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Slavery in the Roman Provinces: North Africa

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The formation of slave societies based on chattel servitors was a sea-centered and seaborne phenomenon. From the ancient Black Sea to the modern burgeoning of the Atlantic system, this type of slavery was also an insular fact. The Mediterranean world of the Roman empire was no exception. Chattel servitude developed into its most intensified forms in the coastal lands of the empire that circled the Mediterranean Sea and on the islands of the inland sea. By contrast, the great continental land-centered empires of Han and Song Dynasty China experienced chattel slavery as a marginal rather than a central social and economic force. In the West, the gradual shift in the center of gravity of economic development after the sixth century CE from the Mediterranean to the western European hinterland emphasized forms of rural servitude other than chattel slavery. The still later historical transition from the world's largest inland sea to the Atlantic Ocean shifted chattel slavery from the confines of the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean to the western shores of Africa and to the New World. In its most concentrated forms, this new slavery was found, once again, in island and seaboard environments. In the context of the Roman empire, the main problem is to determine where along this spectrum between the continental and the seaborne the lands of the ancient Maghrib stood in terms of the place of slavery. Did the African provinces of the Roman period harbour something like the slave society that was characteristic of the core lands of the empire? The answer is both yes and no.

Most of what can be known about slavery in the north African provinces of the empire depends on a haphazard mix of literary and epigraphical sources. Archaeology, somewhat frustratingly, has contributed rather little so far. What literary evidence there is indicates that the lands of the ancient Maghrib were like a series of continental units separated from the rest of the Mediterranean. The consequence is that the free peasant farmer and labourer, whether known as a colonus, a Mancian cultivator, or merely an agricola, rather than the chattel slave

was the most common producer in the rural economy of Africa. In every agricultural scenario for which we have reasonably dependable evidence, from the running of imperial domains in the Bagrada River Valley in the reigns of Trajan, Hadrian, and Commodus, to the broader work forces associated with private domains in Numidia and Mauretania Caesariensis, to the irrigation farms of the Saharan periphery, the work forces were constituted of persons of nominally free status [Flach 1978; Kehoe 1988 for the imperial estates; see Johne, Köhn & Weber 1983, 319-37; and Kolendo 1991 for African coloni in the high empire; for a typical irrigation community, see CIL 8.18587 (Lamasba), and Shaw 1982 for comment]. Many of these cultivators worked for themselves, while others worked as indentured or tied labourers who owed work time and portions of their harvest to landlords.

Most of these tied agricultural producers, who might well have been a majority of the rural population, worked under a customary land and labour arrangement of great antiquity in Africa. This agreement was known in Roman times as the Mancian custom or law, the consuetudo Manciana or the lex Manciana [CIL 8.25902 (Hr. Mettich, Trajanic in date), contains a statement of the regulations for the coloni of an imperial estate, drafted ad exemplum legis Mancianae]. The Mancian contracts were, in effect, a species of sharecropping arrangements by which most of the more complex and surplus-oriented large farms were run [CIL 8.25943 (Aïn el-Djemala, Hadrianic); CIL 8.26416 (Aïn Wassel; Severan); CIL 8.10570 (Souk el-Khemis; Commodan); CIL 8.14428: Ksar Mezuâr; and, probably, CIL 8.14451 (Aïn Zaga); ILTun 627-30 (Djemen ez-Zitouna): a mancian(us) cultor, dating to AD 198-202]. These labour and production contracts were parts of long-lived customary arrangements. Indeed, we have evidence for the application of these contracts in the working of farms in north Africa as late as the end of the Vandal period [Courtois et al., Tablettes Albertini, 97-99: land units described as particella ex culturis mancianis, dating to the mid 490s].

Despite the pervasive presence of these free and dependent peasantries, the African provinces were never the exclusive preserve of persons of free birth and status. Slaves are known and well-attested from the beginning of the Roman period. They included the local Africans and Carthaginians who were subject to

mass enslavement at the time of the capture of Carthage in 146 BCE. In this sense, the presence of slavery in Africa was part of the long-term economic exploitation of lands in the western Mediterranean, beginning most strongly with Hellenistic developments of which Carthage and other western Phoenician settlements in the late fourth and third century BCE were part [Gsell, Histoire ancienne, vol. 2: 226-27; vol. 4: 134-40; 1932: 397-98]. Following the demise of Carthage, both slaves and freedmen, especially those serving élite Romans, were central to the establishment of the Roman provinces. Men like the powerful freedman Marcus Caelius Phileros were instrumental in the Roman state's foundation of provincial and municipal institutions in the early decades of Roman rule [CIL 8.26274 = AE 1930: 3 = ILTun 1370 (Uchi Maius) & CIL 10.6104 = ILS 1945 (Formiae); see Gasco 1984 and Leglay 1990 623-26; Gasco 1984]. Slaves and freedmen remained important to the development of the structure of larger domains that were in the hands of the social and economic élites of the Roman period [Carlsen 1995, for the status of domain managers in Africa]. Rural slaves are still attested in the heart of the Vandal period, at the end of Roman Africa, in wooden documents found at the edge of the Sahara. One of these tablets records the sale of a slave according to the precise formalities that Roman law required for the transfer of ownership of res mancipi [Courtois at al. Tablettes Albertini, no. II: 216-17; 5 June 494]. If not always in large numbers, or concentrated in any particular productive sphere, chattel slaves were always present and are attested for almost every region and major settlement in Roman Africa. Although we cannot offer accurate estimates of the total numbers of slaves, or even their approximate proportion of the total population, it seems reasonably certain that they were concentrated most heavily in the provinces of Africa proconsularis and Numidia, where they might have constituted—at a simple guess—something upwards of five per cent, or so, of the population. Their numbers appear to have diminished significantly and progressively as one advanced westward through the Mauretaniae, with only a few rare cases actually attested in Mauretania Tingitana [for the truly exiguous data, see Matilla 1975, and Gozalbes Cravioto 1979].

If slaves were not the backbone of the productive labour forces on rural domains in the countryside, questions must arise about their precise location in

the political economy of Africa. The evidence is slim—which is, in itself, a rather telling fact—but the main peculiar function of slaves seems to have been to serve as tools of administration and management, and in two particular spheres. First, and perhaps most obviously, slaves and freedmen were the backbone of the imperial administration of the so-called familia Caesaris, which is principally at Carthage, but which was also present at other provincial capitals like Caesarea in Mauretania Caesariensis. These provincial centers were connected with the central training facilities of the Ad Caput Africae on the Caelian Hill at Rome [Weaver, Familia Caesaris, p. 121]. Even these slaves, however, illustrate the peripheral position of Africa with respect to the center of slave power in the Mediterranean of the time. It was only insofar as the fact that the African provinces were part of a larger political entity that these slaves had a place and were present in Africa: They were extensions of central imperial power.

The burial grounds of the officiales at Carthage have provided a rich source of information that documents not only the administrative bureaucracy of the imperial state in Africa, but also the internal ranking of the various grades of its servitors [CIL 8, p. 1301 f. = 12590-13186 & p. 2479 f. = 24681-24861; cf. Weaver, Familia Caesaris, p. 18]. Slaves provided the lowly runners (cursores), doormen, footmen (pedisequi), guards and gate-keepers (custodes), cleaners, collectors and delivery men (tabellarii) at the bottom of the administrative hierarchy. Elite risen freed slaves, on the other hand, held the higher-ranking positions of assistants to imperial officials (adiutores), archivists and record-keepers (tabularii). Above these government servitors were those who held even higher level imperial procuratorships, like the freedman procurator who headed the main administrative district of imperial lands in Africa, the Tractus Karthaginiensis [e.g. CIL 6.8608 = ILS 1485; CIL 8.25902], or the freedman procurator who was in charge of the collection of the four main state taxes in the African provinces, the Quattuor Publica Africae [CIL 10.6081 = ILS 1483]. All of this complex servile organization, whether in the huge central offices at Carthage or in the numerous local regional desks or mensae of the quattuor publica and the annona, only existed because of the prior existence of an imperial state of the type and size whose tribute collection and record-keeping system required these permanent functionaries. That is why these slaves were in Africa.

Much the same explanation also applies to the presence of slaves and freedmen in the second major employment roles in which they are found. This was as administrative and managerial functionaries, this time in the private sphere. Survey after survey of the rural economy of the Roman period has demonstrated that almost all of the named and well-attested slaves and freedmen in the private sphere served as tabellarii, scribae, arcarii, and dispensatores in the administration and the running of larger farms and domain lands, and as high-ranking vilici, procuratores, and actores at the top of domanial organizations. They filled almost the same range of administrative personnel as is found in the bureaucratic apparatuses of the imperial state centered on the collection of imperial tributes. But they performed these same tasks for the organization of labour and production on large estates, which included the collection of harvest dues and rents, the private equivalents of state taxes [Schtaerman 1987: 18-19]. For the great private estates in Africa, the quantities were consequential, since the service staffs required to run the large houses, or the series of houses that were owned by the domini, could run to large numbers. Apuleius gives the round number of 400 for the number of these servitors in the big house that his new wife Pudentilla had given to her son Pontianus [Apul. Apol. 93]. The problem is that the number '400' is rhetorical in more than one sense, meaning not much more than 'a large number.' But the notice, which evinces neither exaggeration nor surprise, is an indication that slaves were found, and sometimes in considerable numbers, in the service of the houses of the wealthy and powerful domini of the African provinces. The assumption that elite persons usually had domestic slaves is found elsewhere in the same defense speech: Apuleius himself had at least a fifteen slaves with him, and was reported to have manumitted three others (Apul. Apol. 17-18; 43-44).

In short, the evidence indicates the location of chattel slaves in Africa in specific functional niches. They served in administrative and managerial capacities, both high and low, in private households and in the bureaucratic services of the imperial state. Naturally, they could also serve the same functions for local municipal governments, although the evidence for them here is truly thin [Leglay 1990]. Slaves were also present as servitors in other specific cases, like the personal servants of army officers, whose very possession of slaves was a

form of self-identification as being 'Roman' in a provincial society [Chausa 1998]. The same applies to the Mauretaniae, both under the African client kings down to the early 40s CE, and subsequently as Roman provinces. Here the evidence for the presence of chattel slaves is exceedingly sparse, and specific evidence locates them as servitors in the households of the pre-Roman kings and as imperial and municipal servants thereafter [Cravioto 1979: 37-40]. It should be noted that even the slaves of the emperor display this same peripherality with respect to the core slavery of the empire. The slaves of the Familia Caesaris in Africa do not have the higher rates of manumission, the same kinds of upward mobility, or the same ability to 'marry upwards' in the social order as is found among their peers at Rome [Weaver, Familia Caesaris: 104, 114-15]. The members of the African Familia Caesaris were more provincial in nature.

Although the lands of Africa were not themselves classic centers of rural slave labour, they might still have been important in their relationship to the demands for slaves in the core of the empire. It is known that slaves were being imported across the southern frontiers of the empire. At the Roman customs post at Zarái, slaves or mancipia, are found at the top of the list of goods subject to portoria, almost certainly because they were one of the most frequently imported commodities [CIL 8.4508; AD 202]. This was part of a long-term pattern of the slaving of Saharan populations that was still practiced in Late Antiquity, when Augustine could describe a Gaetolian slave who dreamed of his former home in the deep south [Aug. En. in Ps. 148.10 = CCL 40: 2173]. In these cases, there survive only a few indications of a phenomenon that is much better documented for the portus along the western desert frontiers of Egypt. The significant levels of Roman imports, luxury and ordinary, found at Garama and Zinhecra, in the homelands of the Garamantes deep in the Libyan Fezzân, for example, must be accounted for somehow, and the most probable answer is a trade in human commodities [Mattingly, Archaeology of the Fezzân, 1, 355-62; 2, 305 f.]. It is known that Julius Maternus joined an expedition made the king of the Garamantes from the Fezzân to the lands of Agysimba far to the south 'to hunt down' Ethiopians (Ptol. Geogr. 1.8.4, derived from Marinus of Tyre). And the Bu Njem ostraka record that some Garamantes returned a fugitive slave to the fortress there [Marichal 1992, no. 71]. This trade would have gone north through

the great Mediterranean emporia of Tripolitania, adding considerably to the urban wealth of the coastal cities.

There are some indications of internal slaving operations, especially in the more densely populated mountain zones of the west. In Late Antiquity, the highlands of Mauretania were reputed to be a source of slaves for the Mediterranean [Expositio Totius Mundi 60 (SC 124: 319): Quae provincia <sc. Mauretania> vestem et mancipia negotiatur...; cf. Aug. Ep. 199 = CSEL 57: 284]. It is perhaps not accidental that one record we have concerning the sale of an individual African slave abroad, by one Aurelius Epimachos (who was possibly a slave dealer) from Caesarea in Mauretania, at auction in Rhodes in the mid-third century CE, was of a young girl from the ethnic group of the Mauri [Oates 1969: 238-44 CE; see the improved text in P. Oxy. 3593, with full bibliography]. The most vivid and detailed descriptions that we have of this trade come from a period of late Antiquity, in the 410s, when the disintegrating power of the central state in the West encouraged more aggressive and violent raiding to capture people for sale by slave traders called Galatai [Aug. Ep.* 10 = CSEL 88: 46-51; see Szidat 1978; Rougé 1983: 183-88; Decret 1985]. But these slavers were most likely only enhancing their existing operations in the heavily populated tribal zones in the mountains of the Mauretaniae in which they had always operated. In addition to the raiding for captivi, there was a considerable supplement to this supply in the practice of impoverished parents selling their children into slavery. Although such sales were covered by the legal fiction that they were only a long-term sale of the labour of the children, there is no doubt that they were, in effect, sales into chattel servitude [Gsell 1932: 398; Willvonseder 1983; Minucius Felix 31.4; Tert. Ad Nat. 1.15 & Apol. 9; Lactant. Div. Inst. 6.20] The practice was one commonly in evidence to the end of antiquity [CTh 11.27.2, AD 322 & Aug. Ep.* 10; Gebbia 1987; Humbert 1983]. Even during this later period, Africans were being captured or bought to be traded 'across the sea' in the Mediterranean, but not generally, as far as we can tell, for use elsewhere in Africa.

In the light of this evidence, we might ask if the various societies of the provinces of Africa in the Roman period constituted true slave societies. The answer has to be a mixed and nuanced one. In a strict economic sense based on the numbers and the proportions of slaves involved in the primary productive

processes found in the region, the answer is that they probably were not. The huge continental hinterland areas of the ancient Maghrib were farmed and exploited by dependent peasant cultivators. As is seen from the place of the slave trade, however, a more nuanced answer must be 'yes' in the sense that the African provinces were integral parts of a larger world system that had slavery at its core, and that the ideas and concepts generated by being part of this larger whole permeated the thinking and values of Africans. Two examples must suffice to illustrate the point of the ever-present image of chattel slavery. The first is the law. In every application of it, as Buckland famously noted, the fact that one of the parties to a transaction might be a slave was in constant consideration in the Roman legislation that governed social relations in Africa. This was true if the measures came from the high period of the Roman administration in the provinces. If imperial laws were issued for the punishment of sectarian miscreants in the fifth century, the rules carefully distinguished between persons of high and low status. Then among those of low status, the law carefully distinguished between free persons of low status, plebei, free persons of dependent status, coloni, and chattel slaves proper [CTh 16.6.4 = SC 497: SC 497: 344-46, 12 February 405; 16.5.52.pr.-4 = SC 497: 306-08, 20 January 412; and 16.5.54.8 = SC 497: 316, 17 June 414]. That is to say, regardless of their actual numbers, the presence of slaves as a core element in the formation of imperial society powerfully inflected social hierarchies in Africa.

The second aspect that is powerfully reflected in the culture of the African provinces of Late Antiquity is the dominant metaphor of slavery that is found everywhere in the discourse of African Christian writers. In the martyr acts, slaves normally appear as 'characteristic actors' in these African Christian dramas of the time [compare the slave woman Felicitas and her fellow slaves in the martyrdom of Perpetua in 203 CE: Passio Perpetuae 2.1 = SC 417: 104]. More importantly, the metaphor of chattel slavery was deeply embedded in the central message of all the propagators of Christian faith from Tertullian and Cyprian, through Augustine and Quodvultdeus, to Fulgentius and Primasius. The master metaphor that powered the new Christian ideology, its concepts of deity, and its models of believers, was that of the Roman slave master and of the slave-holding familia [See, e.g., Klein, Die Sklaverei, 63-87; Garnsey, Ideas of Slavery, ch. 13,

206-19]. So no matter how occasionally seen or specifically located slaves were in their lands and societies, Africans shared the ways in which the chattel slave system at the core of the imperial economy created some of the most important metaphors in which they thought and spoke. These common elements that were determined by the larger existence of chattel slavery can be seen both in the place of slaves in literary production [e.g. Garrido-Hory 1998] and in their artistic representation [e.g. Blázquez Martínez 1998]. That is to say, regardless of their actual numbers in local African society, the image of the slave and of chattel servitude was found everywhere, and it was central to the ideas of the time.

As for the slaves and freedmen themselves, their degree of integration with local society has been tested in the critical area of religious practice and devotion, a social area where slaves had access to what little power and prestige was possible for them. These investigations have revealed two aspects of the process. First, in some important respects, African slaves and freedmen were sometimes just different in their social behavior from their peers in the other western provinces of the empire. For example, in the worship of Silvanus, as measured by votive inscriptions, slaves and freedmen represented a very significant proportion of all attested cult worshippers of this deity in Italy and Spain, but not in Africa, where his servile votaries are singularly absent. The more compelling evidence for difference, however, centers on the priesthood of the imperial cult and its sacerdotēs, the *seviri* and the *Augustales*. These officials, who are so important elsewhere in the western empire, are hardly in evidence in Africa [Leglay 1990 635-37; Kotula 1984: there are only 27 examples as opposed to the more than two and a half thousand discrete data known from Italy and other provincial contexts]. One interpretation that has been offered for this peculiar absence is that there was an unusually severe status bar in Africa that kept slaves and freedmen out of these priesthoods [Lengrand 1998]. The argument is not convincing. In fact, the opposite seems more likely and it signals a basic fact about slavery in Africa: it suggests that the numbers of slaves and freedmen in Africa never reached levels sufficient to create the widespread existence of centers of imperial worship comparable to the numbers found in Spain and Italy.

The same is true of ritual and cult as a whole, for which there is painfully little evidence of the involvement of slaves in the cults found most ubiquitously in Africa. A good test is the pervasively present, socially powerful cult of Saturn. It is manifest that all sorts of indigenous Africans of low social rank, and especially these persons to the exclusion of those of high rank, were priests and sacred servitors of the god. But among these persons of low and plebeian status, slaves and freedmen are rarely found: a solitary freedman is all that is attested so far. The explanation for this peculiar absence is surely not to be found in some principle of social exclusion, but rather in the simple fact that slaves and freedmen were not present in Africa in sufficiently large numbers to be commonly found in Saturn worship. Where such numbers are large and reach a certain critical social mass, as they clearly did in central and southern Italy, slaves and freedmen had their own social norms, ranks, and institutions of prestige. These are also found in abundance in other regions of the western empire. But they are not found in Africa where almost all slaves and freedmen, as far as the critical area of ritual and belief just alluded to was concerned, followed the values of the great mass of peasants in whose dominant patterns of community and belief they seemed to have been subsumed.

In sum, in its scale and location the peripheral slavery of the African provinces was different from the type of chattel servitude found in the core of the empire—in central Italy, Sicily, or the large insular units of the Greek city-states. Slavery in the African provinces was similar to the slavery found in the provinces outside the core area of the empire, in provinces like Gallia Belgica, Britannia, Dalmatia, or Pannonia Superior. Perhaps African slavery is even better seen, ecologically, as closer to the patterns found in the wide band of semi-arid lands to the east of the Maghrib: in Cyrenaica and in Egypt, and further east in the provinces of Judaea and Arabia. Or, best of all, as a type that represented a historical development of servitude in converging and overlapping areas of these two other types. These peripheral slaveries, even if different, cannot be seen in isolation. Although they were marginal, they were still integral parts of a larger imperial system of chattel servitude that affected the most important elements of thinking and concept, and which, as a potential way of controlling wealth and labour, survived the political demise of the empire.

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