

Recent books on ancient slavery, II

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THE current review will focus on two recently published books with revolutionary implications for the future study of ancient slavery. The first book by David Lewis is a comparative examination of various Greek slave systems of the archaic and classical periods alongside other contemporary systems in the Eastern Mediterranean (Israel, Assyria, Babylonia, the Persian Empire), as well as Carthage in the West.¹ The second book by Alice Rio is a history of early medieval slavery between 500–1100 CE, covering both the Mediterranean South and Northern Europe, as well as using Byzantine and Irish slavery for comparative purposes.² These two works focus on aspects and periods for which there has been no systematic coverage and synthetic work so far: Lewis' is the first systematic comparison between Greek and Near Eastern forms of slavery, while Rio's is the first synthesis on medieval slavery for over fifty years, and the first ever in English. But as I will try to show below, the significance of these two books does not lie solely in covering relatively neglected subjects and providing syntheses: along with these significant contributions, these two works have major theoretical and methodological implications for the global study of slavery and provide the basis for an alternative historical narrative.

I will start by providing an overview of the traditional conceptual framework and historical narrative, before examining the contents of these two works and exploring their implications for the future. The traditional narrative is strongly connected with a conceptual distinction first made by Moses Finley in the 1960s.³ Finley distinguished between two major categories of slaveholding societies: *societies with slaves* have relatively few slaves, who do not play a major economic role, while in *slave societies* slaves comprise a significant percentage of the population and constitute the main source of revenue for the elite. Societies with

¹ LEWIS 2018.

² RIO 2017.

³ VLASSOPOULOS 2016b.

slaves are extremely common in world history, and therefore their existence requires no historical explanation; but slave societies are very rare, and in fact, according to Finley, there have been only five slave societies in global history: Greece and Rome in antiquity, and the modern New World societies of the US South, Brazil and the Caribbean.

Accordingly, historians need to explain the reasons behind the emergence of this rare historical phenomenon. Finley's explanation has remained particularly influential. He argued that the societies of the Near East, as well as Greek societies before the late archaic period, were societies with slaves characterised by a spectrum of statuses. Elites derived their income by exploiting various dependent groups; slaves comprised only one of those dependent groups, which exhibited various disabilities and privileges. In these societies, therefore, there was no clear dividing line between slave and free, since the concept of freedom was unknown.⁴

In the course of the archaic period, a momentous change took place in certain Greek societies. A deep social crisis was resolved by guaranteeing civic rights to the lower classes; this was the birth point of the concept of freedom. In Finley's famous phrase, 'freedom *and* slavery in ancient Greece walked hand in hand'.⁵ Because the lower classes acquired freedom and civic rights, they could no longer be enslaved at home or directly exploited by the elite; therefore, the elite needed to find a labour substitute, and the mass importation of foreign slaves was the consequence. The creation of a clear dividing line between freedom and slavery, the mass importation of foreign slaves and their role as the main source of elite income constitute the genesis of the first slave society in world history.

The traditional historical narrative of ancient slavery has been formed on the basis of this purported emergence of slave societies in ancient Greece. Then, for almost a thousand years, hardly anything changed in all the important parameters: slaves comprised a significant proportion of the population of the archaic, classical, Hellenistic and Roman imperial societies, at least in mainland Greece and Italy. But starting from the third century CE, the ancient slave societies were gradually extinguished, giving their place in turn to new societies with slaves, where a small number of slaves co-existed with various other dependent groups. Gradually, the status of slaves was enhanced by being settled as family

⁴ See now LENSKI and CAMERON 2018.

⁵ FINLEY 1981, 115.

groups in agricultural tenancies, while at the same time the status of the lower classes was depressed, since they lost the privileges associated with their civic status. The result was the emergence of serfdom which dominated Europe for many centuries to come.⁶

This brings us to the final conceptual framework of significance for our discussion. The distinction between slavery, serfdom and free labour has been at the foundations of history and sociology in the last two centuries. The concept of slavery has until recently focused on a legal relationship: a slave is a human being who is the property of another human being. The stereotypical image of slaves envisages them as individuals who can be bought and sold, work under the direct orders of their masters, and do not have any legally recognised social relationships and rights (e.g. family, kinship, property). It is of course well-known that many slaves did not fit this stereotypical image; but, it is often argued, this was because their masters voluntarily chose to use them and treat them in other ways, not because the slaves possessed any rights that could be enforced. While the stereotypical image of the slave is based on a legal relationship, the stereotypical image of the serf is based on a socio-economic condition. Serfs are envisaged as dependent peasants, who have their own families and work their own plots of land, from which they cannot be separated and over which they hold certain rights, on condition of paying dues and rents to their landowners.⁷

These concepts have been fundamental for the study of ancient slavery. As regards Greek slavery, Athens is by far the best known case; most sources for the archaic and classical period concern Athens, and their diversity (historiography, law-court speeches, comedy, tragedy, essays and dialogues on philosophy and society, inscriptions) enables historians to have an in-depth perception of Athenian slavery. While many other Greek communities had similar forms of slavery, there is exiguously little evidence for them as regards the archaic and classical periods. The situation improves from the Hellenistic period onwards, when epigraphic sources offer historians evidence on slavery in Greek communities outside Athens. But the lack of diverse sources for slavery in any other Greek community outside classical Athens has led to the largely implicit, but occasionally also explicit, assumption that slavery operated in essentially the same ways in all Greek communities from the

⁶ FINLEY 1980.

⁷ See the comparative examination in BUSH 1996.

archaic period onwards; accordingly, the better-known Athenian slavery is considered as representative for all forms of slavery in the Greek world. Given that the diversity of Athenian sources only applies to the classical period, the result is that in most scholarly works Greek slavery is effectively tantamount to Athenian slavery in the classical period.⁸

On the other hand, scholars have long been baffled about how to interpret those forms of dependent labour in ancient Greece that do not seem to fit the stereotypical image of slaves, like Spartan helots, Thessalian *penestai* and Cretan *woikeis*. There is little unanimity about how these forms should be conceptualised. Until very recently, hardly any historians considered them as proper slaves; most scholars understood these groups as a form of serfdom, imagining helots, *penestai* and *woikeis* as dependent peasants: they were not acquired and reproduced through the market, but were subjugated native inhabitants, who formed their own families, had a strong sense of community and ethnic identity, cultivated the land of their masters and rendered them part of the produce. While there is very little that is actually known about the *penestai*, the Gortyn law code provides substantial evidence concerning the Cretan *woikeis*. The Code uses two different terms which in Greek can be employed for slaves, *doloi* and *woikeis*. This fact has led many scholars to conclude that the terms are not interchangeable, and that they describe two different social statuses, with *doloi* referring to slaves, while *woikeis* being similar to Spartan helots. The provisions regarding the children and property of the *woikeis* and regulating mixed marriages between *woikeis* and free people have been traditionally interpreted as recording rights to family and property possessed by the *woikeis*, which make them clearly different from slaves and similar to medieval serfs.

It is quite remarkable that so much in modern scholarly work has depended on what is clearly a lop-sided comparison: between a concept based on a legal relationship and a concept based on a socio-economic condition.⁹ As we shall see below, the two works under review offer a devastating blow to this traditional conceptual distinction and provide a new basis from which to construct an alternative framework. It is equally remarkable though that they do this through taking very different paths, at least at first sight. Lewis adopts a transhistorical definition of slavery as property; on the contrary, Rio presents a historicist argument

⁸ See the comments in VLASSOPOULOS 2012.

⁹ BAK 1980.

in which slavery is not conceived as having a transhistorical essence, but is approached from an instrumentalist perspective in which the crucial parameter is what people tried to do by employing the tool of slavery. As I will try to show, these two approaches complement each other very fruitfully, and open new ground even when they reach it by different paths.

The view that slavery is essentially a property relationship has a very long pedigree; until recently, scholars who explored slavery were content to accept this general definition and leave it at that. But over the last few decades, the explosion in the global study of slavery brought to the forefront a number of alternative approaches, which pointed out the problems created by a property definition of slavery, and offered alternative definitions. Some scholars argued that property was an insufficient criterion for explaining the historical phenomenon of slavery and proposed definitions that focused on the natal alienation and dishonour suffered by slaves. Other historians objected to the ahistorical and unilateral character of definitions of slavery as property, which presented slavery as an essentially static institution that was unilaterally defined by masters. If slavery was primarily a form of property, then it was an institution that remained essentially static in the course of its history. Slave agency was a fundamental aspect of the historical configuration of slavery; but the definition of slavery as property left no space for conceptualising the historical role of slave agency. Instead of assuming an ahistorical legal institution of human property, historians should focus on the slaving processes through which slaves, masters and other parties pursued their aims.¹⁰

Lewis' book is a reaction to these more recent approaches which have challenged the property definition of slavery. Lewis argues that the study of slavery is inconceivable without a property definition. But while previous scholars who accepted the property definition offered merely an abstract definition of slavery as property, Lewis constructs a detailed definition of ownership (25–55). This is based on a famous article by Tony Honoré, which presented a cross-cultural definition of ownership.¹¹ This conceptualisation of property consists of a list of rights and other characteristics: *the right to possess*, that is, the right of exclusive possession; *the right to use*, which allowed the owner to use the

¹⁰ PATTERSON 1982; MILLER 2012.

¹¹ HONORÉ 1961.

property in any way he saw fit, excluding illegal uses; *the right to manage*, allowing the owner to decide how and by whom the property might be used; *the right to the income* arising from the use of the property; *the right to capital*, that is, the right to alienate the property; *the right to security*, which guarantees the exclusive right of owners and their protection; *transmissibility and the absence of term*, which ensures that the previous rights are transmissible to posterity and not time-limited; *the prohibition of harmful use*, which sets legal limits to the enjoyment of the various rights to property; and finally, *liability to execution*, which regulated the circumstances in which third parties could divest property from its owner.

The advantages of Lewis' detailed definition of property as slavery pay handsomely in his reconsideration of the various forms of slavery in the ancient Greek world. His detailed property approach allows him to achieve two things at the same time. On the one hand, Lewis shows beyond any doubt that helots and *woikeis* were undoubtedly the property of their masters and had no recognised rights that distinguish them from Athenian slaves and make them similar to medieval serfs. Spartan and Gortynian masters held helots and *woikeis* as property and exercised the various rights of ownership over them. The peculiarities of helots and *woikeis* in comparison to Athenian slaves were due to the particular social, economic, political and geopolitical conditions of Sparta and Gortyn in relation to Athens, and not due to some purported rights held by helots and *woikeis* which distinguished them from slaves. As regards Gortyn, Lewis shows that the terms *doloi* and *woikeis* are indeed interchangeable and refer to the same group of people; he also shows clearly that the regulations concerning the family and property of *woikeis* do not record any rights of the *woikeis*, but rather regulate the property rights of their masters to the belongings of the *woikeis* and to the children born from their sexual unions (147–65).

In the case of Sparta, it is true that the helots of Messenia lived as communities of dependent peasants; but this resulted from the peculiar conditions of Spartan history. Spartan masters were absentee masters who lived far away, and could not oversee the helots constantly; the political, social and economic balance of relations among Spartan citizens put a clear limit concerning the ways in which Spartan masters could exploit and employ their helots; and the geopolitical situation, in which Sparta was surrounded by enemies who did not have a similar system of helotage and were willing to incite the helots to revolt, meant that Sparta

had to manage helots carefully (125–46). Classical Sparta and Crete had limited engagement with Mediterranean markets and accordingly could not resort to the reproduction of their slave labourers through purchase in the market; consequently, their systems depended on the natural reproduction of the slaves, and this is the reason that slave families were allowed and encouraged. Absentee masters had to give great leeway to their slaves and the result was that helots effectively operated as dependent cultivators. Because of its geopolitical and economic conditions, the Spartan community restricted significantly the right to capital of Spartan masters: helots could not be sold outside Spartan territory, and they could not be manumitted by their masters, but solely by the Spartan community. All the above factors had significant implications about the form and history of helotic slavery; but as Lewis persuasively argues, helots were still slaves, though with peculiar features.

Consequently, Lewis argues persuasively that we need to stop approaching helots and *woikeis* as non-slaves and search for terms that will allow us to dissociate them from slaves. The differences between Spartan helots, Gortynian *woikeis* and Athenian slaves reflected the particular conditions of each community and were the result of various historical processes. This conclusion has a major implication: we can no longer accept the traditional assumption that Greek slaveries were all the same, and accordingly identify Greek slavery with the Athenian slavery of the classical period. Greek slavery consisted of diverse epichoric systems, each with its own particular characteristics, which developed as a result of the particular conditions of each community. It is remarkable that an approach to slavery based on a cross-cultural and ahistorical definition of property does not lead to a homogenising and static account, but on the contrary opens the way for a perspective that highlights geographical diversity and chronological change.¹²

This approach has serious implications for the historical narrative of Greek slavery. Till recently, this narrative was shaped, as I explained above, by the work of Finley. Until the archaic period, the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world knew only societies with slaves. Slavery existed in all societies of the Aegean and the Near East, but slaves were relatively few, were involved primarily as household servants, and did not constitute the main source of revenue for the elites. Slaves were part of a complex spectrum of statuses, which included diverse groups

¹² See also VLASSOPOULOS 2018.

from the king at the top to the most marginalised groups at the bottom. Elites exploited various groups of dependent labourers, including wage labourers, debt-bondsmen, share-croppers, and *corvée* labourers; slaves were only one particular group among many, and not particularly important at that. In this world, according to Finley and his many followers, slaves did not necessarily constitute the most marginalised and downtrodden group, as their incorporation within the households of their masters gave them better conditions than e.g. unskilled and itinerant wage labourers.

But in the course of the archaic period, a political and social revolution changed radically the significance of slavery in ancient societies. The creation of slave societies meant that a single distinction between free and slave substituted the spectrum of statuses that defined all ancient societies till then. The exploitation of free citizens by the elite was radically curtailed, and imported slaves became now the main source of elite revenue in the slave societies of the Greek world. On the contrary, in the Near East no such revolution took place; freedom and citizenship were unknown concepts, and as a result these societies maintained their spectrum of statuses instead of the single distinction between slave and free. Near Eastern elites derived their wealth from the exploitation of various forms of labour, and slaves were only a small group among the exploited.

Lewis provides a major reconsideration of this temporal and spatial distinction. His first major point concerns slavery in the archaic Greek world (107–24); this issue is telling about the extent to which conceptual schemes predetermine how historians approach the evidence. Most historians of ancient slavery have been baffled by slavery in the Homeric epics. The evidence presented in the epics leaves no doubt that Homeric elites employed large groups of slaves in household service, agriculture and pastoralism; furthermore, there is no evidence for any other forms of dependent labour apart from wage labour. But historians have preferred to start from the image of dependent bondsmen as the main source of labour in archaic Attica before the reforms of Solon; this is an image created by late classical and post-classical sources, like Aristotle and Plutarch. Accordingly, historians have imagined Greek societies before the radical changes of the archaic period as quasi-feudal societies, in which the aristocracy exploited the labour of dependent peasants.

If one starts from this image, it is impossible to account for the social world presented in the Homeric epics, where slavery is dominant

and other forms of dependent labour are invisible. It is not surprising therefore that historians have either not paid attention to slavery in the Homeric world, or have tried to dissociate Homeric slavery from their concept of slavery, by inventing neologisms like ‘patriarchal slavery’ in order to sustain their conceptual acrobatics. A few scholars had already argued that Finley’s narrative as regards Homeric slavery and the purported emergence of slave societies in the archaic period is untenable, but their arguments have largely been ignored.¹³ Lewis uses their arguments and his own approach to slavery in order to drive a major point: the earliest evidence we have for Greek history, the Homeric epics and Hesiod, make it absolutely clear that slaves constituted the main labour source from which Greek elites derived their wealth. It is impossible to tell how far before the eighth century we should extend this situation. But the idea that slavery became important in the Greek world during the archaic period and that slave societies emerged for the first time in the archaic period is simply untenable.

There were undoubtedly important changes that took place in the course of the archaic period: the slave trade expanded across the Mediterranean and the Black Sea and became substantially more important as a source for slaves; the extent of slave ownership might have expanded significantly beyond the elites; the institutionalisation of citizenship affected slavery in important ways; new forms of economic activity, like the production of agricultural staples and manufactured goods for market exchange, developed substantially and slavery became a major factor in these new forms. We need to construct new narratives of the history of slavery in which these developments can be incorporated and given their due; but we will have to abandon the current narrative that misconstrues radically Homeric slavery and attempts to interpret changes by means of a radical disjuncture between societies with slaves and slave societies.

Equally significant are the implications of Lewis’ research on the history of slavery in various societies of the Ancient Near East. He explores four societies of the first millennium BCE, which were roughly contemporary with archaic and classical Greek societies: Israel before the Babylonian exile (199–222), Babylonia in the seventh to fifth centuries (235–45), the Assyrian empire of the eighth and seventh centuries (223–34),

¹³ RIHLL 1996; HARRIS 2012.

and the Persian empire of the sixth to fourth centuries (247–58). In addition, Lewis examines the case of Carthage, a Phoenician colonial offshoot in the Western Mediterranean (259–66). The first major implication of these studies is that the traditional distinction between the Greek slave societies, where there existed a single dividing line between slavery and freedom, and the spectrum of statuses exhibited by Near Eastern societies is completely misleading. The legally sanctioned spectrum of statuses that one encounters in the society of the orders in early modern Europe or Thailand is in fact absent from Near Eastern societies. There existed of course various distinctive groups, like soldiers, women who lived in ‘convents’, or debt-bondsmen, and the law stipulated particular conditions that pertained to these particular groups. But these groups were not ranked into a hierarchical spectrum of statuses. Instead, like Greek societies, Near Eastern societies recognised only a single major division between slave and free. By examining court records and contracts from Babylonia, Lewis shows beyond reasonable doubt that the Babylonians operated with the same legal distinction between freedom and slavery that one can find in Athens or Gortyn (86–89).

This does not mean that there are no important differences between the Greek world and the societies of the Near East. A first major difference concerns non-legal conceptualisations of slavery. In the Near East, the language of slavery could be deployed in order to convey hierarchy and subordination between free people: thus an inferior could address a superior as his master, and the king’s subjects could be described as his slaves. These uses did not define a legal relationship, nor were they necessarily derogatory: they rather tended to express a measure of politeness and deference, depending on the context. On the contrary, the use of the language of slavery to refer to relationships of power and service among free people in the Greek world was almost exclusively derogatory, and was not employed to express deference or politeness.

Further differences can be seen as regards the language of freedom. From a legal point of view, a free person is simply somebody who is not the property of somebody else. Beyond this negative definition, which is common in both the Greek world and the Near East, the definition of freedom can be developed and enhanced with further qualifications. In most societies globally the conceptual polar opposite of slavery is mastery; but because in the Greek world the concept of freedom moved from being defined negatively (not being property, not slave) into being defined positively in association with features like independence, au-

tonomy, inviolability and respect, freedom became the main polar opposite of slavery. The combination of the different uses of the language of freedom and the language of slavery in the Greek and Near Eastern worlds created significant cultural, political and social divergences.

These divergences require further exploration. But they should not lead to the mistaken assumption that has so far dominated the comparative study of slavery in antiquity. Many scholars assume that the existence of divergences in the cultural or political practices of slavery must be the result, or at least dependent on, the existence of major economic divergences between the Greek world and the ancient Near East. The different Near Eastern economies examined in Lewis' book can be classified in terms of their similarity to the Greek slave systems. Carthage is undoubtedly a major slave society, which shows remarkable resemblances with slave systems like that of Athens, where slaves were employed in large numbers in all sectors of the economy. It is remarkable that such a major slave society has so far been absent from all lists of slave societies employed by ancient historians, despite the fact that any cursory examination of the evidence immediately reveals what Lewis' analysis shows in detail. Next to Carthage, it is perhaps unexpectedly Iron Age Israel that comes closest to the Greek slave systems. As Lewis shows, slaves were a routine element in the property portfolios of Israelite elites, and they appear to be employed in significant numbers in agriculture, pastoralism and household service.

The Assyrian and Persian empires present major surprises for those unfamiliar with the evidence. Both empires constituted a mosaic of ecologies, economies, societies and cultures; as a result, it is impossible to make generalisations about slavery in those empires as a whole, but only for specific societies within them. Lewis shows the very large numbers of slaves employed by the elites in the Assyrian and Persian empires. Whether one looks at the elites in the imperial heartland of Assyria, the Persian imperial diaspora in areas like Asia Minor, Persian governors like Arsama, the satrap of Egypt, we see portfolios of tens or hundreds of slaves employed in agriculture, pastoralism, the crafts and household service.

Some conclusions can be drawn from this evidence. In all Near Eastern societies under examination, slaves constituted a major part of elite portfolios, and were employed in a variety of ways. The traditional distinction between the dominant role of slavery in the Greek world and its marginality in the Near East is consequently no longer tenable and

needs to be abandoned. Instead of a broad classification on the basis of a distinction between slave societies and societies with slaves, we need to set out a number of major issues around which to explore both similarities and divergences. A first major issue is the extent of slave ownership within a single society. While elite ownership of slaves is extensive in both the Greek and the Near Eastern world, and thus constitutes a major similarity, the extent to which other social groups owned slaves might diverge significantly. In certain cases the evidence allows us to calculate relative prices for slaves and other commodities and wages. We can therefore see that slaves were relatively cheap in classical Athens, but comparatively expensive in Assyria and Babylonia. Accordingly, while in Athens slave ownership extended far beyond the elite (180–96), the same does not appear to be the case in Assyria or Babylonia.

A second major issue concerns the existence of other sources of revenue and labour. In many Near Eastern economies, alongside the portfolios and activities of subaltern, middling and elite households, there also existed a command economy directed by the palaces and the temples, which accounted for a significant part of wealth and economic activities. Elites in those societies derived a major part of their income from their role in the command sector, alongside the wealth they generated from their own resources and households. Furthermore, tenancy and wage labour constituted important alternative sources of labour that were particularly significant in certain societies and periods. Thus, while slavery was everywhere a significant source of elite income, in certain societies in the Near East it was also supplemented by other sources. But despite the existence of other important sources of labour and income, slavery was by no means marginal in the Near East.

If Lewis' book explodes major metanarratives and assumptions that have dominated the study of ancient Greek slavery, the same is true for Rio's book as regards medieval slavery.¹⁴ The traditional narrative was framed in terms of the transition from ancient societies dominated by slavery to medieval societies dominated by serfdom. For anyone familiar with the actual evidence the obvious problem was that early medieval sources continued to use the Latin vocabulary of slavery (*servus*, *ancilla*, *mancipium*) until about 1000 CE, after which they started to adopt new vocabularies, both to characterise the groups that have traditionally been described as serfs (e.g. *homo proprius*, *homo de corpore*), as well as

¹⁴ Rio's work should be read alongside the important study by CARRIER 2012.

those described as slaves. The most characteristic example of the latter is the adoption of the ethnic term for Slavs to describe slaves in practically all European languages after 1000 CE. Furthermore, early medieval law codes have very high percentages of laws relating to slaves, and generally give the impression that the legal framework of slavery changed only in limited ways in comparison with the Roman imperial period. On the other hand, the documentary evidence provided by contracts and administrative records presents groups who are described with the same Latin vocabulary of slavery employed by the legal texts, but whose conditions of life and work appear like those of stereotypical serfs, instead of those of stereotypical slaves.

How could one explain this contradictory picture? One solution, which used to be particularly popular with French historians after it was first formulated by Georges Duby, is to posit a ‘feudal mutation’ or ‘feudal revolution’ around 1000 CE. An ancient model based on slavery prevailed till that time, before the feudal mutation changed drastically the character of medieval societies by overturning the fundamental distinction between free and slave. By enhancing the status of slaves and reducing the status of free peasants, the new status of dependent peasants, or serfs, was created. The changes in the vocabulary are thus direct reflections of fundamental changes in social reality. Other historians have strongly disputed this narrative. Conditions like those of high medieval serfdom can be observed long before 1000 CE; in this perspective, the early medieval sources retained the Roman vocabulary of slavery which no longer reflected social reality, and slavery in the law codes can also be interpreted in the same way as a relic of the past.¹⁵

The conundrum faced by medieval historians is that a significant number of people classified as slaves in early medieval Europe fit perfectly the stereotypical image of slaves familiar from Greek and Roman societies. But the same slave terminology is also employed to describe people and conditions that appear to fit the stereotypical image of serfs. The view that all medieval people classified as slaves were slaves in the stereotypical image of slavery is as untenable as the view that all these same people were stereotypical serfs. But how can we explain this apparently schizophrenic situation?

Rio constructs a radically new narrative by adopting an instrumentalist approach (10–14). Early medieval slavery was neither a simple

¹⁵ BONASSIE 1991; BOIS 1992; BARTHÉLEMY 2009; SUTT 2015.

continuation of Roman slavery till the supposed feudal mutation of 1000 CE, nor slavery in name only, effectively an early form of high medieval serfdom. Early medieval slavery was the diverse and divergent outcome of a series of practices that employed slavery as a tool for a variety of purposes in a variety of contexts. What is peculiar about early medieval slavery is an explosion in experimentation: slavery was employed as a tool for new purposes and in new contexts. Some of these experiments were highly local, and many of them served highly specific purposes; consequently, they had a limited time span and did not survive past the early medieval explosion of experimentation. As a result of this highly instrumental and experimental use of slavery, the various aspects of slavery and slave status tended to move in different directions and take divergent trajectories. Accordingly, early medieval slavery cannot be studied in the holistic manner which is standard for Greek or Roman slavery. Different contexts and aspects of slavery need to be studied on their own terms, because certain conditions or processes affected them in specific ways which cannot be extrapolated to other contexts and aspects.

The best illustration of this diversity concerns Rio's exploration of early medieval ways in and out of slavery. As regards exiting slavery, early medieval manumission and freedmen tell a very fascinating story (75–131). There is much here that fits what we know about manumission and freedmen in many other societies, which I will skip. But the experimental character of early medieval slavery is best seen in the novel purposes for which manumission was employed and the new forms of freedman status that emerged during this period. In many cases the status of freedman was no longer a temporary situation that affected only the manumitted slaves, but became a hereditary condition that affected also their descendants. This happened because acts of manumission could be employed to recalibrate not only relationships between masters and slaves, but also between different groups of masters. Bequests of lands to churches were often accompanied by the manumission of the slaves who cultivated them, thus turning them into hereditary freedmen who owed gratitude to their manumittor and services to the church.

But equally telling are the processes of entering slavery. On the one hand there were slaves who were the result of slave raiding and slave trading. These slaves were the involuntary products of processes of warfare and trade and had no say on the processes that turned them into slaves. As a result, the conditions of slaves created by raiding and trading resembled most closely those of stereotypical slaves (19–41). On

the other hand, we also come across people who became slaves through self-sale, debt or penal enslavement (42–74). Greek and Roman societies in principle posited that freedom and slavery were absolute statuses, that freedom could not be voluntarily shed or exchanged, and that free members of the community could not be legally enslaved for debt. In contrast, early medieval societies turned status into a negotiable commodity. People could negotiate their status and use it as a commodity that could be exchanged for other things: as a result, people could exchange their status and turn themselves into slaves in return for security and sustenance, to pay debts, or as a punishment for crimes.

This fact has a variety of implications. The negotiation of status meant that people could negotiate the terms of their slavery; consequently, many of the outcomes do not look like the stereotypical images of slaves historians usually have in mind. People could negotiate serving as slaves for certain days of the week, determine the conditions under which they would serve as slaves, or stipulate the condition of their future children. The quality of this kind of negotiated slavery could diverge significantly. While those who had few chips to bargain with ended up in conditions that differed little if at all from those of stereotypical slaves, in other cases people who sold themselves to a monastery could get security and sustenance for the last years of their lives and become something closer to a monk than a stereotypical slave. Slavery was employed as a tool in order to negotiate various forms of dependence or service.

As Rio argues, the multiple terms for slavery and their multivalent meanings in the early medieval world were not archaic relics of the past without any contemporary relevance; on the contrary, they expressed and reflected processes of negotiation between masters and their dependents about various issues and conditions. Classifying estate tenants as slaves was a method employed by the landlords in order to enhance their negotiating position. It gave landlords the theoretical right of unilaterally imposing unlimited dues and services, and could thus be used to force tenants to accept higher dues and services. Being classified under other terms strengthened the hand of the dependant tenants, since it meant that landlords could not impose unilaterally their wishes. In practice, some kind of negotiation was involved in all relationships between landlords and tenants irrespective of the classification of the latter. But the classification mattered, as it strengthened the hand of one side or the other in the constant negotiation and renegotiation of these relationships (175–211).

Where do early medieval law codes fit into this framework of negotiation and experimentation? As we have seen above, the legal relationship of slavery in the codes shows few if any significant differences from the cross-cultural definition of ownership presented by Lewis; this would imply that early medieval slavery operated effectively in the same way as Greek and Roman slavery. Rio argues on the basis of the practical operation of law, as seen in legal documents like contracts, sale deeds and court records, that early medieval law codes should be placed in the same framework of negotiation and experimentation. Law codes established the maximum claims that could be sought by the opposing sides. Early medieval law codes provided masters with a powerful bargaining tool in relation to their dependents; but what usually happened in practice was not the strict application of what the law entailed, but a negotiated settlement in which law, status, relationships, networks of support and socio-economic conditions were all bargaining chips that mattered more or less, depending on context and circumstances (230–36).

This is why the contexts of slaving are so significant for understanding early medieval slavery. While the urban slaves who lived and worked on their own as artisans, traders and labourers, who were a constitutive element of Greek and Roman slavery, disappeared with the economic contraction that affected most of Western Europe in the early Middle Ages, slavery within households and slavery in estates remained major contexts of slaving. Slavery in early medieval households approximated most closely the forms of slavery which are familiar to most historians, since most such slaves worked under the direct control and supervision of their masters (135–74). Slavery in estates was more complex and variegated (175–211). An estate could comprise the elite manor, which was operated by slaves working under direct control and supervision, who fit the stereotypical image of slaves; bipartite estates also included demesne lands that were cultivated directly by the landlords, employing either slaves who worked under their direct control, or dependant tenants that devoted part of their time in cultivating the demesne lands; finally, most of the estate land was divided into tenancies. These tenancies were given to cultivators who were classified under various terms, from the most servile to the relatively free and independent. They tended to live in family units, worked the land on their own and owed their landlords fixed or fluctuating rents and services. The servile and dependent tenants approximate more closely the stereotypical image of the serfs; but it would be a major misinterpretation to assume that people working in the

manor were slaves, while people working as tenants were serfs. It was not the fact that tenants were legally serfs, a status that entailed certain rights, while manor dependants were legally slaves, a status that meant they had no rights and could be employed as their masters saw fit.

During the early Middle Ages there was no legal distinction between slaves and serfs. The same language of slavery was employed to classify and negotiate all working and living conditions. The major differences in the conditions of the servile groups were not the result of distinct legal statuses, but the outcome of the interplay between the various slaving strategies of the masters and the dialectical relationships between masters and slaves, between freemen and slaves, and within the communities in which slaves took part. An individual could start as a directly controlled worker serving in the manor and be given a tenancy to cultivate on his own later in life. While many of the servile tenants lived in family units, landlords seemed to have significant control about marriage and residence, as seen in the cases where servile bachelors lived together with slave families and cultivated the same tenancy.

If the traditional narrative of the transition from slavery to serfdom is untenable, is there another narrative that we can put in its place? Rio offers an important step forward in this direction, which will need to be further amplified (215–45). Medieval serfdom as a distinct legal status emerged after 1100 CE, as a result of a series of distinct but interrelated developments. Early medieval Europe was characterised by widespread experimentation in the instrumental uses of slavery; but after 1000 CE the range of purposes that slavery served diminished significantly and also took radically divergent paths. A major factor in these developments was the emergence of no-slaving zones on the basis of religion. No-slaving zones are areas whose inhabitants are not subject to enslavement as a result of warfare or other practices.¹⁶ For most of human history before 1000 CE it was considered legitimate to enslave enemies, even if they belonged to the same ethnic or cultural group. The monotheistic religions that emerged in the first millennium CE had various compunctions about the enslavement of coreligionists, but in the course of the first millennium these compunctions were never solidified into law and practice. For reasons that are still unclear, after 1000 CE both Catholics and Orthodox started to abandon the timeless principle that the defeated in war could be enslaved.¹⁷ It was still fine to kill and maim

¹⁶ FYNN-PAUL 2009; FYNN-PAUL and PARGAS 2018.

¹⁷ GILLINGHAM 2012.

coreligionist enemies, but no longer acceptable to enslave them. In the Mediterranean, where the Orthodox, Catholics and Muslims continued to clash, slavery remained a significant practice and enslavement became the fate of religious outsiders. The Christianisation of the Slavs and Scandinavians after 1000 CE turned central and northern Europe into the homogeneous religious zone of Latin Christendom. As a result, warfare stopped being a source of new slaves in central and northern Europe.

This was a major historical transformation, as well as an excellent illustration of anti-essentialism. Monotheistic religions had certain properties that made later developments conceivable and possible. Slaves participated in monotheistic communities in ways which were significantly different from the way they participated in ‘polytheistic’ communities; this explains why it ultimately became conceivable and possible to prohibit the enslavement of coreligionists. Historians have yet to find ways for conceptualising the differences between monotheistic and ‘polytheistic’ slaveholding societies and this should be an urgent task for the future. But at the same time, there was nothing inherent in monotheistic religions that led inexorably to the prohibition of the enslavement of coreligionists. It took more than half a millennium for Christian societies to conclude that they should not enslave coreligionist enemies. It is obvious that it was not monotheistic religion *per se*, but the conjuncture of ideas, processes and circumstances that led to the creation of religious no-slaving zones after 1000 CE. While the study of this phenomenon is yet at its early stages, the necessity of thinking processually rather than essentially is, I hope, fairly obvious.

At the same time, slavery in households and slavery in estates started to follow radically divergent paths. Slavery in households, which was always the form that approximated most closely the stereotypical image of slavery, became a practice associated with religious outsiders and was replenished through the slave trade. It largely survived only in the Mediterranean, while it gradually disappeared from central and northern Europe, where household service was performed by wage labourers or serfs. But servile agricultural tenants formed communities of coreligionists who were replenished through natural reproduction. Their living and working conditions came gradually to be defined not on the principle of being slaves, but on the basis of the customs of the manor and of the institutions and practices of the village community of which they were members; their families and marriage were based on the fact

that they were members of the Christian community. Out of the great range of early medieval uses and experiments, the tool of slavery was gradually restricted to the single purpose of determining issues of agricultural tenancy; and whereas slavery worked on the principle of negating any rights for the slave, serfdom was the outcome of the principle of charging dues to servile dependents for the right to inherit property and to marry. After 1100 CE serfdom emerged as the legal status of those groups of servile dependants.

As a result of these developments, there emerged a major divergence between the Mediterranean and central and northern Europe after 1100 CE. In the Mediterranean slavery was largely restricted to household service by religious outsiders. Other forms of labour, like agricultural work, were now performed by dependents who were religious insiders and were classified as serfs. The early medieval situation, where people classified as slaves performed all forms of labour, although their conditions could diverge very significantly, was now transformed into a major disjuncture between household service performed by foreign slaves and agricultural labour performed by native serfs. In central and northern Europe slavery was gradually restricted to regulating issues of agricultural tenancy and was legally defined after 1100 CE as a form of serfdom in which serfs were charged dues for the right to marriage and inheritance. The creation of the new legal status of serfdom, the lack of a disjuncture between household service and agricultural tenancy, alongside the religious unification of central and northern Europe, meant that slavery was effectively extinguished from this area after 1100 CE. Instead of the traditional narrative in which slavery was substituted by serfdom, we get a new narrative in which the early medieval period constitutes a distinct phase of its own. Early medieval slavery appears as an explosion in experimentation and new uses, some of which survived in the Mediterranean after 1100 CE, while others were gradually transformed into serfdom through a specialisation in the instrumental uses to which slavery was put.

The remaining part of this review article will be devoted to exploring the wider implications of the approaches espoused by Lewis and Rio. While Rio has favoured an instrumentalist approach that stresses the historically contingent uses for which slavery was employed, Lewis has defended a cross-cultural and achronic definition of slavery as property. I want to explore the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches,

as well as the ways in which these two approaches can complement each other in a very productive way. Lewis' book is a defence of the idea that property constitutes the sine qua non of slavery, and a devastating critique of approaches like that of Orlando Patterson, which refuse to see property as the essence of slavery. Patterson claimed that property is an insufficient criterion to distinguish slaves from other groups of people, since many groups of people can be conceptualised as human property. In a famous set of examples, he argued that baseball players are the property of their teams, and American husbands the property of their wives.¹⁸ Lewis argues persuasively that Patterson's approach is based on a misleading identification of property rights with contractual rights. Marriage gives the two spouses rights to the property of each other; but Patterson's argument that an American husband is the property of his wife confuses ownership with the rights of third parties to one's property as a result of a contractual relationship like marriage. Patterson's argument that exclusive property rights were the invention of the Romans is equally wrong, as Lewis shows through two detailed case-studies of classical Athens and sixth-century Babylonia (39–53).

So far Lewis is undoubtedly correct; but his property definition does not deal effectively with the reasons for which Patterson and other scholars, particularly those studying African slaveries, objected to the property definition of slavery. Many societies worldwide recognise a father's right to pawn or sell his children in order to deal with famine or debt. This was the case with early Roman law, which allowed a father to sell his son up to three times, a process that was later used in order to emancipate a son from his father's legal authority, once the selling of children was no longer recognised as legally valid (Gaius, *Institutes*, 1.132). Furthermore, many African societies employed the concept of rights in people, in which corporate groups like lineages had a range of different rights over various people, including their own members; this means that these corporate groups had the right to sell their members if they deemed it appropriate. This is totally different from penal slavery, in which a member of the community is sold into slavery as punishment for a crime; in the case of many African communities, the rights in people that lineages had over their own members allowed them to sell members who were at no fault of their own.¹⁹

¹⁸ PATTERSON 1982, 17–34.

¹⁹ MIERS and KOPYTOFF 1977; WATSON 1980b.

In such cases, it is obvious that fathers or lineages have the right to alienate their sons or lineage members and sell them as slaves (the right to capital, in Lewis' terminology); but it is fairly obvious that sons and lineage members are not the same thing as slaves, and that was fairly obvious to the members of those societies.²⁰ How exactly should we therefore conceptualise the distinction? It is to deal with problems like this that Patterson offered his alternative to the property definition of slavery, defining slavery as 'the permanent, violent domination of nataly alienated and generally dishonoured people'; natal alienation and dishonour served to differentiate sons and lineage members from slaves. A property definition of slavery needs to find a way of making such distinctions, instead of burying them under the carpet.

Furthermore, many societies recognise sale as a means of acquiring rights over people. Chinese societies in particular recognised sale as a means through which one family acquired children from another family, which could be used as sons, wives or concubines, depending on the circumstances; they also recognised sale as a means through which families acquired servants, who were sold by their families or by themselves. Such people acquired through sale may or may not be sold to third parties (the right to capital) and may have various rights recognised by law. But at the same time the individuals and families who acquired such people had various rights over them (e.g. the right to use, the right to manage, the right to income, the right to security).²¹ Finally, what about those cases where slavery emerged as a consequence of a contract between buyers and those who sold themselves? Such cases can be found in various societies globally. As we have seen above, Rio discusses various such cases from early medieval Europe, where people who sold themselves as slaves could negotiate the terms of their slavery, creating limits for example to the owner's right to use and his right to manage (42–70). The phenomenon is also attested e.g. in early modern Russia, where individuals could sell themselves for the duration of their master's life, but had the right to become free after the master's death; therefore, they limited transmissibility and the absence of term.²²

The examples we have seen above differ in various ways; in the case of fathers selling their children it is the right to capital which is the most

²⁰ For the difference between sons and slaves in the Roman context, see SALLER 1994.

²¹ WATSON 1980c; SOMMER 2015; RANSMEIER 2017.

²² HELLIE 1982, 49–64.

prominent manifestation of the phenomenon; in the case of the purchase of children, brides or servants, it is precisely the right to capital which is often restricted; in the case of medieval self-sales there are restrictions to the right to use and manage, while the Russian self-sales limit the right to transmissibility and the absence of terms. As with all definitions which are based on a list, at some point it becomes necessary to decide if all listed features are essential parts of the definition, and how many of them need to be present before the phenomenon under consideration morphs into something rather different.

But is slavery to be conceptualised solely as property and as a legal relationship? Many scholars have concluded that this is not the case. To give a personal example, I have argued in an earlier publication that the Greek abstract noun for slavery (*douleia*) was primarily used by the Greeks to describe power relations of domination, rather than legal relationships of property.²³ Nobody familiar with the evidence can doubt this point. But so far the problem had been that it was difficult to see how we could proceed from this observation. Some scholars had opted for combining the legal relationship of property with the social relationship of domination. Other scholars had argued that the Greeks relied on non-legal approaches to slavery, while many came to the conclusion that the Greek conception of slavery was fuzzy and inchoate.²⁴ It is one of the important contributions of Lewis' book that it offers a clear way forward.

Lewis argues that we need to distinguish sharply between legal and non-legal conceptions of slavery. Slavery was inconceivable without the legal relationship of property. On the basis of this legal conception, the Greeks constructed various other conceptualisations of slavery: as a lack of independence and autonomy, as the inability to live as one wishes, as the practice of ignoble professions, as the lack of certain moral characteristics identified with being free, etc. This meant that one could be free in a legal sense, while at the same time be seen as a slave in another sense (for being dependent on another person, or having slavish characteristics). This multivalence of the language of slavery is what explains the different uses of the term that one can find in the sources. Lewis shows that context made it usually fairly easy for ancient Greeks to distinguish which particular use was employed in each case; the same careful atten-

²³ VLASSOPOULOS 2011.

²⁴ See the survey in LEWIS 2018, 57–79.

tion to context can also enable modern scholars to make similar distinctions between the different uses (81–92).

We can advance on this proposition by following Rio's call to distinguish between the different symbolic systems in which slavery was implicated (73–74). I wish to develop further her argument by suggesting that slavery is implicated in three different symbolic systems. The first is that of slavery as a form of property, in the terms offered by Lewis above. This symbolic system is relational but unilateral: it establishes the relationship between two human beings, but in a way which focuses solely on the unilateral rights of the master over the slave. It is the existence of this symbolic system that makes it possible to talk of slavery on a global and cross-cultural framework. But we have already commented that in many societies slavery is not the sole existing system of property in human beings. Accordingly, slavery is also commonly implicated in two other symbolic systems, which help to distinguish slavery from other forms of ownership in human beings. But even where slavery was the only form of human property, these other symbolic systems played significant roles in how slavery operated and was conceived.

The second system works through polarity by establishing the features that slaves lacked, the rights denied to them, the practices forbidden, restricted or imposed on them. As Alain Testart has argued, slavery in this sense works through exclusion from whatever identity, feature or practice is valued by the slaveholding community and allowed to its members.²⁵ In many societies the central aspect from which slaves were excluded is kinship; in others, like Greek and Roman societies, it was freedom. The actual content of this central aspect from which slaves were excluded matters a lot: it is one of the major issues that affect the global diversity of slavery in space and time.²⁶ This second symbolic system tends to operate in absolute rather than relational terms, usually through exclusive polarities (e.g. free or slave). It is this symbolic system that makes it possible to speak of slaves as a distinct legal status: if only the first symbolic system of property existed, it would often be impossible to think of slaves as members of a general group of people, as the extent to which being property determined slave life and conditions would vary significantly from one master to another and from one slave to another. Many societies, like those in the Near East or early medieval

²⁵ TESTART 1998.

²⁶ WATSON 1980b.

Europe, as we have seen above, left relatively abstract the polar opposite of slavery and were not particularly prescriptive concerning the practices and identities from which slaves were excluded. But other societies, like classical Athens or the antebellum US South, took many more steps in creating clear polarities between insiders (free citizens) and outsiders (slaves).

As Rio argues (11–12), slavery belongs to the category of ‘promiscuous institutions’, to use Michael Mann’s term: promiscuous institutions draw in and structure elements from many areas of social life. As a result, slavery is often used to define relations of domination and hierarchy, resulting from the fact that one individual was the property of another. This symbolic system is relational but not unilateral, as is the case with the property symbolic system. Many societies employ slavery as a means of conceiving or defining various hierarchical relationships in politics, economics, society or culture. As we have seen, this was a particular feature of ancient Near Eastern and early medieval societies; it was also present in Greek and Roman societies, but it tended to have exclusively negative characteristics. On the other hand, the opposite direction is also commonly attested: in many societies, various hierarchical relationships, like patronage or lordship, provide the symbolic system within which slavery is largely embedded.²⁷ Whether hierarchical symbolic systems will provide the language through which slavery operated, or slavery would provide the means of structuring hierarchy and domination is one of the most important issues in the global history of slavery.

These three symbolic systems operated alongside other factors that defined how slavery developed in space and time. The *slaving strategies* employed by the masters had different aims and produced divergent groups of slaves. Slaving strategies aiming at labour created slaves who worked in labour processes controlled and directed by the masters; slaving strategies aiming at revenue created slaves who lived and worked on their own and surrendered to their masters a portion of their earnings; slaving strategies that used slaves in bureaucratic and military positions created slaves with authority and power. Slavery was constituted by the interplay between three *dialectical relationships*: the relationship between masters and slaves; the relationship between insiders (free men, citizens, kin members) and outsiders (slaves); and the rela-

²⁷ E.g. REID 1983.

tionships within the various communities in which slaves participated (communities and networks of kinship, work, residence, ethnicity, cult). Each dialectical relationship pulled in different directions, which could be partly complementing and partly contradicting each other.²⁸

Rio has suggested a useful framework for conceptualising the interplay between symbolic systems, slaving strategies and dialectical relationships by distinguishing between three levels: terminology and labelling, practical forms of exploitation and the formal institutional and legal framework (14–16). The level of practical forms of exploitation concerns the various slaving strategies and the purposes for which they were employed. The institutional and legal framework was created by the political community and the dialectical relationship between insiders and outsiders; but, as we mentioned above, both the relationship between masters and slaves, as well as the relationships within the communities in which slaves participated, had an impact on the institutional framework, usually in highly asymmetrical ways. The extent to which the political community decided to intervene in the theoretically unmediated relationship between masters and slaves to superimpose its own concerns or interests is one of the most crucial parameters in the historical configuration of slavery. Rio makes a strong case that the peculiarity of early medieval slavery resulted from the fact that political communities largely refrained from intervening, beyond giving masters useful tools for their aims and bargains (230–45). The last level of terminology and labelling constitutes the interface between practical forms of exploitation and the institutional and legal framework. Slave labelling is effectively a means of staking various kinds of claims. The content of these claims will depend on the symbolic systems and how they are employed, the purposes for which the claims are made, and the space for negotiation and imposition offered by the institutional and legal framework.

The above framework requires eschewing a unidimensional approach to slave status. Some scholars have adopted Finley's proposal of incorporating legal, social, political and economic aspects of status into a single spectrum of statuses. Deborah Kamen's study of status in classical Athens presented a unified spectrum which included various aspects of status; this allowed Kamen to distinguish between chattel slaves, privileged chattel slaves and freedmen with conditional freedom.²⁹ Lewis

²⁸ VLASSOPOULOS 2016a.

²⁹ KAMEN 2013; see also my review in VLASSOPOULOS 2015–16.

argues that this unified approach will produce highly misleading results, and that we should instead distinguish between institutionalised and non-institutionalised aspects of status (72–92). Slavery as a legal relationship of property was institutionalised in ancient communities, though this institutionalisation took rather different forms or had different inflections among the various Greek and other Mediterranean and Near Eastern communities. Non-legal aspects of status (wealth, comportment, education, achievement, authority) were significant as well, but formed distinct spectra, which did not necessarily align with the legal spectrum. The case of rich slaves, like the Athenian slave bankers, or slaves who exercised power or influence, like public slaves or the slaves of Roman magnates, are excellent illustrations of how different spectra of status might fail to align, thus producing the phenomenon of status dissonance.

It is at this point that the approach offered by Rio can enable us to see what is most valuable in Lewis' property approach to slavery. Rio opts for an instrumental approach to slavery: slavery is a tool that enabled masters to do certain things. But the extent to which this tool was employed for a range of purposes, or for a rather limited number, is something that historically varies significantly; the tool of slavery might be employed to its full extent, or only certain elements of it might be utilised; it might be used to cover the full range of slave life, or used for a limited number of aspects, while other aspects were run on other principles. The typology of property offered by Lewis is an ideal type of slavery as property; but the extent to which all elements of this typology are applicable, or limited or absent will vary in a number of historical conditions and processes. In this respect, it is particularly significant that Lewis has incorporated into his property definition a number of features that limit the portmanteau of property rights, like the prohibition of harmful use and liability for execution. This creates a conceptual opening for recognising that the historical configuration of slavery as property is not unilaterally defined by the property interests of the masters, but also by a variety of other agents and factors. In the majority of cases, we should expect to find the political community as the most important agent that affected how slavery operated as a form of property. Apart from the political community, there were other agents involved in the historical configuration of slavery as property; as the cases of self-sale that we mentioned above show, people who sold themselves into slavery could affect significantly how slavery operated as property.

The extent to which legal and non-legal symbolic systems of slavery will align, thus creating effectively a single spectrum, or will diverge significantly, thus producing major issues of status dissonance, is also the result of historical conditions and processes. Few societies, if any, have managed to make the different symbolic systems of slavery to align closely, and the antebellum US South is probably one of the closest approximations. In other societies status dissonance might be very extensive, in particular where slaves manned armies and bureaucracies and had opportunities to become very rich, as in many African and Islamic societies, and, in important ways, in imperial Rome as well. Most slaveholding societies were probably in the middle between these two extremes, where various forms of status dissonance produced by misalignment between different uses of slavery existed and could produce significant outcomes, but the legal property relationship put a ceiling on the extent of status dissonance.

This brings us to the enormous diversity presented by early medieval slavery. How different was early medieval slavery in this respect in comparison with Greek and Roman slave systems? Rio argues that in the early medieval period experimentation and negotiation by masters and slaves was largely unconstrained by centripetal homogenising forces. There were no early medieval legal specialists like the Roman jurists to enforce a homogenising interpretation of what legal status and legal rules entailed; instead, people were allowed to negotiate and reach settlements as they saw fit, and use rules and status conditions as bargaining chips rather than as absolute standards. Furthermore, medieval states were equally uninterested in enforcing absolute standards. The law codes they promulgated were intended to support masters by setting the maximum claims they could make, instead of providing rules that should be followed in judging cases. As she puts it, ‘the meaning of the legal instruments [early medieval people] used, however, was determined not at the top, by jurists or legislators, but at the end-user level’ (247). This is a very thought-provoking argument with important implications.

Can we really assume that Greek and Roman states and their legal systems played a fundamentally different role in regards to slavery from that of early medieval states and their laws? Even if we conclude that the difference was real, we need to pursue where exactly the difference lies. Early medieval slavery primarily concerned rural populations. Few of the people classified as slaves were ever bought and sold, and the replenishment of these slave groups was accomplished through natural

reproduction and not through the slave market. Lewis is right to stress that slaves were property; but we need to ask ourselves what happens to the concept of property when an item of property is infrequently exchanged and is enmeshed in many other social and economic relationships which work on different principles than those of slavery. Many early medieval sources concern the property of slaves and conflicts and negotiations between masters and slaves and among different masters about the control of these properties. Early medieval slavery did not recognise ownership by slaves, but reality was shaped by negotiation and conflict rather than legal prescription. Roman law did not recognise slave ownership either; but Pliny the Younger explains how he let the slaves in his estates to make wills and bequeath their belongings to relatives and friends (*Letters*, 8.16). How different from early medieval slavery would Roman slavery look like, if these slave wills had survived? How different in practice was Roman slave reality from early medieval slave reality? Maybe the experimentation with slavery and slave status was qualitatively different in the early Middle Ages, in comparison with Greek and Roman societies. But even if this were true, historians studying Greek and Roman slaveries will benefit significantly by thinking about their subjects through the prism of early medieval slavery and the instrumental approach espoused by Rio.

Another major issue concerns the concept of serfdom. Lewis has shown that helots were not serfs with recognised rights, but slaves with peculiar characteristics, which were shaped by the peculiar historical conditions of Spartan society and its development. In the same way, the peculiar and diverse features of early medieval slavery resulted not from some purported transformation of slavery into serfdom, but from early medieval historical conditions and the choices and experiments that medieval people resorted to. The implications of these two works for the historical study of slavery and serfdom are manifest. The lazy classification of any status that does not fit the stereotypical image of slavery as forms of serfdom is now untenable. Instead, the tool of slavery as property and domination could be employed in diverse ways and in different historical circumstances, and the results varied significantly depending on space and time.³⁰ But where does this leave serfdom as a useful historical category? Rio's account presents a possible way forward. She argues that while slavery works on the principle of negating any rights to the slave, serfdom works on the principle of charging dues

³⁰ INIKORI 1999.

to servile dependents for certain rights. This is a distinction that makes sense in terms of European history, as we have seen above. But it is a distinction that emerged as a result of specific historical trajectories in medieval Europe, and not a transhistorical essence. Whether it can be employed as a historical category outside the trajectory of medieval European history will require further work to substantiate.

We finally turn to the conceptual distinction between slave societies and societies with slaves. In the past, scholars assumed that the ancient Near East consisted of societies with slaves, where slavery was marginal, while the Greek world consisted of slave societies. It is now clear that slavery played an important role in Near Eastern elite portfolios in Israel and various other societies in the Assyrian and Persian Empires. The differences with the Greek world need therefore to be redrawn: in the Near East there existed additional sources of elite income beyond slavery, which were unknown in the Greek world. Furthermore, while ownership of slaves extended significantly beyond the elite in Greek communities like Athens, the same was probably not the case in most Near Eastern societies. There also existed important differences in how the language of freedom and slavery was employed in the Greek world and in Near Eastern societies. But these political, social and cultural differences can no longer be attributed to underlying economic differences, but need to be considered on their own.

The concept of the slave society was invented by Finley when it was assumed that a specific set of five societies constituted the only slave societies in world history (Athens, Rome, Brazil, US South, the Caribbean). But Lewis' study shows that the concept can now be extended to the Homeric world and to Carthage, and this has serious implications about how the concept should be perceived.³¹ It is also remarkable that Lewis persuasively shows that the quintessential example of a slave society was not Athens, but Sparta. It was at Sparta that all citizens depended on the labour of slaves, while in Athens a substantial proportion of poor citizens had no slaves at all. Finally, the distinction between slave societies and societies with slaves can no longer be used to write a narrative of ancient slavery as a transition from societies with slaves to slave societies and back again.

If the concept of slave society will survive for future use, it will need to find a way to account for these findings: the distinction between elite

³¹ VLASSOPOULOS 2016a.

and sub-elite slaveholding, the significance of alternative sources of income, the difference between economic and cultural or political features of slavery. Furthermore, the concept of societies with slaves becomes rather redundant. It made sense as a catch-all category as long as slavery was considered a marginal phenomenon in all societies beyond the few rare slave societies. Lewis' study shows that slavery was far from marginal in the Near Eastern world, even if these societies cannot be labelled as slave societies. We need to find some alternative way for accounting for the different roles of slavery in slaveholding societies, and the binary classification of slave societies and societies with slaves no longer makes sense. Noel Lenski has recently argued that the only way to retain the concept of slave societies is to conceive them as societies in which the role of slavery is intensified for particular purposes or functions. This is a fruitful suggestion that allows us to avoid the catch-all concept of societies with slaves, while accepting that slavery does not have the same significance or play the same role in all societies.³²

The last significant contribution of Lewis' book concerns a model for explaining the diversity in how slavery operated in space and time (269–94). The model includes the various factors that affected how slaveholders chose their labour force. The first factor concerns the monetary costs of labour in relation to the costs of other forms of labour, which could vary significantly between different ancient societies, as we have seen. The second factor concerns the institutional advantages of different labour forms. Given that slave and free labour were not straightforward substitutes, certain institutional aspects of slavery might be advantages for certain purposes and disadvantages for others: the costs of training a skilled labourer might give slavery an advantage, while short-term labour needs might favour the casual employment of wage labour. The third factor consists of cultural variables that determined preferences and the limits of the possible: long-term employment was considered inappropriate by a free citizen in classical Athens, but was perceived otherwise in Babylonia. The final factor relates to the dynamics of slave use, in terms of how individual circumstances and conditions shaped what choices people made in regards to their labour force (the experiments and practical choices stressed by Rio).

Alongside the factors that shaped the choice of labour force, Lewis explores the implications of economic and political geography. The

³² LENSKI 2018.

creation of slaving zones and the emergence of no-slaving zones was a crucial way in which political geography affected the historical development of slavery, as we have already seen in relation to early medieval slavery. But slavery was also shaped by the networks, routes and commodity chains and flows of economic geography. Slaves moved alongside other commodities, and it was often the economic geography of other commodities that determined the geography of the slave trade, rather than the other way round. The study of ancient slavery has long neglected the significance of the slave trade, since it was considered that there was little evidence for it and it was not particularly consequent beyond the purported period of crisis in slave supply from the imperial period onwards. But studies of the early modern slave trade have established beyond any doubt that the slave trade was one of the most important factors in shaping how slavery developed economically, socially, politically and culturally. Lewis' call to explore its significance for ancient slavery is timely; but equally important is his argument that the slave trade cannot be considered divorced from the wider patterns of commercial circulation in antiquity. The overall model is a major step forward in thinking about ancient slavery in processual terms. While Lewis is content to sketch out the model alongside some valuable observations, the actual employment of the model for constructing novel historical narratives of ancient slavery can produce some really fascinating results.

To conclude: the study of ancient slavery is currently at the crossroads. Old approaches and narratives are currently challenged, but no new approach or narrative has yet provided an effective alternative. The two works under review are brilliant studies which provide ideas, perspectives and frameworks that can lead to a conceptual revolution in the study of ancient slavery. They deserve to be read with attention—and they will remain at the forefront of research for a long time to come.

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