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Introduction and Historical Context

Slaves who love the class of masters provoke a great war with the other slaves.
Euripides (Athenian playwright, ca. 480–406 BCE),
Alexander, fr. 50 in Nauck 1889

Slavery is a cruel institution, but it was central to ancient Greek and Roman civilization for around a thousand years. The prevalence of classical slavery justifies the claim that, during some periods, Greece and Rome were true "slave societies" just as surely as the pre-Civil War American South. But reconstructing and understanding Greek and Roman slavery has long presented a tricky and complex, but fascinating, challenge for historians, who have had to rely on elegant arguments, painstaking investigations, and bold inferences from evidence that is often sparse and difficult to interpret. That evidence is also biased since it is slaveholders rather than slaves who wrote almost every text that has survived from antiquity. For example, the Euripides quotation above is the only hint we have of what must have been a common dynamic among household slaves: conflicts between those slaves determined to resist their oppression in small ways or large and those hoping to get ahead by pleasing their masters. And even this single short quotation comes from a play written by a slave master.

Despite the paucity of evidence from slaves themselves, the issues involved have generated passionate debates. Historical interest has also been piqued by a general admiration for the sophistication and historical significance of classical culture and the inevitable question, "how could they have allowed and indeed approved of slavery?" So, instead of giving up, historians have devised ingenious methods to span the millennia between us and the classical world and to get the most out of our recalcitrant evidence. For example, slaves often paid to buy their own freedom. A long series of such payments was recorded on a stone retaining wall below the temple of Apollo at Delphi in Greece, in part to publicize the terms of the agreement and thus to prevent either party from reneging. The increase of the average price paid from the third to the first century BCE suggests that the demand for slaves in Roman Italy outpaced the number of people enslaved in Rome's almost constant wars in the second century BCE (Hopkins and Roscoe 1978, 134–71) – a surprising result we'll discuss in Chapter 4. Though not all such bold theories have withstood scrutiny, we would not understand Greek and Roman slavery nearly as well as we do were it not for historians willing to try new approaches and to push against the limits of our evidence.

Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery, First Edition. Peter Hunt.

An understanding of Greek and Roman slavery is important for several cultural and historical reasons. First, students interested in the culture of the classical world, ancient Greece and Rome, need to understand its system of slavery, one of its central institutions. In classical literature, for example, you find slaves wherever you turn. Their presence is often obvious: Achilles and Agamemnon quarrel over captive slave women in Homer's *Iliad*; near the beginning of Aristotle's *Politics*, we find his infamous doctrine of natural slavery; witty, scheming slaves often drive the action of Roman comedies; powerful ex-slave administrators play a large role in Tacitus' history of the reign of the emperor Claudius. Less obviously, slavery permeated Greek and Roman thinking, as evidenced by their frequent use of analogies to slavery. When the orator Demosthenes appealed to the Athenians not to submit to *slavery* to Macedonia, he was not saying that the Athenians were in imminent danger of actual slavery – being sold away from their families or whipped for refusing an order. Nevertheless, his metaphorical use of *slavery* evoked a concrete, everyday, and violent institution familiar to his audience.

Second, classical slavery has had profound effects on modern slave societies, not just in the American South, but also in Brazil, the Caribbean, and elsewhere – some of which we'll explore in the final chapter. From the seventeenth through the nineteenth century, the study of the Classics played a huge role in Western education and thus Greek and Roman models were constantly present in the minds of slaveholders in the New World. They were deeply influenced, for example, by the Roman law of slavery. George Fitzhugh, in his infamous defense of slavery in the US South, *A Sociology for the South* (1854), drew on Aristotle's doctrine of Natural Slavery to justify slavery based on race. Classical models often shaped the way that modern slaveholders conceived of and justified slavery.

Third, classical styles, ideas, and values have remained important to Western culture in general, so understanding the role of slavery in ancient Greece and Rome can yield insight into ideas and debates important to the modern period. In the nineteenth century, at the beginning of the *Communist Manifesto,* Karl Marx uses the opposition of slave and master in antiquity as his first example of the class struggle between oppressor and oppressed: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles: Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf . . . " (Marx and Engels 1955 [originally 1848], chapter 1). Following his lead, several modern communist groups have named themselves after Spartacus, the leader of a great slave revolt against the Romans. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals, A Polemic* condemned Christianity as a slavish religion in contrast to Greek and Roman paganism (Nietzsche 1994 [originally 1887], I.8–10). Finally, the West's cherished ideal of political freedom had its origin in a slave society, classical Greece, where the opposite of freedom was a vivid and concrete reality: slavery.

So far, I have been treating Greek and Roman slavery as if they constituted a natural unit. This may at first appear arbitrary. Linking together ancient Greece and Rome as the "classical" civilizations is arguably an artifact of post-Renaissance Western cultural history and of the important role both Greek and Roman literature, art, and philosophy has played in that history. In fact, the culture and society of the thousand-odd Greek city-states of the classical period or of the later and larger Hellenistic kingdoms was quite different from that of Rome and the enormous empire it eventually controlled. Nevertheless, historical links and cultural similarities justify treating the slavery of Greece and Rome together. Even the contrasts between Greek and Roman slavery – of which there are many – often prove to be illuminating of both.

Over the course of the second and first centuries BCE (from 200–31 BCE) Rome conquered Greece itself and the Hellenistic kingdoms of the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece, however, did not disappear after its conquest. Rather, Greek-speaking elites continued to dominate the eastern half of the Roman Empire. Indeed, this Greek-speaking eastern half of the empire survived as the Byzantine Empire even after the dissolution of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century CE. So, Greek history and the history of Greek slavery became part of Roman and then medieval history. For example, papyrus posters advertising rewards for the return of fugitive slaves survive, preserved in the desert. Most of these date from the period when Egypt was part of the Roman Empire and partially subject to its laws, but they are written in Greek, which remained the language and provided the cultural background of the elite in this former Hellenistic kingdom. It is simplistic to categorize slavery in Egypt in this period as purely Greek or Roman – not to mention the Egyptian context.

Although Rome conquered Greece, Greek art, literature, and thought had a profound influence on Roman culture. The embrace and imitation of Greek culture by the Romans has important consequences for the study of Roman slavery. For example, Roman philosophers were all adherents to one or another of the schools of philosophy founded by the Greeks. To understand the views on slavery of Seneca (c. 4 BCE–65 CE), a Roman aristocrat and advisor to the emperor Nero, we need to keep in mind that, as a Stoic, he was an adherent of a school of Hellenistic Philosophy. It is still possible to take these considerations into account and to treat either Greek or Roman slavery by itself. This book capitalizes on the benefits of covering the two subjects together and especially on the enlightening contrasts and parallels such an approach allows.

Greek History and Slavery: An Overview

It is not only the connections between Greek and Roman history that are important here; in general, a system of slavery can only be understood within its wider historical context. In the case of Greek and Roman slavery, this context extends over more than two thousand years and, largely because of the extent of the Roman Empire, comprises slavery from Spain to Iraq and from Britain to Egypt. So we are not talking about just a little historical context, but a lot. Here I can only provide a brief sketch of those aspects of Greek and Roman history most relevant to slavery. As I treat particular issues in later chapters, I'll provide more background. For now, it is just the big picture that we need.

The first speakers of Greek probably migrated to the area we now know as Greece around 2000 BCE. By 1600 BCE they had developed the high culture and bureaucratic states that scholars call Mycenaean civilization after the spectacular finds at the site of Mycenae in the Peloponnese. The Mycenaean states kept records on clay tablets in a script known as Linear B. Some tablets contain the Linear B version of the classical Greek word for slave: *doulos/doulē* (masculine/feminine). The people so described are usually unnamed, humble, and dependent on a more important person, often a religious figure. But they sometimes seem to own land and pay taxes, something we would not expect of slaves. Other tablets list groups of workers supported by state rations, including women and children but no men.[1] Some groups are described with ethnic adjectives

1 E.g., the Pylos Aa/Ab/Ad series with Shelmerdine 2008, 138–139 and Chadwick and Ventris 1973, 156.

Table 1.1 The periods of Greek history.

Dates	Historical period	
1600–1150 BCE	Mycenaean Civilization	Bureaucratic palace governments, writing in Linear B
1150–750 BCE	Dark Age	Decline in population and material conditions, no writing during most of period
750–500 BCE	Archaic Period	Growth in population, alphabetic writing, formation of city-states, Panhellenism and colonization
500–323 BCE	Classical Period	Democracy in Athens, Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, most influential period of Greek culture, ends with Macedonian dominance of mainland Greece
323–30 BCE	Hellenistic Period	After Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire, Greek and Macedonian elites ruled large areas of the Near East. Starting after 200 BCE, Rome defeats, dominates, and eventually annexes the Hellenistic Kingdoms
30 BCE–400 CE	Roman Period	Greece and Hellenistic kingdoms part of Roman Empire
400–1453 CE	Byzantine Empire	Eastern, Greek-speaking Roman Empire survives the fall of the western Empire, finally falls to the Ottomans

that indicate that they were foreigners and, according to one reconstruction, slave captives whose husbands had been killed in war. Thus slavery may well have existed in Greece as far back as we have textual evidence. Unfortunately, we do not know much more about Mycenaean slavery.

In the century or so after 1200 BCE, the Mycenaean palaces were destroyed, population plummeted, large-scale construction ceased, and literacy was entirely lost – thus this period is known as a Dark Age. Historians did not even know that the Mycenaeans were Greek speakers until Michael Ventris, a professional architect rather than a scholar, deciphered the writing system in 1952. Writing appears again in Greece in the

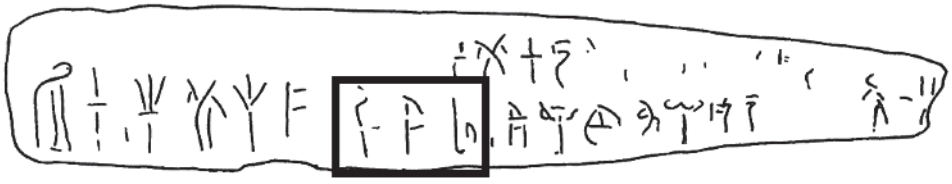

Figure 1.1 Slaves in the Linear B Tablets? A tablet from Pylos, ca. 1200 BCE, written in Linear B syllabograms: "At (?) Pylos, slaves of (?) the Priestess, on account (?) of sacred gold: 14 [ ]women" – or perhaps "in exchange for sacred gold." The word in the box, do-e-ra[i], is the antecedent for the classical Greek word for slave (feminine: *doulai*), but what the term implied in Linear B is not clear. "The Priestess" was an important, religious figure. *Source*: PY Ae 303 translated in Duhoux 2008, 295–296. Illustration from *The Pylos Tablets: Texts of the Inscriptions Found 1939–1954* by Emmett L. Bennett. Copyright © 1955, renewed 1983 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission.

course of the eighth century, 800–700 BCE, after the adaptation of the Phoenician alphabet for writing Greek. This was only one of the many ways in which archaic Greece drew upon the older, larger, and more sophisticated civilizations in the Near East: Babylonia, Assyria, Lydia, and Egypt. All of these societies possessed slaves, who are mentioned already in the twenty-third century BCE and in the Code of Hammurabi, but none were slave societies (Turley 2000, 39). It is possible that archaic Greek aristocrats, in a newly prosperous society and enamored of other aspects of Eastern art, clothing, and technology, decided that a bought slave was another luxurious foreign status symbol they would like to acquire. But this is not the only scenario we can imagine. Slavery was common throughout the ancient world: in particular, the enslavement of the women of a defeated enemy was almost ubiquitous. Greeks probably did not need to learn about slavery from anybody.

The return of writing to Greece was far from the whole story. The eighth century also saw growth in population, wealth, and trade, as well as cultural changes. In particular, the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, our best evidence for eighth-century culture and society, were first committed to writing at this time. Slaves play important roles in both epics. For example, upon his return home, the hero Odysseus, an exemplary master, reestablishes his relationship with the loyal slaves in his household and eventually punishes the disloyal ones. Since the suitors of Penelope, Odysseus' wife, have been cruel masters to the slaves in Odysseus' house in his absence, an anonymous slave woman curses them (*Odyssey* 20.116–19, trans. Lattimore 1967):

> On this day let the suitors take, for the last and latest
> time, their desirable feasting in the halls of Odysseus.
> For it is they who have broken my knees with heart-sore labour
> as I grind the meal for them. Let this be their final feasting.

We can easily imagine slaves in the classical period uttering similar prayers; both loyalty and resentment towards their masters are well attested. But in two interrelated ways, slavery as portrayed in Homer is different from what we find later. First off, although Odysseus captured some of his slaves himself and paid for others, Homer does not present slaves as essentially foreign. In contrast, slaves in the classical period were virtually never native to the city in which they worked; indeed, Greek-born slaves were relatively rare in Greece. Second, in Homer the distinction between slave and free often seems less important than the distinction between the heroic nobles and everybody else. By the classical period, the distinction between slave and free was of paramount importance.

We also see in Homer signs of the early development of the *polis*, the city-state, the form of political organization that was to dominate Greece until the supremacy of Macedonia in the late fourth century. Greece was not a single nation state, but rather each city – eventually most cities were walled – along with the countryside around it was an independent political entity. The extent of ancient Greece was also different, larger than modern Greece: in addition to the whole coast of the Aegean, there were Greek *poleis* (the plural of *polis*) in Sicily, in southern Italy and France, and on the coasts of the Black Sea, as well as a few on the northern coast of Africa. Some of these city-states raided their non-Greek neighbors for slaves or at least traded slaves, both practices we'll discuss in Chapter 3.

The growth and development of Greek society and culture continued in the seventh and sixth centuries. Our sources of information, however, are not good since no contemporary histories survive and we are left to interpret short poems or the writings of later historians, who had to base their accounts on unreliable oral traditions. Two important events during this period affect our understanding of slavery. First, a later, fourth-century BCE historian, Theopompus, reports that the Chians were the first Greeks to use "bought barbarians [foreigners]" for slaves – we have little idea when.[2] According to Theompompus' model, cities had previously obtained slaves directly, by enslaving the people they captured in war, the most common practice in Homer's epics. Throughout the classical period, it was always possible to enslave war captives, but it was often financially more advantageous to ransom captured soldiers back to their native city – assuming that it had not been destroyed. As a result, most slaves in the classical period were probably non-Greeks imported and purchased rather than captured directly.

The second crucial development occurred in Athens, the most populous and best-known city-state in Greece. In the early part of the sixth century BCE, an Athenian politician named Solon abolished debt bondage and, perhaps, a certain type of share-cropping – a development we'll revisit in Chapter 5. He thus reduced the ability of the rich to exploit the poor among the citizens. If similar events and processes occurred in other cities – as did the development of democracy – this may have helped drive the market for foreign slaves, outsiders to whom no rights need be given and who could be exploited to whatever extent was practical. The evidence of Homer shows that slaves were used from the eighth century on; it's likely that they became more common during the sixth century.

Our sources of information become much better after the start of the classical period in 500 BCE, which roughly coincides with two of the Greeks' proudest accomplishments.[3] First, hostilities with Persia began in 499 BCE; the mainland Greeks repelled invasions by the vast Persian Empire in 490 and 480–79 BCE. In the aftermath of these defensive struggles, Athens led the counter-attack that freed the Greek cities of the Ionian coast from Persian control. Athens eventually turned its anti-Persian alliance of Greek city-states, the Delian League, into an empire, from which many of its "allies" tried to escape in vain. In the process, Athens became a wealthy and powerful state. This wealth supported its outstanding achievements in the arts and literature, many of which belong to this period. It is also likely that this period of wealth and population growth was also the time in which slaves at Athens were most numerous.

Second, Athens became a democracy following the reforms of Kleisthenes in 508 BCE. As opposed to oligarchies, which typically allowed only the wealthy to exercise political rights, Greek democracies gave such rights to the poor. This made it harder for the rich to subject the poor to subordinating economic relationships and contributed to the tendency, already encouraged by Solon's reforms, for the rich to buy slaves to fill their labor needs. In addition, although the rich did not really consider the poor their equals, an ideology emerged in which the main distinction among men was between the free citizens and the slaves. This was an egalitarian and democratic way of thinking as far as the male citizens were concerned, but it was not a generous worldview when it came to slaves, who lacked basic rights and were often despised as inferior foreigners.

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2 Theopompus, Fr. 122 (a) in Shrimpton 1991.

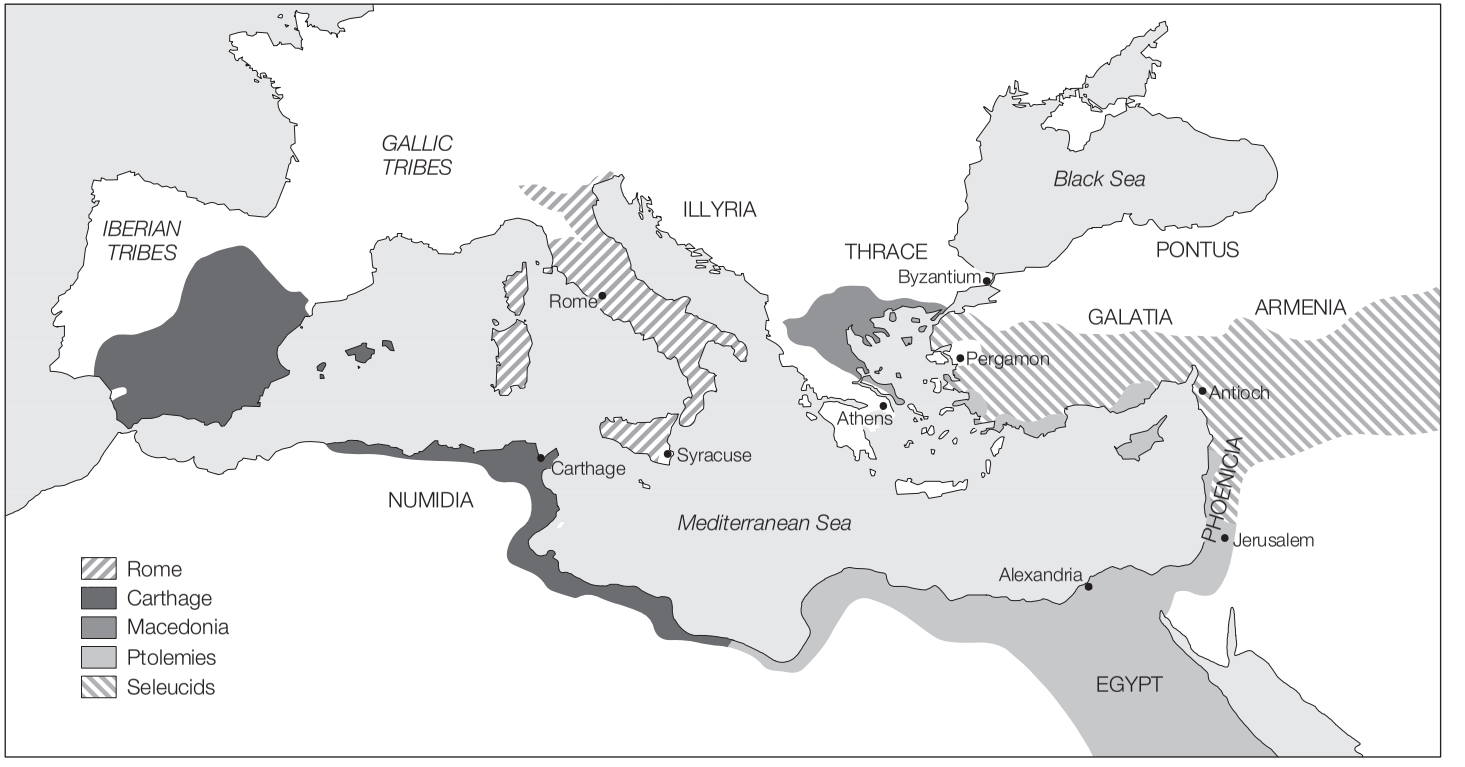
3 Some historians prefer 510 or 479 BCE as the beginning of the classical period.

Despite amazing cultural accomplishments in medicine, art, tragedy, comedy, history, and philosophy, the fifth century was a period of frequent wars, at first against Persia but later mostly between Greek states. These culminated in the long, extremely bitter, and costly Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) between Athens and its empire on one side and the Peloponnesian League under Sparta on the other. During this struggle, Athens lost more than half of its citizen population in battle – and suffered a terrible plague to boot. In these wars, slaves too could be recruited to fight in the navy – sometimes with the promise of freedom as a reward. Other slaves took advantage of hostilities to flee slavery, since enemy cities could be as close as thirty miles from each other and did not, of course, return fugitive slaves to their masters in a hostile city. For example, the historian Thucydides reports in *The History of the Peloponnesian War* that more than twenty thousand slaves escaped from Athens when a Spartan fort was established nearby (7.27).

Warfare continued in the fourth century but was never as intense. Several states made bids to dominate the Greek world, but none succeeded until Macedonia finally achieved domination over almost the whole of mainland Greece. Although slavery was known in Macedonia, it played a smaller role in this society – dominated by aristocrats and mainly populated by dependent peasants – than it had in the city-states to the south. When Alexander of Macedon conquered the whole of the vast Persian Empire (335–323 BCE), he mainly left the economies and labor practices of the areas he conquered intact. Alexander died without an heir to the throne and eventually his generals fell to fighting over the huge empire he had created. The result of these wars, which lasted for fifty years, was the formation of a number of stable independent monarchies, called the Hellenistic Kingdoms.

Greeks and Macedonians who had emigrated from their homelands constituted the ruling class in these kingdoms. There they used domestic slaves just as in Greece. The mass of the population in the Hellenistic Kingdoms, however, was composed of natives, mainly peasants engaged in agriculture. Their status and way of life often predated even the expansion of the Persian Empire in the sixth century and did not change with the Macedonian conquest either. Slavery in the Hellenistic Kingdoms was therefore primarily an urban phenomenon practiced by the Greek and Macedonian ruling class. Nevertheless, we know more about some aspects of Hellenistic slavery than that of the classical period: the manumission records at Delphi back in mainland Greece and the papyri from Hellenistic Egypt provide particularly good evidence, which we'll use in several places.

Rome came into contact with the Hellenistic world in the third century. Shortly after 200 BCE, Rome decisively defeated Macedonia, and eventually it conquered all the Hellenistic kingdoms. Rome did not annex the last kingdom, Ptolemaic Egypt, until 30 BCE, but even before then, by the middle of the second century at the latest, Rome was the most powerful state in the Mediterranean. Even the proud kingdoms of Alexander's successors needed either to do as Rome wanted or to suffer the consequences. Nevertheless, slavery in Greece continued after its conquest by Rome and even after the fall of Rome. The eastern, Greek-speaking half of the Roman Empire, known as the Byzantine Empire, outlasted the fall of the western Empire by almost a millennium. Its people referred to themselves as the *Romaioi*, which is Greek for "the Romans" – yet another striking example of the eventual blending of Greek and Roman culture. These *Romaioi* owned slaves all the way up to the final fall of Constantinople in 1453 CE.



Map 3 The powers of the Mediterranean in 220 BCE. *Source*: Courtesy of Stephanie Krause.

Rome's Expansion

The traditional, but legendary, date for the founding of Rome on seven hills overlooking the river Tiber is 753 BCE; archaeology confirms that by the middle of the next century the city center, the *forum*, had been built between these hills. Already by the end of the sixth century BCE, the city of Rome was one of the largest in Italy. Unfortunately, most of our detailed information about the long early history of Rome (750–350 BCE) comes from sources written down centuries later, whose accuracy inspires little confidence. The oldest genuine document, parts of which survive, is the law code known as the Twelve Tables, which may have been enacted around 450 BCE. Among other topics, the Twelve Tables contain regulations about slaves, including several regarding manumission. As was the case with Greece, Roman slavery went back to the earliest period of its recorded history.

The basic theme of the first eight centuries of Roman history, from about 750 BCE to 50 CE, is the expansion of Roman territory and power through warfare. Rome's growth began with its control of a league of cities to its south, the Latin League, who spoke Latin just as the Romans did. Rome slowly grew to control more and more neighboring states in central Italy, either directly or as subordinate allies. After its final victory over the Samnites of south-central Italy (290 BCE), Rome controlled almost the whole of the Italian Peninsula. Two long and bloody wars against Carthage, a powerful Phoenician city in North Africa, left Rome at the end of the third century victorious and possessing overseas provinces including Sicily and parts of Spain. Rome's domination, defeat, and eventual annexation of the great Hellenistic kingdoms was an inevitable, if slow, process – as was the conquest of Spain. Hard inland campaigns brought Gaul – roughly modern France – under Roman rule (58–50 BCE). Rome eventually controlled all the territory west of the Rhine and south of the Danube. Rome's eastern conquests brought its frontiers to, and occasionally past, Armenia. In the north the Romans managed to conquer about half of the island of Britain. The emperor Claudius conducted this last campaign in the 40s CE, but the Romans acquired the vast majority of their empire during the Republic and during the reign of the first emperor, Augustus, who died in 14 CE. There were still wars and some emperors conducted important and successful campaigns, but not at the same constant and intense level as before. Since conquest provided large numbers of slaves, we'll consider in Chapter 3 whether the prevalence of slavery peaked and then began to decline as this source of slaves dried up.

As a result of this long process of expansion, Rome became one of the largest and most powerful empires in world history. Nevertheless, Rome suffered setbacks and pauses. For example, its wars against the Samnites and Carthaginians were marked by famous defeats. But for much of its history, starting in the fourth century BCE, Rome had a way of losing battles, sometimes disastrously, but eventually winning the wars. Historians focus on two basic factors in Rome's resilience and success.

First off, unlike the Greek city-states that jealously guarded their local citizenship, the Romans allowed conquered people to advance through various gradations of partial citizenship and eventually to become Roman citizens. This was not a quick or peaceful process: it often took many generations for a state to go from enmity and defeat – often repeated defeat – through subordinate status to full incorporation in the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, Roman power and territory grew in this way, slowly but surely. Rome could eventually draw on a much larger population than any of its rivals. In

contrast, the Hellenistic monarchies never succeeded in winning over the populations that Alexander the Great and his army had conquered. The Greek and Macedonian ruling class remained a relatively small foreign elite, centered in the cities, and superimposed upon a much larger and often hostile native population.

Rome's ability to incorporate foreign states paralleled its treatment of former slaves. Rome was almost unique among slave-societies in that slaves formally freed by a Roman citizen became citizens themselves, a practice we'll consider in more detail in Chapter 8. Rome imported or directly captured large numbers of slaves in every generation for centuries; some proportion of these gained manumission. So some historians suspect that the citizen population of Rome, or even Italy as a whole, eventually included a large proportion of ex-slaves and their descendants.

The second basic factor behind Rome's military success was its social cohesion, which helped Rome to mobilize its strength effectively against external enemies. Up until the mid-fourth century BCE, social conflicts had occasionally hampered Rome; class tensions and political conflict plagued the late Republic (133–30 BCE). Nevertheless, for a long and crucial part of Rome's expansion, from the mid-fourth to the mid-second century BCE, Roman society was marked by remarkable unity, an ideology of inclusion, and an ethos of shared sacrifice for the community. Rome's eventual success in the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE) highlights these qualities. In 218 BCE Hannibal, the Carthaginian commander, crossed the Alps from Spain to invade Italy itself. He decimated large Roman armies in three battles and ranged up and down Italy with his army for years and didn't return to Carthage until 203 BCE. Nevertheless, few of Rome's Italian allies went over to the Carthaginians and the Romans themselves presented a united front. They continued to mobilize new armies to replace their losses and eventually won the war.

The inclusiveness of the Romans is revealed in a story set at the nadir of Roman fortunes after Rome's third and worst defeat by Hannibal, at Cannae. At this time, the Senate called for *volones*, slave volunteers, to replenish the army, and was able to form an entire legion from them. After fighting bravely for Rome, the *volones* gained their freedom as a reward. It is not that remarkable that the Romans out of dire necessity turned to arming and freeing slaves; the Greeks did that as well, as we'll see in Chapter 5. What sets Rome apart from Greece is that the Romans were not embarrassed about this expedient, but rather they celebrated the *volones* (e.g., Livy 23.35.8). In practice Roman slavery was often extremely brutal and violent, but one stream in Roman ideology stressed the ability of some people, even slaves, to rise to the status of Romans by their virtue and hard work.

Rome's wars of conquest directly supplied large numbers of slaves, starting in the third century BCE at the latest. By the second century, Rome's acquisition of slaves through war reached a remarkably high level. In addition, the wealth that empire brought allowed rich Romans to buy more slaves from beyond the borders of the realm. Many of these lived in cities and contributed to the ostentatious and luxurious lifestyle of the wealthy Romans. In Italy, the heartland of the empire, these slaves also constituted a large fraction of the agricultural work force. Some historians have estimated that the population of Italy in this period was more than 25 percent slaves, mostly first-generation slaves. We'll explore the repercussions of this in Chapters 3 and 5, and look at the theory that Italy was converted from a country of small independent farmers into a landscape dominated by large estates with slave workers. In many parts of the Roman Empire, however, slavery mainly remained primarily an urban phenomenon.

Table 1.2 Roman government and the periods of Roman history.

Date	Period	Political developments
753 (?)–ca. 500 BCE	Regal	Kings
ca. 500–133 BCE	Republic	Representative government dominated by an oligarchy of wealth and birth
133–30 BCE	Late Republic	Constitutional crises and eventually civil wars
30 BCE–235 CE	Empire	A series of hereditary monarchies
235–284 CE	Crisis of the Third Century	Many civil wars, assassinations, and foreign invasions
284–476 CE	Late Empire	More bureaucracy and militarization of society. Empire divided into western and eastern (Byzantine) halves

Roman history is traditionally divided into periods based on its system of government. We know very little about the earliest period, the Regal period, when Rome was ruled by kings: later Romans told many stories about these early monarchs, but historians disagree about how many of these, if any, are true. After the Romans expelled their kings, probably around 500 BCE, Rome became a republic. Each year the people elected powerful magistrates, headed by two consuls, to govern. The Roman system of government was a complex one with various branches – including a powerful senate, made up of former magistrates – and many of its features served to limit the power any one official possessed. On the whole, however, Rome's government was a representative republic whereas Greek democracy, as at Athens, was direct: in a Greek democratic city, the assembled people made most decisions themselves and delegated little power to magistrates.

Another contrast was that while Greek democracies tried to establish political equality among the citizens, the Roman Republic was deliberately set up to favor the rich citizens and the magistrates. Any citizen could address the Athenian assembly – the herald proclaimed, "who wishes to speak?" – while the convening officials, from the wealthiest classes, controlled the agenda and speakers at a Roman assembly. In Athens, every citizen's vote carried the same weight. But the Roman Centuriate Assembly, for example, elected high officials and decided issues of war and peace. Its voting units were called *centuries*. Citizens were allocated to these *centuries* based on their wealth class in such a way that most of the *centuries* were composed of wealthier citizens. The poor, despite their great numbers, were allocated to fewer *centuries*. To make the process even less democratic, units composed of the upper classes voted first, and the issue could be decided and the voting halted before the *centuries* for most of the population even had a chance to vote.

One crucial social reform during the second half of the fourth century BCE was the abolition of debt bondage for Roman citizens. The elimination of debt bondage sharpened the divide between Roman citizens, who from this point on were rarely faced with the prospect of servitude, and imported slaves, devoid of all rights. In this respect, the Roman situation resembled that at Athens after Solon's abolition of debt bondage. In other ways, however, the societies were different. As we'll explore in Chapter 5, Roman ideals still allowed for subordinating economic ties between rich and poor, those

between a rich patron and his poorer clients for example. But for one Athenian citizen to be permanently employed by, or be subordinate to, another was thought disgraceful. Paradoxically, the ideal of equality among the citizens perhaps contributed to Athens' general refusal to allow slaves – or usually foreigners – to become citizens. That would be to concede too much to them. At Rome, in contrast, a hierarchical view of citizenship as including higher and lower ranks was one factor that made it easier for the Romans to accept ex-slaves as citizens – of low rank of course.

Roman conquests continued unabated throughout the late Republic (133–30 BCE), but an escalating spiral of social conflict, violent political strife, and finally a series of hard-fought civil wars also marked this period. Competition among aristocrats became increasingly bitter and eventually violent. Since successful politicians were often victorious generals, their competition eventually involved the clash of Roman armies more loyal to their commanders than to the Republic. Some historians hold that the displacement of Italian smallholders by slave-worked farms meant that the traditional recruiting ground of the Roman state – free Italian farmers – was being depleted. They argue that, in consequence, Roman legionaries were recruited from the poor and landless, who, without a livelihood to return to, were more dependent than ever on their generals (see the section Slave and Freedmen Administrators in the Early Roman Empire in Chapter 5). In times of political conflict they were likely to support their own generals, even when it meant marching against Rome itself.

The rapid expansion of Rome and the consequent acquisition of so many slaves also caused problems for Rome in a more direct way. In the period 140 to 70 BCE, slaves rose in open revolt on three separate occasions: twice in Sicily, Rome's first overseas province, and once in Italy itself (Chapter 10). It is only in rare circumstances that slaves are able to successfully revolt; the sheer number of new slaves in Sicily and Italy was a crucial factor in these uprisings, each of which lasted for years and required major military campaigns in order to suppress them. Evidence of slaves' hostility towards their owners appears throughout Roman history, either in the form of open violence or day-to-day resistance. Slave owners sometimes emphasized the hostility of their slaves with the aphorism, "You have as many enemies as you have slaves," a pithy four words in Latin: "Quot servi tot hostes" (Seneca, *Epistles* 47.5). The actual relations between slaves and masters were complex and could vary greatly from one case to another, as we'll explore more closely in Chapter 9. For example, slaveholders celebrated the outstanding loyalty of some slaves who were willing to die for their masters, especially during the civil wars that led to the fall of the Republic, a topic we'll revisit in Chapter 11.

The final result of these civil wars was the conversion of Rome into a monarchy, the Empire, which lasted into the fifth century CE. The first Roman emperor, Augustus, claimed that he was restoring the Republic and, in legal terms, he ruled by virtue of possessing a bundle of traditional powers, albeit previously divided among different officials and limited in duration. The Senate still sat and, for a while, assemblies elected officials – but only from those vetted by the emperor. Despite this legal façade, everybody knew that the emperor's real power lay in his control of the armies on the frontiers and the Praetorian Guard, detachments of troops stationed in Rome itself, contrary to Republican practice. Individual emperors varied in their relationships with the senatorial order, upon which they still depended to govern the vast empire and command its armies. As we'll see in Chapter 5, emperors also used their slaves and ex-slaves as

a loyal bureaucracy and even the equivalent of a cabinet: such men were loyal only to the emperor, unlikely to take offense at being given frequent orders – as a blue-blooded senator would – and they often possessed the expertise needed to administer an empire of sixty million people.

Sometimes a tyrannical or insane emperor terrorized the Senate; most emperors enjoyed generally smooth relations and ruled without serious challenge or dispute. Despite two interludes of civil wars due to a disputed succession – both after an unpopular emperor's assassination without a viable heir – the basic imperial system continued into the third century CE. The "Crisis of the Third Century," 235–284 CE, involved a long series of civil wars, assassinations of emperors, and foreign invasions by Goths, Franks, Alemanni, and a resurgent Persia. These forces devastated large swaths of the empire, some of which had not seen a foreign army for centuries. Plagues also contributed to a decline in population. Amazingly, a series of brilliant military emperors, culminating with Diocletian (284–305 CE), restored Rome's fortunes and reestablished order. As a result, however, the late Roman Empire was more militarized and bureaucratic than before. The political division between the Eastern, Greek-speaking provinces and the Latin west was first officially instituted by Diocletian and reemerged for good at the end of the fourth century CE. Equally important to the development of the late Empire was the conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity. After a long history of sporadic Roman persecutions of Christians, Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire over the course of the fourth century CE.

Renewed invasions by the Goths, among others, led to the sacking of Rome in 410 CE and the fifth century saw the western Empire ravaged by invaders, while emperors became increasingly impotent until a Germanic king deposed the last emperor in the west in 476 CE. The eastern Empire, which historians refer to as the Byzantine Empire, was reduced by Persian and then Islamic conquests in the seventh century, but it lasted until the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453 CE.

Most scholars agree that Italy, the heart of the Roman Empire, was a slave society during the late Republic and early Empire. Slaves were numerous in the cities: Roman aristocrats might have a couple of hundred slaves working just in their mansions in Rome. More important, slave-worked large farms dominated agriculture, the most important part of the economy. This period, perhaps from about 150 BCE to 150 CE, and this place, Italy and Rome in particular, provide a large proportion of our evidence. But we should not project the picture we get from these Italian sources onto the whole expanse of the Roman Empire. Although large slave-run farms existed in different provinces of the Empire, the domination of agricultural labor by slaves seems mainly to have been an Italian phenomenon.

In addition, the dependence on slaves in agriculture varied over time. Scholars used to paint a simple picture of the rise and fall of Roman slavery. The conquests of the Republic and early Empire drove the transition to the use of slave labor. When these conquests slowed and then ceased, so the argument goes, Roman aristocrats found substitutes for slave labor, in particular the *coloni*, whom some historians argue were precursors to medieval serfs. The actual situation is more complex, and we will consider critically both the rise (Chapters 3 and 4) and the fall of Roman slavery (Chapter 13) in more detail.

Contrasts and Comparisons

Both Greece and Rome had a long history of slave use, but the period during which we can describe them as slave societies – when slavery was prevalent, even in agriculture – was much shorter. These periods included the classical, "golden" ages of both civilizations. It is ironic that the greatest cultural accomplishments of Greece and Rome were the products of the periods when slavery was most prevalent.

The two slave societies were limited in space as well as time. For example, we can call Athens and similar city-states slave societies, but we could not describe Thessaly as such, with its serf-like lower classes and rare use of slaves in the classical period. Roman Italy was a slave society, but many provinces outside of Italy mainly retained their previous social structure, usually based on the labor of peasants or serf-like classes. In both cases, we must be careful not to extrapolate too boldly from evidence that is concentrated in time and place. We know vastly more about classical Athens than about any other Greek city. Similarly, Rome and Italy from the late Republic through the second century CE are better attested than earlier and later periods or the rest of the Empire, although the bias of our Roman sources is less severe than is the case with classical Athens versus the rest of Greece. Thus, while our evidence is better for the places and times when slavery was most important, that does not mean that slavery was as pervasive everywhere and in every era.

The direct democracy of Athens and other Greek cities and the Roman republican system make Greece and Rome stand out among many other societies throughout world history that displayed a similar technological, social, and economic complexity. The legal and political rights they accorded to every free man inspired the modern embrace of democracy and the rule of law. In a sharp and unhappy contrast, slaves were common in both societies and devoid of legal rights or social status. Both societies made a sharp distinction between the in-group of male citizens, who could rarely lose this status, and the "outsiders within," foreign slaves, who lacked rights.

Greek and Roman slavery were different in other ways. Although the dichotomy between slave and citizen was sharp in both cases, the line between the two was more permeable at Rome than in Greece. Greek cities jealously guarded their citizenship and rarely allowed any foreigners to become citizens. Thus ex-slaves remained in the category of *metics*, resident foreigners, with almost no hope of eventually attaining political rights in the cities where they lived. In contrast, Roman freedmen and freedwomen could join the ranks of the citizens. Consequently, Rome's system of slavery is sometimes classified as an "open" one, while Greek slavery was "closed." This does not imply that Roman slavery was milder than Greek slavery. We can't be sure what proportion of Greek or Roman slaves actually attained their freedom in the first place, nor can we gauge the average treatment a slave received in Greece versus Rome, as we'll examine in more depth in Chapters 8 and 9.

Another and more obvious contrast is the much larger scale of the Roman Empire and thus of Roman slavery. A high estimate for the population of the whole Greek world during the classical period is between seven and ten million inhabitants. The Roman Empire at its peak probably contained approximately fifty to sixty million people. This difference, almost a ten-fold one, still understates the difference in scale between the two societies: the classical Greek world was composed of perhaps a thousand city-states, a fair proportion of which were independent, while the entire Roman Empire was at many

times a single political entity. The Hellenistic world occupies an intermediate position with a total population perhaps somewhat larger than that of the Roman Empire, but divided among different states. These differences of scale – especially between classical Greece and the Roman Empire – meant that total numbers of slaves, the scale of enslavement, and the slave trade differed greatly in each case.

There was also a difference in the distribution of slaves among free families. The social structure of classical Greek city-states was more egalitarian than at Rome. The rich in classical Greece were not as rich as the Roman elite and a broader proportion of families in Greece were somewhat affluent. These basic economic facts were reflected in the ownership of slaves. Roman aristocrats had hundreds of slaves, and holdings into the thousands were not rare. Although one Athenian supposedly owned a thousand mine slaves, other Greeks of the highest classes possessed only about ten to thirty slaves. On the other hand, even the seemingly average Athenians represented in Aristophanes' comedies owned from a couple to a dozen slaves. Such comic households were not average in the strict sense, but rather richer. Nevertheless, it is possible that half of the citizen households in Athens possessed at least one slave during the fat years of the Athenian Empire. Thus, to judge from Athens, Greek citizens were more likely than Roman citizens to possess slaves; classical Greek slaves were more apt to live in small households rather than among a large group of slaves owned by a noble.

A different distribution, however, characterizes the Hellenistic world. Hellenistic aristocrats were generally grander and richer than their classical antecedents, but their wealth in land consisted of farms with attached peasant workers, rather than with slaves, as had been common practice during the classical period. Their domestic establishments probably contained more slaves than one would have found at Athens, but total ownership was probably less than at Rome at the height of Roman slavery, since the Hellenistic world did not possess many equivalents to the large farms worked by slaves common in Italian agriculture at that time.

Suggested Reading

Pomeroy, Burstein, Donlan, and Roberts 2013 is a recent authoritative textbook on Greek history, clear and accessible. Boatwright, Gargola, Lenski, and Talbert 2013 provides the same for Roman history. Kolchin 1993 is a clear, judicious, and engaging introduction to slavery in the United States. There are a number of good general treatments of Greek and Roman slavery. Wiedemann 1988 collects important ancient sources for both slave systems and Andreau and Descat 2011 treats them both with frequent comparisons. Fisher 1993 is a short, balanced survey of Greek slavery whereas Garlan 1988 takes a French, Marxian approach to that topic. David Lewis (forthcoming) looks at Greek slavery in the context of the whole ancient Mediterranean and Near East. On Roman slavery, Bradley 1994 highlights its brutality and slave resistance; Joshel 2010 is a concrete and lively treatment with many excellent illustrations.