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The Economic and Cultural Impacts of Slavery in Classical Athens

The enslavement of foreign groups in classical Greece, primarily Athens, had major impacts on the economy, society, and democracy. It shaped how Athenian democracy was made possible and what Athenian citizens were able to do with their leisure time. The following statements are a plausible assessment of the impact of slavery in ancient Greece: “Slavery produced profound effects in every corner of Greek society, not only in the economy. Aside from providing labor, slaves also made possible the accomplishments of Athenian culture.” By looking at primary sources, such as artifacts and ancient texts, and secondary sources that analyze the history of slavery in classical Greece, we can improve our understanding of what life was like for slaves in Athens and how they contributed to society during this time period.

Although the beginning of slavery can be traced back to before the classical period, due to a number of factors, it was the most prominent during the 5th and 4th century B.C.E. and is discussed widely throughout various types of evidence (Carlos Museum 2021). However, slaves began appearing in sources such as ancient texts and ceramics beginning in the mid 6th century B.C.E.. When slaves were first being brought back to Athens during this period, Athens had other interests in Thrace, regarding their natural resources. Evidence for some of these first slaves that were brought back appears in comedy masks. By looking at these masks, it could be confirmed that the first slaves in Athens were Thracian because all of the masks had red hair. This most likely arose when the majority of Athenian slaves were red-headed and not ethnically

mixed (Rosivach 1999, 156). After the Athenians began to bring groups of individuals back as slaves, they continued to do so for centuries after.

Slaves were considered an integral part of society, and as said by Aristotle, “the component parts of a household are (1) human beings, and (2) goods and chattels” (Aristotle, *Economics*, 1.1343a). The majority of Athenian households had at least one slave that helped their owners, and slave help was considered the norm in a household during this time period (Jameson 1977, 123). It was so crucial that it was considered not only an economic benefit but “...the fundamental economic unit of the time” (Lin 2023, 48). From the years of 317 to 307 B.C.E., towards the end of the classical period, a census completed by Demetrios of Phaleron reported that there were a total of 400,000 total slaves in Attica. With the total number of citizens being 21,000 individuals in addition to 10,000 metics (who were resident aliens who paid taxes in Athens, but rarely were able to become citizens because they were born elsewhere), this meant that there was a minimum of 4 slaves per citizen (Morris and Papadopoulos 2005, 181). By looking at this ratio, it is clearly emphasized how much Athens relied on slave help as a polis.

Athens additionally relied on multiple types of slaves. Under the rule of Perikles, the different categories of slaves depended on the particular skills and abilities of the slave. Many of the slaves in Athens worked in agriculture, and those who worked in these settings were known as the *douloi*, and they made up a significant amount of the agricultural workforce in Athens (McInerney 2018, 240). The *oiketai* referred to slaves that worked in the household, doing tasks such as cooking, waiting on their owners, and weaving cloth. Two other types of slaves, who often would reside away from the household were the *choris oikountes* and the *demosoi*. The *choris oikountes* were individuals who had more unique abilities as craftsmen, such as shoemakers or painters, who were able to support both themselves and their owners, with their

labor. Lastly, the *demosoi* were public slaves that contributed to Athens by helping as clerks, secretaries, or street sweepers (McInerney 2018, 241). All four of these types of slaves helped Athens to function as a society and support the democratic processes that Athenian owners who were citizens, were encouraged to participate in.



Figure 1. Kylix with a Reveler, Greek (Attic), ca. 480 BCE, Object 2005.058.001, Carlos Museum at Emory University

An example of what one of the *chorus oikountes* may have worked on is depicted in **Figure 1**. This piece of ceramic is a portion of a kylix from 480 B.C.E., which would've been used as a drinking cup. This kylix was made by the Brygos Painter, who was an influential painter in Athens that specialized in red-figure pottery during the early 400s B.C.E. (Getty Museum 2024). While the actual name of the Brygos painter is unknown, it is likely that he was enslaved based on his name, which was most likely given to him to designate his foreign

ethnicity as a member of the Bryges tribe. Because the Brygos Painter had a special craft, there was a chance that he was able to buy his freedom from the profits of his labor, or purchase his workshop as well (Object Number 2005.058.001., Carlos Museum). Because buying one's way to freedom was selective, "...only those in lucrative craft professions could work their way to freedom, thus few slaves freed in fourth century B.C. Athens worked in agriculture" (Morris and Papadopoulos 2005, 183). This is one of the reasons the Brygos Painter was able to own his own studio.

The treatment of slaves was a topic of contention within classical Athens. In Aristotle's work, *Economics*, he discusses the treatment of slaves and how that treatment impacted their work and productivity. Guidelines such as "we may apportion to our slaves (1) work, (2) chastisement, and (3) food" (Aristotle, *Economics*, 1.1344a) were recommended to the owners of slaves for how to treat their slaves, in order to keep them obedient to them. Aristotle believed that by using food as a slave's pay, that they could be kept under their master's control. As previously mentioned, buying your freedom as a slave was not an easy feat. The goal of freedom was often set in front of the slave, and as written by Aristotle, "to set the prize of freedom before him is both just and expedient; since having a prize to work for, and a time defined for its attainment, he will put his heart into his labors" (Aristotle, *Economics*, 1.1344b). Another author from the classical period who expressed similar rhetoric to Aristotle about slavery is Xenophon. In his work, *Economics*, he explains his beliefs on how to enforce obedience with slaves. He states, "but in dealing with slaves the training thought suitable for wild animals is also a very effective way of teaching obedience; for you will do much with them by filling their bellies with the food they hanker after" (Xenophon, *Economics*, 13). After looking at both Aristotle and

Xenophon's views on the treatment of enslaved people, we can see how the logic they used was widespread throughout the majority of classical Athens and Greece.

The perceptions that the Greeks carried surrounding the idea slavery, which they believed was acceptable and justifiable, was the prevailing thought for a couple reasons. Prominent figures, such as Aristotle, shared their beliefs on why slaves differ from free men. In his work, *Politics*, Aristotle's theory of natural slavery defines what he considers slaves to be, and the justification for why certain groups of individuals should be enslaved. He argues that "...there are cases of people of whom some are freemen and the others slaves by nature, and for these slavery is an institution both expedient and just" (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.1255a). While there may not seem like there is much logic in an argument like that, this was the rationale the general public believed in terms of who should and shouldn't be enslaved. Aristotle used other arguments such as, "...when slavery for the one and mastership for the other are advantageous and just, and it is proper for the one party to be governed and for the other to govern" (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.1255b) to justify the governing/ruling of another group of individuals.

Additionally, the term *barbaroi* was used to define individuals and groups who did not originate from the same places or spoke the same languages. In Greece the *barbaroi*, who were classified as individuals who are not Greek and do not speak Greek, were considered to be inferior to those who were of Greek origin and ancestry. Because the *barbaroi* were seen as an outside and inferior group, they were thought to be enslaved by nature, as opposed to Greeks, who could never be slaves by nature. By using the reasoning similar to "...not only are all barbaroi by their nature slaves under all circumstances, whether they are actually enslaved or not, but all Greeks can never really be slaves under any circumstances, even if they are taken prisoner and sold" (Rosivach 1999, 148), Greeks justified the enslavement of other societies that were not

similar to theirs. Slaves were also thought to be fundamentally different from all free people, including women and children, and considered to be closer to domesticated animals (Rosivach 1999, 146). This reasoning follows a similar rhetoric that both Aristotle and Xenophon write about as well.

Shifts in the ways that slaves were distinctly shown in Attic pottery in the classical era are also apparent. Research on this pottery from the second half of the 6th century B.C.E. done by Nikolaus Himmelmann has “identified as occurring about this time in the representation of servants on Attic pottery, who for the first time became clearly distinguishable iconographically from free men” (Rosivach 1999, 156). This shift happens concurrently to the shift in ideology of *barbaroi* as groups of people that were “meant to be enslaved.”

While Athenians thought of the *barbaroi* as outsiders and thought they were meant to be enslaved because they did not fit the typically Athenian mold, there were other ways of enslaving groups of people that the Athenians participated in. Warfare and fighting between outside groups were regular and seasonal events in classical Greece. An easy way of acquiring slaves was after a city was captured, and normal practice for Greeks was to kill the men of military age and enslave the women and children (Rosivach 1999, 133). Enslaved groups made up a significant portion of the population in Greece, including Athens.

While men that were caught in cities that were being sacked were occasionally taken as slaves, they were normally killed. Orlando Patterson, who is a historical and cultural sociologist, believes that this is due to the reasoning that “... ‘women and children were easier to take than men; they were also easier to keep and to absorb in the community’” (Rosivach 1999, 140), and they were valuable as help for agricultural purposes and around the households. Once a slave was taken by their owner, “the slave did not exist as a legal persona, had almost no protected

rights and his master had almost complete control over him” (Vlassopoulos 2011, 123). Because they were considered to be the legal property of their owner, they could also be subjected to unjust treatment and other methods of coercion.



Figure 2. Votive Relief with Banquet Scene, Greek, 400-350 BCE, Object 1984.16, Carlos Museum at Emory University

An example of what slaves did to help their owners is depicted in **Figure 2**. This relief from 400-350 B.C.E. shows a banquet scene that is honoring a hero, accompanied by his wife. The second figure to the left is a male slave, who is shown as smaller than the man and his wife to show that he is of inferior status to the hero, who is the primary subject in the relief.

According to the analysis by the Carlos Museum, his physique implies that he is of desirable nature, and this reflects the wealth and status of his enslaver (Object Number 1984.16., Carlos Museum). He is serving the man and his wife wine from a krater, that is to the slave's left. Additionally in the relief, a male worshipper is pictured, who is also depicted as small in size, to demonstrate that he is serving the hero.

In agricultural settings, slaves were heavily used as well. Because many poleis in ancient Greece were primarily agricultural societies, slaves greatly contributed to work in the field (Jameson 1977 124). They were so heavily used that often "...as much as three-quarters of the labor and were a major portion in the countryside" (Morris and Papadopoulos 2005, 181). In addition to the ease in acquiring slaves, they were less expensive, even compared to the cost of a pair of mules in the 5th and 4th century B.C.E. (Jameson 1977, 139). They often made "...no demand on the farmer's property other than maintenance while working" (Jameson 1977, 140). Both the ease of acquiring slaves for agricultural work and the low financial demands of keeping them working, Athens relied on slave labor to do this work. The use of slavery within this sector was so instrumental in allowing for the democratic activities of the slaves' owners (Lin 2023, 46). This provided them with the means to actively participate in the government.

One of the major reasons slaves were considered important to the Athenian economy was so their owners had the ability and time to take part in leisurely activities. The more wealthy Athenian citizens who owned a larger number of slaves were able to have their slaves complete more of the physical labor for them, whereas poorer citizens needed to spend more of their time working in agriculture, which meant they had less leisure time- aka democratic activities (Jameson 1977, 124). Slaves were considered a crucial "...piece of property and part of a household's necessary possessions" (Vlassopoulos 2011, 122) and were built into the functions

of a household. Because they were so crucial to the function of Athenian households, the usefulness of slavery was often justified “...as a means of procuring the necessary conditions for attaining the good life” (Vlassopoulos 2011, 122).

The social gain for Athenian society is another factor that many scholars bring forward when discussing the contributions of slavery. Because slaves allowed for their owners to spend time doing more leisurely activities, such as participating in democratic affairs. As stated in a journal article “Agriculture and Slavery in classical Athens” by Michael H. Jameson, “under the most favorable circumstances, slaveholding enabled the Athenian to be a participant in a democracy” (Jameson 1977, 140). Without the work and contributions of slaves, even if it was forced upon them and coerced, the individuals participating in Athenian democracy would not have been able to devote the same amounts of time to those pastimes.

Some scholars believe that the contributions of Athenian slaves in the classical period were key to the formation and implementation of the Greek democratic systems. Statements such as, “one might almost say that in the ancient world there was no true freedom without true slavery” (Jameson 1977, 122), have been used to express the importance of slave labor during this time period. As briefly discussed above in regards to various sectors of Athenian life, “during the Classical era in Athens, slaves were integral to maintaining the standard of living enjoyed by the free Athenian citizens and fostering the cultural and intellectual development of the city” (Lin 2023, 48). This dynamic created a society in which the leisure and political engagement of free Athenian citizens were directly supported by the labor of an enslaved underclass. This reliance on slave labor allowed free citizens to dedicate themselves to public services, including participation in the democratic assembly and jury service. By assuming the

burdens of agricultural work, domestic duties, and specialized crafts, slaves created the economic and social conditions necessary for Athens to thrive as a new democratic society.

The statement that slavery profoundly impacted all aspects of Greek society, is highly plausible. Not only was slavery an economic institution, it was deeply embedded in the social, political, and cultural sectors of classical Athens. Slave labor in agriculture, households, and other trades allowed for free citizens the leisure and opportunity to engage in political participation, philosophical inquiry, and artistic endeavors. However, this dependency also emphasizes the paradox of Athenian democracy: an inclusive political system that was built upon and exploited the free labor of enslaved groups of individuals. Therefore, slavery was not only a cornerstone of the Greek economy, but also a fundamental force enabling the cultural and intellectual achievements for which Ancient Greece is celebrated.

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