



Historically Speaking

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Slavery



Sidebar piece

The ancient Greeks had several words to indicate slaves. In Homer, Hesiod and Theognis of Megara, a slave was called δμῶς (dmōs). The term has a general meaning but basically refers to war prisoners taken as property. The most common word for slaves is δούλος (doulos). An earlier form of the word appears as do-e-ro, "male slave" (or "servant", or do-e-ra, "female slave" (or "maid-servant". Finally, the term οἰκέτης (oiketēs) was used, as meaning "one who lives in house", referring to household servants. In my books I will use the phrase "woman of the house" referring specifically to a female servant.

Slavery was a common and accepted practice in ancient times in Greece and other societies, and some writers, including Aristotle, described it as natural and necessary, however, the stoic philosophers are the first of the western societies to condemn the practice. The most common use of slaves was in agriculture, but they were also prevalent in mines and stone quarries, and as domestic servants. Slaves were prohibited from participating in politics which was reserved for 'citizens' (generally seen as male property owners.) Slaves were property and could be bought and sold as such. Slaves were often considered part of the family unit. Generally, they did not enjoy the benefits of non-slave members of the household.

Slaves were not afforded the opportunity to be educated. That was reserved (again, generally) for the male children of citizens. Some women were specifically educated in the process of becoming hatairai. The hatairai were women raised to entertain men with conversation as well as physical activities at the drinking parties called symposia.

There were four primary sources of slaves: war, where the defeated became the property of the victors, piracy (those taken by pirates at sea), banditry (those abducted on land), and international trade.

In my books, Mentu, Sinon's servant, is captured from his village in Nubia as a child and sold to Melaius in Greece in international trade. The other significant servant in the books is Katana, a woman servant for Krisa, Sinon's mother. Mentu and Katana are both treated well by the family, especially Sinon and Krisa, so much so that when Katana is given the opportunity to have her freedom, she elects not to, but to stay as a member of the household, "a woman of the house." Mentu is eventually given his freedom, but remains functionally a member of the household as well.

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Slavery in Egypt

It used to be presumed that in Ancient Egypt, the Great Pyramids at Giza were built by many thousands of foreign slaves, toiling under very harsh conditions over a period of decades. Now scholars disagree with this picture of ancient Egypt. The common belief is that the pyramids were built by the free Egyptians themselves and some probably worked for the artisans who designed and supervised the construction.

However, Nubian slaves were commonly used during the rein of Ramses II or Ramses the Great, in his massive production of temples. So there were slaves in Egypt, but not on the scale historically supposed, and most often of foreign birth. Thutmose III for instance is reported to have returned from a campaign in Canaan with almost 90,000 prisoners. Given the small size of armies - generally thousands rather than tens of thousands of soldiers - most of these prisoners must have been civilians.

The Egyptians may have preferred to make slaves of the able bodied soldiers of defeated enemy armies rather than of the inhabitants of captured cities, the majority of whom were children and women. During antiquity there was a preponderance of male slaves, who were often more valued than the females for the hard labour they could perform. But the most cherished - and expensive - were generally those who had special or rare skills.

If the slaves were near the bottom of Egyptian society, their lot was rarely as bad as that of slaves in other societies. As servants in a temple or in the household of a rich family it was often better than that of the "free" peasants.

Treating a slave well was a moral precept, but the very fact that decent treatment of slaves was a moral duty means that they must have been treated badly quite often.

Sometimes slaves were set free through 'manumission' - a practice deemed advantageous for the soul of the slave owner - and were at times even adopted by the family of their former master.

Slavery in my books -

The abhorrent practice of slavery has been a stain on human history throughout the ages. Even when the treatment of a slave is "humane", the denial of liberty is disgusting. I wanted to make that clear because in an effort to maintain historical accuracy, slavery exists in my books. I have made an honest effort to consider that practice and how it might have been in those times. Mentu gets his freedom as a result of the humanity of Sinon and the willingness of Melaius to facilitate it. We also find that there is a kind of justice accomplished by Melaius in his acquisition of Katana, and that she chooses to stay with the family when given the opportunity to be free. That clearly is tempered by the practical consideration of survival away from the setting she has been accustomed to. I include the issues related to freedom versus slavery in a discussion between Sinon and Mentu as Sinon proposes obtaining freedom for Mentu.

We also meet individuals who have chosen to become servants (slaves) for a specific time as a result of economic adversity. This also has historical origin.



Women as plunder of war: Ajax the Lesser taking Cassandra, tondo of a red-figure kylix by the Kodros Painter, c. 440-430 BC, Louvre.