

Social Death: Aspects of Slavery in Ancient Greece



Categories of Slave in Ancient Greece

- *Chattel* (from the same root at “cattle” and “capital”): “income-earning bodies”
- *Douloi*: miners and field workers (cleaners, gardeners, harvesters)
- *Oikêtai*: household slaves (porters, cooks, bakers, meal-grinders, but also tutors, shoppers, personal assistants, torch-bearers)
- Public slaves (*dêmosioi*): clerks for the *Boulê*; police force of archers (?); workers in the mint
- *chôris oikountes* (“those dwelling apart”)
- Dehumanizing terms: *andrapodon* – “a thing with the feet of a man”; *Konipodes* (local name for agricultural slaves at city of Epidauros: “The dusty feet”)

Slaves as often from “elsewhere”

“Elsewhere in Thrace **they sell their children for export abroad** ... Thracians consider it best not to work, and **working the land is regarded as the most dishonorable profession**. The best way to make a living, in their judgment, is **off the spoils of war**.”

(Herodotus 5.6, tr. Waterfield, adapted).

“**Barbarians are slaves, but Greeks are free.**”
(Iphigeneia, in Euripides’ *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, line 1401)

War → more captives and slaves



War & Slavery

“It is the universal and unchanging custom of men that when a city is captured in war, the citizens’ persons and property belong to the captors.”

- Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus* (4th C BCE), 7.5.73

Pricing

[from the so-called “Attic Stelai,” from 414 BCE (source: J.W. Roberts, City of Sokrates, 1984)]:

drachma ~ roughly a day’s earnings for a skilled worker or soldier (so, more than minimum wage)

Two Syrian slaves: **301 and 240 *drachmae***, respectively

Three Thracian women: **220, 165, 135 *drachmae***, respectively

Carian (= Halicarnassian) boy: **72 *drachmae***

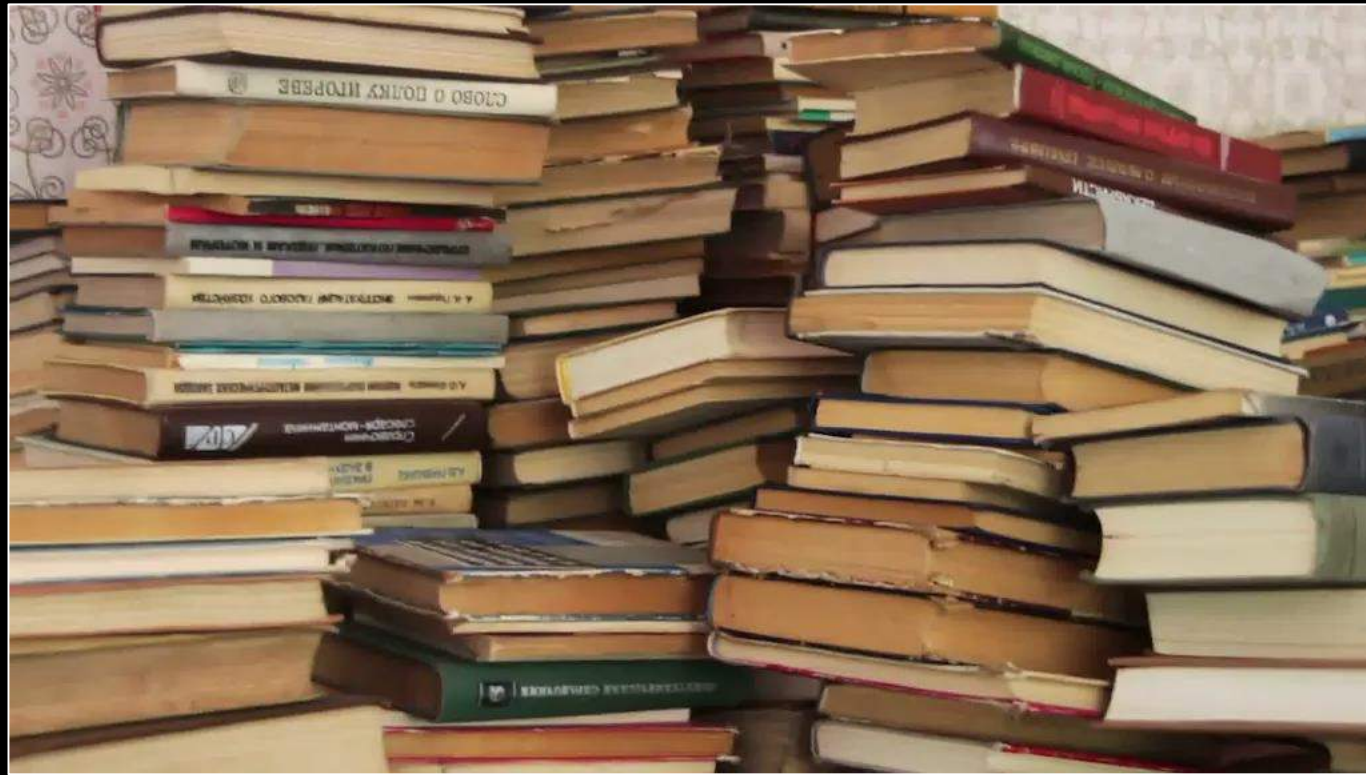
The “Old Oligarch” (5th-C BCE) Complains that Slaves and Middle-Class and Poor Citizens Look Alike

“Now among the slaves and metics [resident foreigners] at Athens there is the greatest uncontrolled wantonness; you can’t hit them there [if the slave belongs to someone else], and a slave will not stand aside for you. I shall point out why this is their native practice: **if it were customary for a slave ... to be struck by one who is free, you would often hit an Athenian citizen by mistake on the assumption that he was a slave. For the people at Athens are no better dressed than the slaves** and metics, nor are they any more handsome.” (*Constitution of the Athenians*, trans. Marchant)

Other Rules and Exemptions

- Slaves *could* take part in the first day of the City Dionysia, the great festival in honor of Dionysus
- If of Greek ancestry, a slave could be initiated into the so-called Eleusynian Mysteries, a religious cult often thought to be connected to ideas of afterlife and rebirth
- But slaves could not use the main three *gymnasia* in Athens
- Owners could not murder their own slaves, and if they did, they had to undergo purification so as not to be cursed (*Antiphon* 6.4): “the murder of *any* human being was offensive to the gods” (Roberts 1984: 32)
- Sex between and children from slaves a “reward” for good behavior (Xen. *Oeconomicus* 9.5).
- Slaves sometimes buried in family plots along with owners.

Scholê (“leisure” → school, scholarship)



Slavery and Others' Leisure and/or "Success"

"I cannot yet afford to
buy a slave to take
over my trade."
(Lysias *Or.* 26.4)



chôris oikountes (“those dwelling apart”)

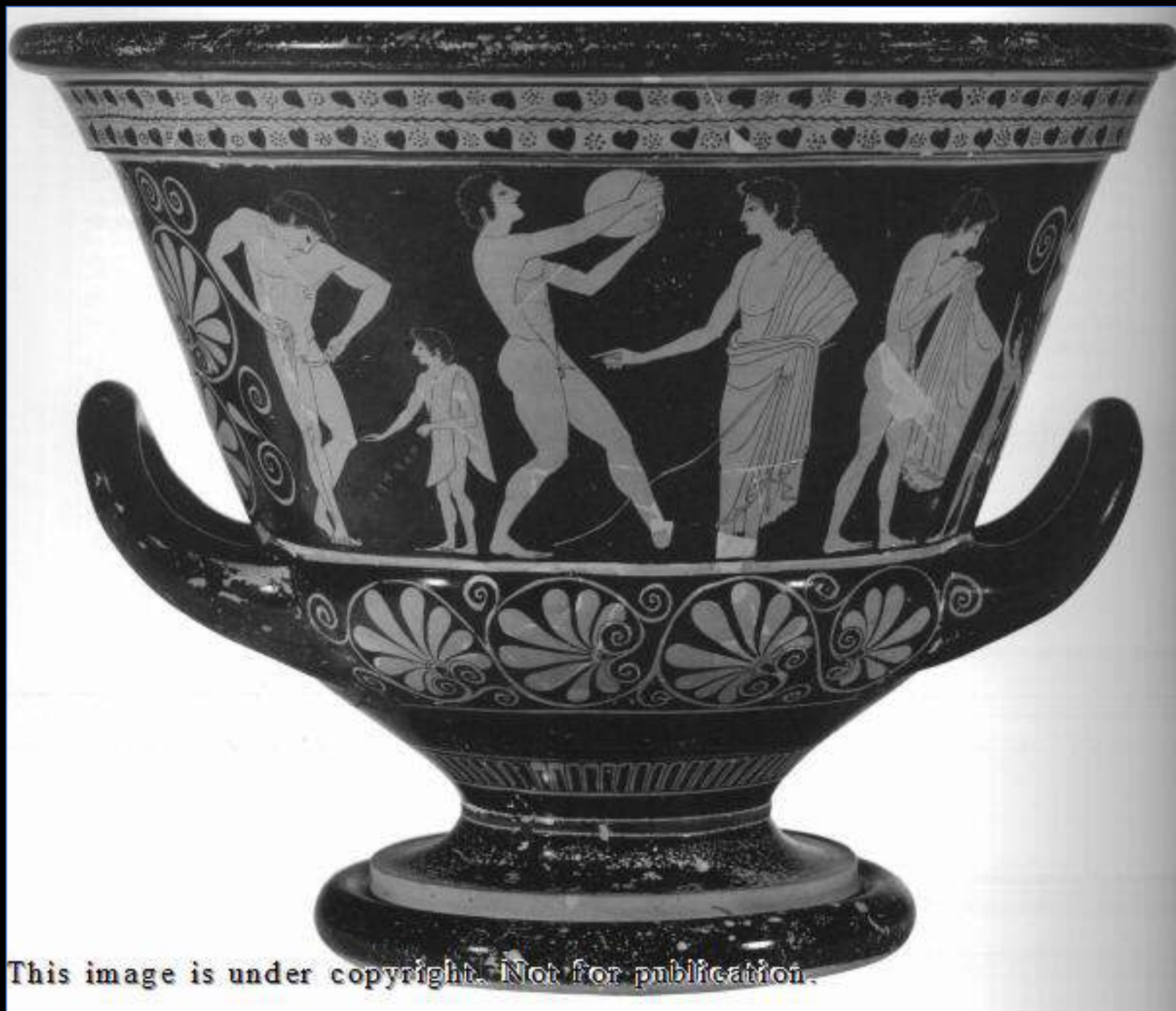
Skilled slaves might live apart from their owners for various reasons (i.e., to work fields, in a factory, etc.) and render an *apophora* (basic income) to their owner, but would be allowed to keep extra beyond base-wage and possibly purchase their own freedom.





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Attic Red-
Figure *skyphos*
(drinking cup),
mid-5th
Century BCE,
Getty Villa







Trying to Imagine Slaves' Lives



Slave: "I'm thrilled when I can curse my master behind his back."

Xanthias (other slave): "What about being able to grumble when you go outside after being beaten?"

Slave: "It's great!"

- Aristophanes, *Frogs*, lines 746 and following

Frogs, continued

Xanthias: “You’re a man after my own heart. What about eavesdropping when the master’s having a private conversation?”

Slave: “That’s enough to drive me wild with delight.”

Xanthias : “What about gossiping to your friends about what you discover? Do you like that?”

Slave: “Do I like it? By Zeus, that’s enough to make me mess my pants!”

Exploitation & Punishment

- The slave's body as the site of abuse and punishment. Slaves were whipped in court proceedings, for instance, to elicit information, and by their owners: "If a slave might not be beaten by anyone else, he might certainly be beaten by his master" (Roberts 1984: 35).
- Keeping slaves in check: low rations, locking them up, locking up food supply
- Bodies as owned (new slaves showered with figs and nuts, similar to bridal entry):
 - Slaves of Alkestis regarded her as mother (Euripides *Alkestis* line 769 and following)
- Working in worst places: e.g., the Laureion, the silver mine near Athens, in dangerous conditions
- "Social death" (Orlando Patterson)
- Xenophon, *Memories of Sokrates* 4.2.22, has Sok. condemn carpenters, smiths, cobblers as mostly "slavish" because of their ignorance of beauty and justice

Aristotle: mastery → usefulness

“Whereas the master is merely the slave’s master and does not belong to the slave, the slave is not merely the slave of the master but wholly belongs to the master. These considerations therefore make clear the nature of the slave and his essential quality: **one who is a human being belonging by nature not to himself but to another is by nature a slave, and a person is a human being belonging to another if being a man he is an article of property, and an article of property is an instrument for action separable from its owner.**”

(Politics 1.4 1254a, trans. Rackham)

Slavery as a Metaphor for Athenian Rule over Allies in Delian League?

“As the essential fact about a slave seemed to be that he had to take the orders of his master, so the essential fact about the subject allies seemed to be that they had to take the orders of Athens.”

- J.W. Roberts, *City of Sokrates* 1984: 38

Some other considerations

- No known slave revolts at Athens. Debate about whether slaves did or did not outnumber free people. Lower-class people had no slaves, and lower-middle-class might own only one or two.
- Slaves may not have revolted, but they did *flee*. Note that in 433 BCE, Athens barred citizens of the city of Megara from the Athenian *agora* (marketplace) and harbors in part because Megara had given refuge to runaway Athenian slaves (Thucydides 1.139.2).
- During Peloponnesian War (between Sparta and Athens) in mid- to late-5th C, some 20,000 slaves deserted Athens (Thuc. 7.27.5), despite knowing that would likely be treated no better by Spartans or people of Boeotia (area north of Attica).

Anxiety and Self-Questioning?

“One thing only brings disgrace on a slave: the name of slave. **In all else an honest slave is a match for a free person.**” – Euripides, *Ion* 854-4

“We have become barbarous to one another, **since by nature we are all of us in all respects equally adapted to be barbarians or Greeks.**” – Antiphon the Sophist, 5th C BCE (text 44 fragment B, column 2)

