N.R.E. Fisher (2001 [1993]) Slavery in Classical Greece. London.

Chapter 1

Definitions and Problems: Chattel Slaves, Serfs, and the Concept of a Slave-Society

Scholars of classical Greece and visitors to Greece have always admired – and with good reason – that civilization's major achievements: the splendid buildings and works of art, the profound works of literature and philosophy, and the development of new political ideas and institutions, above all, the ideas of freedom, active citizenship, and participatory democracy. One could hardly overstate the influence of such Greek achievements on the subsequent history of the West. But it would be wrong to ignore or underestimate their darker side. We must ask how the material wealth and leisure the Greeks enjoyed were created, and what exploitations of other human beings enabled the male citizens of the Greek *polis* (plural *poleis*, 'city-state') to participate in government and other cultural activities. To put it bluntly, can we say that any of these institutions, ideas and works of art (e.g., democracy, Sophocles' plays, Aristotle's philosophy, the Parthenon) would have taken the form they did had the Greeks not employed widespread slave-labour? This book will suggest that the answer is probably 'no', and in two distinct senses. First, unfree labour, of one type or another, contributed to the production of much of the wealth and the artistic objects; at the same time it helped wealthy and educated men to devote their leisure to politics, creativity or the pursuit of physical pleasures. Second, the consciousness of the division between slaves and free men was one of Greek society's most fundamental and determining ideas, one which affected profoundly many of the habits of thought and 'ideologies' of Greeks of all social classes on a wide range of different topics.

To explore these issues involves asking a number of further questions. We must first define key terms. What do we understand by the terms 'slaves' and 'slavery', and how do we distinguish 'chattel slaves' from 'serfs' or 'debt-bondsmen'? Then we have to raise factual questions about Greek societies. Roughly how many slaves or serfs were there in these societies? What work did they do? How were they treated? After that we may be able to approach the larger questions: were all ancient Greek societies equally 'dependent' on unfree-labour? How did

slavery affect the Greeks' views of human nature, of the difference between men and women, between Greeks and non-Greeks, and of the proper shape a society should have? Critical as these questions are, they are difficult to answer, and they continue to produce controversy and disagreement among historians.

There are at least two important reasons for this continuing debate. One reason is the inadequacy – often the extreme inadequacy – of the sources available for the study. Reliable statistics on the total numbers of slaves in any *polis* do not exist, and there is very limited – and often very problematic – evidence for such matters as slave-prices, the proportion of unfree and free people in various occupations, or the numbers of slaves 'manumitted', that is, given their freedom by their master. There are major debates on central questions, for example, the role of slave-labour in agriculture. Sophisticated statistical work on the profitability of slavery is ruled out (though one may note that where more abundant evidence might seem to exist, especially in the southern states of the USA, such work does not readily produce agreement). Furthermore, such discussions and incidental references as we do have on relations between masters and slaves, and on the effects of slavery on their ideas and ideologies, are almost entirely produced by and for the male masters, not the slaves. It is very difficult to trace the thoughts and feelings of the slaves themselves.

A second reason for controversy arises more from the continuing contemporary relevance of debates about slavery and other forms of labour, and from the different approaches and political views of different 'schools' of historians. Some, especially those related to the Marxist tradition, tend to concentrate rather on the economic structures of a society, in particular on the 'class-war' and the definition of classes in relation to the means of production. 'Marxists' may hold that these class-relations are the determining factors in the explanation of a society's basic structure and its major developments rather than issues of status or dominant ideas. Similarly, such historians show special sympathy for the downtrodden underclasses in history, and emphasise the cruelty and pervasiveness of 'exploitation', while playing down any possibilities of good or humane relations between masters and slaves, or between large landowners and peasants or serfs. Other historians, perhaps deriving their approach more from the sociologist Max Weber, prefer to place as much weight on the idea of status as on class: such historians may emphasise the degrading nature of master–slave relations as much or more than their economic exploitation. More conservative or idealistic historians may place weight on the ways in which some slaves were integrated (partially, at least) into the family life of their masters, or were encouraged through the hope and practice of manumission to develop more human relations with their masters, and to win some form of freedom. All these approaches, it seems to me, have some validity, and it must remain in part a matter of one's individual historical or political principles and priorities where one chooses to place most emphasis. Historians, while they must strive for maximum objectivity and accuracy, cannot escape from 'ideological' bias. Nor should they avoid awareness of the continuing significance of these debates; for example, proper emphasis on the evils of slavery, whether in the ancient world or in the Americas, should not be allowed to mask other forms of hardship or exploitation, such as conditions among the landless poor in non-industrial societies or the industrial working classes; nor should it allow other forms of ideological oppression to be forgotten, such as racialism, in the twentieth as in previous centuries.

Definitions

Definitions of a slave-society, and of the various types of non-free labour such as chattel slavery, serfdom, and debt-bondage, are matters of argument, and the argument reflects the different approaches mentioned above. Classical Greece saw the development of two broadly different types of societies: those where non-free labour was predominantly chattel slavery, and those where some form of state serfdom predominated. Sparta is the best known example of the second, Athens of the first.

A **slave-society** is usually held to be more than a community where numbers of slaves exist; there must be a substantial contribution by slaves to the wealth-production of that society. Slaves have existed in innumerable societies in human history, but relatively few of these societies can be safely classified as slave-societies. One definition of a slave-society is one in which slaves played an important part in production, and formed at least a substantial proportion of the total population, for example about 20% (e.g. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* 99). Alternatively, one may concentrate on the idea of productive work and say that a slave-society is one where the main labour providing the surplus production for the ruling class or the élite is slave-labour (so Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* 77ff., and de Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle* 52ff.). In large-scale societies for which there are good statistics, particularly the New World societies with large-scale African slavery, slaves formed about 25-33% of the total population, performing

most of the agricultural and other work from which the rich – above all the planters – derived their wealth. In a 'slave-society', it is not necessary for the majority of the free men to own slaves, and in the southern states of America, for example, most of the free population were poor white farmers with no slaves. In the case of Athens, as we shall see in chapter 4, there are debates on two crucial questions: how far slave-labour was used in agriculture, and how far slave-owning extended to the poorer peasants and manufacturers. While we cannot recover accurate population figures, it does seem highly probable that of all the civilizations of the ancient world, it is only classical Athens, probably a number of other Greek *poleis*, and Roman Italy, which can safely be considered 'slave-societies' to be compared with Brazil, the Caribbean and the USA.

Useful and widely accepted definitions of serfdom, debt-bondage and chattel slavery have been offered by the League of Nations Slavery Convention of 1926 and the Supplementary Convention of the United Nations of 1956 (they are quoted and discussed by de Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle* 134ff.). **Serfdom** is defined (in the 1956 Convention) as the *tenure of land whereby the tenant is by law, custom or agreement bound to live and labour on land belonging to another person and render some determinate services to such other person, whether for reward or not, and is not free to change his status.* Some historians confine the term serf to the feudal societies of the Middle Ages; but it seems reasonable to use the term to apply to the broader category of tenants suggested by this definition, which has existed in many societies. The essence of the definition is that serfs are relatively unfree peasants who are tied, often hereditarily, and by law or agreement, to work land which they do not themselves own. Although responsible for maintaining themselves from this land, they have other fixed dues or services to pay to their lord or master. One further addition to the definition is needed if it is to be applied to the 'state' or 'community' serfs found in Greek states such as Sparta. This would state that some 'serfs', like the Spartan helots, may be owned by the state, while the lands to which they are tied are owned by individual landowners. In many cases the origin of such serf-status lies in the conquest of a territory by invaders who imposed it on the defeated inhabitants.

Debt-bondage is defined by the 1956 Convention as *the status or condition resulting from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or those of a third person under his control as a security for a debt, where the value reasonably assessed of those services is not applied to the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of these services are not respectively limited and defined.* This definition perhaps does not sufficiently distinguish between debt-bondage, and slavery for debts. A debt-bondsman may be a debtor who pledges to provide crops or labour for his creditor, with the hope (however distant or unlikely) of being one day able to pay off the debt and become free again. Enslavement for debts, on the other hand, means that the debtor becomes permanently the slave of his creditor.

Two definitions of **chattel slavery** need discussion. One focuses on the nature of the power exercised by the individual master on the slave, the other on the effects of this power on the slave. The first is that of the League of Nations' 1926 Convention: *the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised* – the phrasing was designed to include all those who are effectively seen as the personal property of their masters. This is in fact quite close to Aristotle's discussion in his *Politics* (1.2 = *GARS* 2) of a slave as someone who belongs to his master completely, as an 'animate piece of property' as well as a human being, and can be seen as a tool. One obvious mark of being the property of another is that one may be bought and sold. This definition in terms of personal ownership helpfully clarifies the essential differences between chattel slaves and state-serfs like the Spartan helots, who typically worked on an individual's estate, but were partly the property of the state and could not be sold without its permission. In two ways, state-serfs, like other serfs, were better off than chattel slaves: they were less likely to have lost all family connections, to be prevented from forming new relationships, or to have them disrupted by individual sales; and they were expected to perform specific work on the estate to which they were tied, and were to a lesser extent at the mercy or whim of their master. On the other hand, the chances of being freed may well have been higher when the choice was that of the individual master, not of the community.

This definition, however, does not bring out other essential aspects that are common to most types of chattel slavery. The other definition to be quoted is that argued for by Patterson in his *Slavery and Social Death*: *slavery is the permanent, violent, domination of natally alienated and generally dishonoured persons.* Here *permanent* means that the condition is likely to last till death and that there is no agreed condition that the slave could satisfy so as to claim a right to be freed – though of course his master may in fact choose to set him free. *Violent* refers to the element of force – actual or latent – inherent in the relationship. The Greeks, like other slaveowners, saw that one crucial difference between slave and free was that slaves were answerable with their bodies for their offences, and were in fact regularly whipped and could legally be tortured.

Domination picks up the point emphasised in the League of Nations' definition that slaves have to do everything they are told. *Natally alienated* indicates that slaves have no 'birth-rights', and do not 'belong' in the society in which they are enslaved (whether they came to it as captives, bought property, or were bred there); rather they remain permanently foreign, 'outsiders', having no social identity. Those who are enslaved during adult life often have their previous identity formally removed in the process of sale: they are stripped of their clothes, their former names, their kin, their nationality, and even their personality. Patterson calls this process 'social death', after which a new life begins with a different name and identity and very few, if any, rights. Such an experience was bound to be traumatic, and to a degree that is hard to imagine. Finally, Patterson's definition places at the centre of the experience of being a slave an almost complete state of *dishonour*, which is constantly and deliberately reinforced by his or her master.

These definitions emphasise – rightly, I believe – the completeness of the power exercised by slaveowners, and the dishonour and disorientation inflicted on the slaves. As we shall see later, there is much evidence in our Greek sources which suggests that slaveowners held contradictory attitudes, that crude assertions of power and brutality co-existed with more humane and warm relationships and the granting of some limited honour and the hope of freedom, at least to a minority of the slaves. How far such suggestions of limited humanity can mitigate the essential brutality, contempt and exploitation inherent in the institution remains a matter of debate.

Greek terms for slaves

Despite the apparent simplicity of a broad distinction between chattel slaves and state-serfs, the actual terms used by the Greeks for their dependent labour are bafflingly complex, and also remarkably haphazard. There are a great many terms used only to refer to specific groups of 'serfs' in particular places, as will be mentioned in chapter 3. Of the terms in more general use, many are applied equally to chattel slaves and helots, and some terms may be used of those of even more varied legal status. The terms which from the fifth century on most commonly indicate slave status as opposed to free are *douleia* (slavery), and *doulos* (slave) as opposed to *eleutheria, eleutheros* (freedom, free man). *Douloi* are usually full-scale chattel slaves. Yet authors often refer to the helots or to other 'state-serfs' casually as *douloi*, and the term is frequently used – by rhetorical extension – of political 'slavery', of subjects to a tyrant, or of 'allied' cities dominated by an imperial power like fifth-century Athens. One term used only of human beings seen as property is the curious word *andrapodon*: formed on the model of *tetrapodon*, 'four-footed creature'; it means literally 'man-footed creature' and is only used in the neuter, referring to a human being as an animal or a thing, to be bought and sold. Other commonly-used terms refer to the function of the non-free person. From the Greek work *oikos* (household) comes the term *oiketes* (compare 'houseboy'); or a slave may be called a *therapon* (servant), an *akolouthos* (attendant or follower) or simply a *soma* (body). Another term that may be used of a slave, with a demeaning implication, is *anthropos* (human being), suggesting that he or she is merely a human being with no further identity. A term with an even more obviously humiliating function, and one which is found in many slave-systems, is *pais* (child, boy or girl); applied to slaves of any age, it reminds them that they can never be treated as free or independent adults. Two passages from Athenian comedy bring out well the implications of this usage. A fragment of fourth-century comedy shows a fictional house-slave expressing his bitterness and resentment at being called 'Boy', especially by some drunken adolescent at a party, when the slave has to bring on the potties, and to look at the half-eaten food, while risking chastisement as a 'glutton' if he tries to eat any of the left-overs (Athenaeus, 262d = *GARS* 80, p. 80). Another comic passage, from a play of Aristophanes (*Wasps* 1296-8), humorously justifies calling an old slave *pais*, since, like children, slaves of all ages were likely to be beaten, with a pun suggesting an etymological connection between *pais* and *paiein* (to beat). This last point also reminds us that regular beating of children (and probably of wives too) was a much more standard and generally accepted feature of family life in the ancient world (and elsewhere) than in the contemporary western family.

Sources

Slaves were everywhere to be seen in Greek society, and references to them, and the use of the slave-free polarity, run throughout all our source-material. Most of the literary sources presuppose slavery, refer casually to slaves, or use the slave-free distinction as argument or illustration. Often they may presuppose stereotypes and conventions, rather than social realities. At all times such sources need to be interpreted both in relation to the conventions of their literary genre and to the expectations of their audiences. Extended defences of slavery and discussions of its problems, however, are relatively rare. Treatises on

'household management' included advice on how to select, train and manage slaves, and we have two short treatments, one by Xenophon, written perhaps around 360 BC, and one stemming from the Aristotelian school. In Book 1 of the *Politics* Aristotle himself offers a full-scale theoretical justification of slavery and a discussion of the differences between 'rule' over women, children and slaves (discussed in ch. 7). There are briefer discussions of some of these issues in various works by Plato, especially his *Laws*. The longest collection of scholarly discussions of slavery, from a great variety of lost works, comes in an extended section from Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai* ('Intellectuals at Dinner'), a very long book written by an educated Greek living in Egypt under the Roman Empire c. AD 200 (262ff. = *GARS* 80). The work, in the form of learned conversations at an elaborate banquet, is a remarkably discursive discussion of all topics to do with dinner-parties and

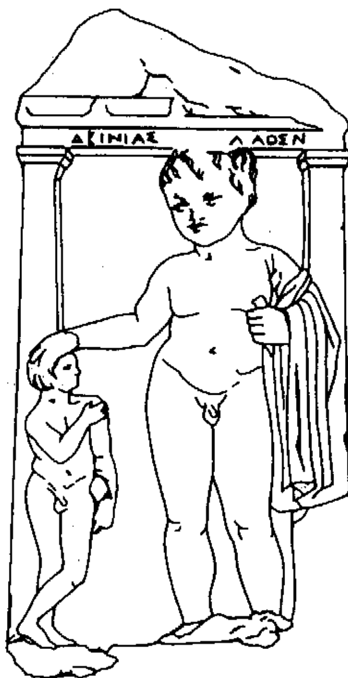

Fig. 1 Tombstone of an Athenian boy, resting hand on his (actually much older) slave *paidagogus*' head. In such cases slave status is indicated by the totally unrealistic size.

drinking-parties (the Greek *symposia*). Its chief value to us is that it contains innumerable, often lengthy, quotations from earlier poets, philosophers, dramatists, historians and so on.

Archaeological evidence has its contribution to make in this area, though it can tell us less about economic and social relationships involving slaves than about many other aspects of Greek history. Slaves seem to be depicted quite often on vases and sculptural monuments, although there are frequently problems in securely identifying the status of apparently 'low-class' figures. Excavations, field surveys, and comparative studies of the countryside can reveal much of the conditions and environment in which slaves and free alike worked and lived. Study of burials and burial goods may suggest changes in social structures and discrimination between different social classes, though suggestions of this sort are controversial and uncertain. Documents and other writings, mostly written on stone or other hard materials and found in excavations ('inscriptions'), are an invaluable source of information, especially on matters such as slave-prices, slave-occupations and manumissions. But the randomness and incompleteness of such records make their statistical use particularly hazardous.