore wider historical forces, but can be a way of seeing how they play out at a higher level of resolution. Thus, Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* is not a foray into parochialism but an attempt to analyse the consequences of a vast, Europe-wide historical process, viz. the counter-reformation, at small scale – the scale of the village, the



scale, even, of the individual (Ginzburg, 1993). What is experienced internally in a region may derive more from exogenous than endogenous factors; and I have aimed to grapple with this issue and the problems of regionalism and diachronic change in the slave systems of the Greek world in two recent essays (Lewis, 2022; 2024). It is true, though, that regional approaches will not in themselves, even when aggregated, add up to history on the Greater Mediterranean scale. But they play a crucial role in the production of accurate, *longue durée* historical analysis, for diachronic history can be thought of as operating like an old celluloid film reel, where the dynamism and fluidity of the moving picture depends on the sharpness and clarity each successive frame. In other words, it is only by constantly refining regional-scale history on a synchronic basis that an ever better long-term analysis of that region (or wider regional contexts) will emerge. Historiography on the local and synchronic must, then, play a symbiotic, recursive role in refining historiography on the diachronic and supra-regional, and vice versa (cf. Wickham, 2023, p. 1-24 on the Medieval Mediterranean).

6. These caveats aside, Joly and Knust's idea of a Mediterranean world-system remains an excellent, thought-provoking approach for analysing slavery. Focusing in particular on trade, statehood and imperialism allows a sense of the Mediterranean slave system's reach at particular points in time to come into focus. The manumission records of Delphi (running from 201 BC–ca. AD 100) provide much food for thought, straddling as they do the crucial period of what Polybius, in describing the Roman takeover of the Mediterranean world, called *symplokē* ('enmeshment'); they act as nothing less than a repository of evidence for the long-term effects of these very processes. And they provide negative evidence too, for what the Delphic records leave out is striking – namely the remarkably small numbers of slaves from the Western Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> We know that during the period straddled by these records, a massive outflow of slaves from Gaul was underway (Diodorus Siculus 5.26.3 with Fentress, 2019); but this seems to have been absorbed wholly by Italy and the West, for not a single Gaul appears in the Delphic records (if we omit the Galatians of Anatolia). Yet those same records show commercial integration via slave-trading with far more distant regions to the east and north – regions as far-flung as Armenia, the Carpathian Mountains, the Iranian plateau, and the deserts of Arabia. Nor do slaves from the Western Mediterranean appear in Greece in great numbers earlier: the Attic Stelai (IG I<sup>3</sup> 421–30) from the late fifth century BC document two Illyrian slaves kept in a household in Piraeus, and perhaps (though the reading is far from secure) a slave from Malta too. But slaves from Thrace, the Black Sea, Anatolia and Syria predominate (Lewis, 2011), and this at a time when we know of close trade relations between the Aegean and Magna Graecia. Is Nemanja Vujčić correct to argue from this pattern that slavery and the slave-trade were barely developed in the Adriatic at this time (Vujčić, 2020)? Were local Illyrian slave systems producing and consuming slaves in a relatively closed loop (Ducat, 1993)? Or were the slave systems of Carthage and Italy already exerting a sufficient commercial gravity to capture the slave supplies of the whole Western Mediterranean basin (cf. Flaig, 2009, p. 55-56; Lenski, 2018, p. 26–29; Lewis, 2018, p. 259-266; Scheidel, 2023)? Anyhow, the origin pattern of slaves in the Delphic manumission corpus is reminiscent of nothing so much as Braudel's characterisation of the eastern and western Mediterranean as 'two Mediterraneans [...] physically, economically, and culturally different from each other. Each was a separate historical zone' (Braudel, 1972, p. 137). Rome's takeover of the east may have united the Mediterranean slaving system, but in an unequal way, adding Eastern Mediterranean slave supplies to Rome's trade without effecting an equivalent counterflow from West to East. At any rate, it seems to me that the idea of a Greater Mediterranean world system in relation

<sup>3</sup> For a rough count of foreign slaves broken down by region, see Lewis (2017, p. 178–179); full references at 195–198; new definitive edition in Mulliez (2018; 2022). *Doleful Merchandise* will contain new counts in the appendixes based on Mulliez's editions.

to slavery will best be served by tracing chains and flows of commodified humanity across time rather than debating the system's parameters and definition – as Oswyn Murray has archly remarked, 'archaeology has saved history, showing that European civilization derives from Eurasian trade routes. Compared with this legacy, the sterile debate on the pseudo concept of 'Mediterraneanism' reveals itself as irrelevant presentism' (Murray, 2024, p. 354).

7. To return, finally, to the title of this short piece: whither the study of Ancient Mediterranean Slavery? I can neither predict nor direct the future; but ultimately, the choice comes down to whether we trend towards, in Isaiah Berlin's terms, a Fox's approach to the problem, or a hedgehog's (Berlin, 1953) – that is, either an approach that makes use of many disparate viewpoints and theories, each of which may reveal part but not all of the picture; or an attempt to find a totalising theory of everything.

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