

Law, Politics and Society
in the Modern Mediterranean World

Edited by
Baruch Halpern
and
Joseph W. Johnson

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SLAVERY AND SOCIETY IN LATE ROMAN EGYPT

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1. *Introduction*

Slavery in Egypt may seem a singularly unpromising choice of subject if one hopes to find anything both new and true. Not only do we have a well-balanced synthesis by Iza Biezunska-Malowist (1974-77), but a host of specialized studies of the material have brought us to the point that Ramsay MacMullen can write, in an article on late Roman slavery, 'Egypt would be almost too richly documented to be treated in a summary paragraph or two, were it not that the numbers and employment of the servile element in the population have been so carefully evaluated already' (MacMullen 1987: 364). Biezunska-Malowist's select bibliography for the Roman period alone includes over 160 items, and Jean Straus, writing four years after the 1977 publication of Biezunska-Malowist's Roman volume, added another 40 or so (Straus 1981).

If one is to add to this pile yet another treatment of slavery, some excuse is needed. And one lies ready to hand. Biezunska-Malowist stopped with the late third century, though she used fourth-century documents occasionally in her treatment of individual questions. And there is no comprehensive treatment of slavery in the Byzantine period at all. On the other hand, MacMullen found no difficulty in discerning a scholarly consensus on the subject.¹ Two examples from the long-standing consensus will suffice. In Johnson and West's standard work on the Byzantine economy of Egypt (Johnson and West 1949: 132-35) we are told that most slaves were household slaves:

1. Given the extensive bibliographic resources in the works of Biezunska-Malowist, Straus and MacMullen cited, I have kept my references to the secondary literature to a minimum.

Egypt has never been a slave-owning country as that term is generally used or in the sense that Italy was in the first century. The dense population of Egypt has always provided an abundance of laborers for every need. Wages have been so low, owing to this superabundance of labor, that there has never been a need for slave labor or any additional profit to be obtained from its use.

E.R. Hardy, in his work on large estates, describes the situation in the Apionic documents of the sixth century (Hardy 1931: 112):

Slaves do not seem to have been very common, although there were still some in great households. Curiously enough several of our references to them show them carrying on businesses of their own—a slave of Flavius Apion renting a house at Oxyrhynchus [*PSI* 709], a slave of Cyril, tribune of Arsinoë, borrowing money from another member of the household [*BGU* 725], or a slave of the patrician Athanasius in the Thebaid holding a government position [*P. Cair. Masp.* 67166]. The Hermopolis estate owned slaves who received food and clothes, but the purposes for which they were used are not stated [*P. Bad.* 95].

In short, the main elements of MacMullen's summary of Egypt would probably find few dissenters—'slaves are perceptibly fewer'. 'As in earlier centuries, slaves are employed as domestic servants but are little or never attested in manufacture and agriculture. When we find large estates in the early or late fourth century with their own bakers or potters, those resident workers are freeborn' (MacMullen 1987: 365). Apart from Egypt, however, MacMullen argues that late antiquity saw less change in the numbers and employment of slaves than has usually been thought, largely on the grounds that they had never been so numerous or economically important in most areas as some scholars have claimed.

Now there is a little inconsistency here. On the one hand, we find that slavery supposedly declined in Egypt in the third century and later. On the other, we find little change in the employment of slaves. For the empire as a whole, however, slavery is supposed to have remained fairly constant in both numbers and uses. Indeed, MacMullen goes so far as to suppose that 'the number of slaves may then have remained very nearly on a level, from Augustus to Alaric' (MacMullen 1987: 376). Now it is not impossible that the Egyptian trend was very different from that of the rest of the empire, of course; but we may still be a little uneasy that this should occur precisely when Egypt in so many ways seems to be in a process of becoming more like the rest of the empire, from the introduction of

councils into Alexandria and the metropoleis of the nomes by Septimius Severus, through Diocletian's unification of the currency and the administrative changes of the early Dominate which made the empire more uniform, to the increased imperial prominence of the Egyptian municipal aristocracy in the fourth and fifth centuries.

There is a still more compelling reason for uneasiness with this synthesis. Numbers and functions of slaves are not totally independent variables. It is difficult to imagine that a decline of, say, a half in the supply of slaves would not radically alter their availability to various classes of society and the uses to which they would put them. Moreover, no reason for the supposed decline in numbers has been offered. It seems to me worthwhile, therefore, to ask on how secure a basis rests the current synthesis. To that I will add an attempt to look again at the structural place of slaves in Egyptian society in late antiquity: not merely what jobs they held, but what role they played in the total fabric of society and economy. This, surely, is what we would really like to know about this institution which occupies such a prominent place in ancient and modern works on Roman law and society.

2. The Numbers Game

MacMullen's assertion that slaves were 'perceptibly fewer' from the third century on appears to be based on evidence, since he has just noted that the papyri sometimes preserve sufficient evidence for us to know just how many slaves there were in a particular time and place. What it is in fact based on¹ is an important article of 1973 (Fikhman 1973), in which the Soviet historian of late antiquity I.F. Fikhman drew attention to the radical decline in attestations of slaves in fourth-century and later documents from Oxyrhynchus. With characteristic carefulness, he showed that this drop in evidence is not the result of a smaller overall number of documents. For example, the Roman period up to AD 284 had yielded about 1700 total documents from Oxyrhynchus, of which 117, or about 6.9 per cent, mentioned slaves by name. For the period from the late third century through the seventh century, on the other hand, about 1130 documents name slaves only 60 times, about

1. Apart from a reference to an assertion of Westermann and a brief remark of Marie Drew-Bear (1984: 326), based on one Hermopolite papyrus in which a well-off councillor of that city left 'only' six slaves in his will.

5.3 per cent. The decline is actually steeper than that, however, for most of the late texts seem to refer to a handful of slaves holding important positions in the Apionic estates. For the period from the late third century through the fifth century, the figure is only 2.2 per cent, less than a third of that for the Roman period. Fikhman shows clearly that this is not some Oxyrhynchite peculiarity, and he points out that the virtual disappearance of manumissions and freedmen from the documentation confirms the picture already drawn. He concludes that the diminution in the number of attestations of slaves is not simply a consequence of deficiencies in our documentation, but a reflection of the real situation.

A closer look at the instances of sales of slaves might seem to give strong confirmation to Fikhman's view. There are ten known from the first century, 16 from the second, 23 from the third and only five from the fourth.¹ And of the third-century sales, only three of 23 come from the last quarter. It would be easy to conclude that there were simply not very many slaves being sold and, with Fikhman, that there were simply fewer slaves around, and fewer still involved in production, than in earlier centuries. And yet we ought to be suspicious. One telling detail is that there are only three Ptolemaic slave sales in the Egyptian papyri, one of them from outside Egypt. Are we to suppose that the number of slaves in three centuries of Ptolemaic rule was only 6 per cent of that in three centuries of Roman rule? This can hardly be the case. Slavery was not uncommon in Ptolemaic Egypt, but it generated a documentation which rarely included contracts of sale. The coming of the Romans produces a dramatic rise in such contracts, a rise which peaks in the third century, then declines, so that there are no such contracts from the second half of the fourth century (apart from one concluded outside Egypt but preserved in it), and very few from later centuries.²

Here we have a *reductio ad absurdum*. This item of evidence supports Fikhman's conclusion so strongly as to throw it into doubt. We

1. See for references to published slave sales *P. Köln* IV 187, introd., supplemented most recently by the fourth-century sale *P. Köln* V 232 (the editor's proposed date of AD 314 is certainly wrong; good possibilities are AD 330, 332, and 337), with references to texts published more recently.

2. For the one contract from AD 350-400, see *BGU* I 316 (Askalon, AD 359). There is an extraordinarily verbose sixth-century example in *Archiv* 3 (AD 1906): 414-24; and for a late declaration of freedom, Wenger 1922.

cannot rationally maintain, faced with the Ptolemaic evidence, that preserved contracts of sale for slaves are a useful index of the presence of slaves in a society. Are we any better off with the other documentation? Our evidence, abundant though it is, has some insidious characteristics. Almost all of it, for one thing, comes from the viewpoint of the propertied classes of the metropoleis of the nomes, telling us little about village life. Most of the documents from the fourth century come from Oxyrhynchus or Hermopolis, fewer from Antinoopolis, Panopolis or Arsinoe, and very few indeed from other cities. These reflect the preoccupations of those who were literate in Greek or could pay scribes who were; transactions petty and large in money or commodities, leases, loans, deliveries, payments; legal complaints and records; the voluminous documentation of tax collection on behalf of the imperial authorities and the management of the finances and services of the towns; private letters.

A papyrological voice may be heard objecting that this description ignores the archives of Arsinoite villages, principally Karanis and Theadelphia. That is only partly true. These archives are rich in documents emanating from the same apparatus and processes at work in the cities, by which the villages sent their taxes in to the cities, by which urban residents lent money or grain to villagers at high interest, and by which villagers tried to move the machinery of the cities to do something on their behalf. In other words, village archives are largely the result of demands and relationships originating from the cities. How much would be left of the archive of Aurelius Isidoros if his liturgical work, tax payments, leases and loans were removed?

Where in this highly archival¹ body of documentation do we expect slaves to turn up? In point of fact, they appear mainly in documents concerned with inheritances, in petitions and court proceedings, and in letters, apart of course from slave sales and manumissions. Slaves did not generally borrow money, lease land, submit petitions, have responsibility for tax collection, pay taxes, buy and sell land, hold official positions, and so forth. It is, of course, possible that some—even many—of the people who appear in various occupations are

1. See Bagnall and Worp 1980, 1982 for the character of the documentation of this period. A very high percentage of our Arsinoite texts, for example, come from two large archives plus the Karanis ostraka. The Oxyrhynchite material is very heavily drawn from certain types of official documents. The Hermopolite sources are dominated by a handful of related family archives.

slaves without our being able to detect the fact. If a landowner writes to his phrontistes, his steward, ordering him to deliver ten jars of wine, we do not know the legal status of the steward. It is not irrelevant to the nature of the interchange, perhaps, but it need not be mentioned in an informal note from one to the other. Slaves, in general, tended not to produce documentation except when they were purchased, sold, manumitted, bequeathed, or reported in a census; when they paid taxes or performed compulsory duties, or when they got into some sort of trouble. In a time when census declarations did not include slaves, one born into a family who lived with it throughout life would not generate much paperwork.

To return to Fikhman's numbers, if we subtract slave sales (whose usefulness for this purpose I have challenged above) from the figures, 4.3 per cent of the pre-Diocletianic Oxyrhynchite papyri mention slaves while only 1.6 per cent of those from Diocletian through the fifth century do. The Roman papyri include seven nursing contracts and related texts (a type virtually extinct after Diocletian),¹ four census declarations (practically absent after the third century), ten manumissions and related texts (only three known after AD 284²), nine wills (very scarce after AD 300³), six epikrisis documents, three death notices (not found after AD 300 [see Brashear 1977: 3-5]), three marriage documents (a genre lacking between Roman times and the sixth century⁴). In all, about 62 per cent of the documents Fikhman lists for the Roman period represent genres which are scarce after Diocletian. Subtracting these and the sales, the remaining quarter amount to only 2.6 per cent of the Oxyrhynchite papyri; the comparable figure for the period after AD 284 is 1.9 per cent. When we remember that the latter figure covers a total of twelve documents, the difference may no longer impress us.

Another approach casts still more doubt on the enterprise. Sales of land from the Roman period totalled 115 when Montevecchi compiled her lists a half-century ago, those from after AD 284, only 35

1. One instance after AD 258, out of 40 known: M. Manca Masciadri and O. Montevecchi, *I contratti di balatico* (C.Pap.Gr. 1) (Milan 1984).

2. For example, *P. Oxy.* IX 1205 (AD 291), *P. Mich.* VII 462 (fourth cent.), *P. Edmondstone* (see *BASP* 15 [1978]: 235-36; 355).

3. See Bagnall 1986: 1-2: only 16 of 131 known wills are after AD 300.

4. Except for *P. Ross. Georg.* III 28, a remarkable piece which I cannot discuss here.

(Montevecchi 1943: 12-19). Sales of building property were 105 for the Roman period, 34 later (Montevecchi 1941: 94-98). If these figures are computed as percentages of the total Oxyrhynchite documents as enumerated by Fikhman, sales of land are 6.8 per cent of the Roman total, those of buildings 6.2 per cent. For the Byzantine period, on the other hand, the comparable figures are 3.1 and 3.0 per cent. Now, more sales have been published since, and the figure is based on all provenances, not just Oxyrhynchus. But I do not think that matters for our purposes. What is clear is that documents recording sales of all sorts decline as a proportionate part of the documentation after AD 284.

This investigation is a bit crude and could certainly be refined. But I think it suffices to show that the numerous and profound changes in the nature of the surviving documentation for the second half of the third century are sufficient to account for the entirety of the decline of our documentation of slaves in the papyri. To what extent those changes in documentation reflect simply the archives we happen to have for the fourth century, or rather embody more profound alterations in the whole structure by which social relations and status were recorded, I cannot go into here. At all events, I believe the numbers game must be abandoned for this subject. There is no reliable basis for any claims about the relative abundance of slaves in Roman and Byzantine Egypt.

We have little information about how people became slaves in this period. A few were acquired abroad;¹ most were no doubt born slaves, and there are explicit attestations of such origin.² A slave of a military officer describes himself as *threptos*, exposed and rescued, brought up by the owner (*P. Abinn.* 36). It was also possible to fall into slavery through debt. For example, one letter complains that the addressee has taken the writer's money in order to get him released but has failed to do so. 'Now then [he says], do not neglect this, master, for God's sake; for you have already given my children as securities to the money-lender on account of the gold' (*P. Herm.* 7). In another

1. *BGU* I 316 (Askalon, AD 359) is the best known; but the power of attorney in *P. Oxy.* XXXVI 2771 (AD 323), whereby a husband in Cos is authorized to sell a slave on behalf of his wife, presumably travelled with the slave to Oxyrhynchus as part of the title papers.

2. For example *P. Lips.* 26 specifies that two of the four slaves are house-born; the origin of the other two is not specified.

letter, the writer recounts (to his wife) his seizure in Alexandria by a creditor; since he has nothing to pay him with, he asks her to put their little *paidion* Artemidoros in hypothec and send him the proceeds (*P. Amh.* II 144 [fifth century, no provenance]). One supposes that the luckless Artemidoros is already a slave and not their child, but the seizure of the writer himself suggests that the insolvent could wind up in indefinite bondage.¹

Roman society, as we know, contained plenty of people whose exact status may have been unclear to those around them, as well as those who moved from free to slave and slave to free. We have two graphic illustrations of the difficulties which could ensue. A papyrus from Hermopolis reports proceedings about the status of one Patricius, evidently because his owner had sold him and the purchaser wanted to register the sale. The slave himself is asked if he is free or slave; he answers that he is a slave. He then answers questions about where he was bought, from whom, who his mother was, what her status was (slave), whether he has siblings (one, a slave); and on the basis of all this the registrars agree to register the sale, but at the purchaser's risk if the facts turn out to be wrong (*P. Herm.* 18 [323p?]).

The reverse case is found in a petition to the prefect, in which the complainant alleges that his wife and children were carried off by another couple (one member of which seems to be a *prytanis*), on the grounds that they were their slaves. The petitioner claims that his wife is of free descent and married to him, and that her brothers are free; he claims that her parents were also free. The case was probably not quite so clear, we may think, but it is striking just how much one might have to prove simply in order not to be enslaved.²

3. Rural Slavery

In saying that 'in the second and third centuries, the work of slaves did not play an important role in Egyptian agriculture', Biezunska-Malowist was not denying its existence, for she goes on to say that 'it is essential to point out its existence, even if only in a minimal amount, in the Roman period' (Biezunska-Malowist 1977: 83). She proceeded to enumerate a number of items of evidence, concluding

1. Another example of creditors seizing children occurs in *P. Lond.* VI 1915 (c. AD 330-340).

2. *P. Grenf.* II 78 (Great Oasis, 307, cf. Bagnall and Worp 1979: 31).

that it is impossible to evaluate their significance. This seems to me unnecessarily pessimistic, even if statistically true. Let us look at what there is. An Oxyrhynchus papyrus (*P. Oxy.* XIV 1638 [282]) preserves a division of the inheritance from one Psenamounis, who lived in a village in the western toparchy of the Oxyrhynchite nome, among the members of his two families by different wives. The estate was divided among seven people; the older family of two got a house, $3\frac{1}{2}$ arouras of grainland, and $\frac{2}{7}$ share of four slaves; the remaining five got the rest of the property and a $\frac{5}{7}$ share of the slaves. Of the slaves, one is apparently male, one undescribed, one an adult female aged 25 and one a child, her daughter aged ten. There is no sign of any actual assignment of slaves, merely division of ownership of the entire group. A family of moderate means thus owned four slaves. Unfortunately, the total amount of land owned by Psenamounis is not mentioned, but the older family's allotment of $3\frac{1}{2}$ arouras suggests a very modest total estate, perhaps no more than ten or fifteen arouras.

From the well-known archive of Aurelius Isidoros from Karanis, there is evidence that the wife of Aurelius Isidoros's brother Heras, one Taesis, owned slaves. Her paternal inheritance, shared with her sister Kyrillous, included 61 sheep, 40 goats, one grinding mill, six talents of silver, two artabas of wheat, and two slaves (*P. Cair. Isid.* 64 [c. AD 298]). It also included land. Each sister seems to have inherited about ten or eleven arouras of grainbearing land, for a paternal total of about 22 arouras; this is a very middle-range holding for a villager of moderate means.¹ About the slave holdings of the central figure of the archive, Aurelius Isidoros himself, we know nothing; since his and his siblings' landholdings far exceeded those of Taesis and Kyrillous, it seems hard to suppose that they did not include slaves. The one census declaration by Isidoros preserved (*P. Cair. Isid.* 8 [AD 309]), states that the household consists only of himself and his son. Similarly, in the census declaration of Sakaon, the central figure of the Theadelphia archives of this period, there are eight free persons and no slaves mentioned (*P. Sakaon* 1 [AD 310]). Sakaon was moderately prosperous by the standards of his village, but the village was in very rocky shape. Unfortunately, we do not know whether

1. The evidence for landholdings is found in or deduced from *P. Cair. Isid.* 6 and 9, using the methods of analysis from Bagnall 1977: 330-31 n. 1. For the landholdings of village liturgists, who are the more prosperous part of village society, see Bagnall 1978: 16; 22 arouras is a very decent holding.

slaves were required to be listed. Sakaon's return contains eight men and no women. Was this really such a bachelor establishment, even though four of the eight men were over twenty? It seems very unlikely. It appears, in other words, as if these declarations of persons simply include only free males. It is hard to test this generalization; these are the only two declarations of persons known for the entire period from AD 275-450.

Yet another small household with a few slaves is attested in a Hermopolite document (*P. Lips.* 26) of the early fourth century, in which two brothers divide up four slaves in their inheritance. Two are farmers, one a weaver and one a donkey driver. It seems likely that these slaves were part of the rural estate of the two brothers. Another Isidoros papyrus (*P. Cair. Isid.* 141) mentions the role of the female slave of another villager in carrying out a criminal raid.

In sum, the character of the evidence for slaves belonging to village families of moderate means suggests that ownership of a small number of slaves—one to four—was not remarkable. The economic importance of slavery in such households was perhaps not so marginal as has been thought by almost everyone. On a small family farm, say 10 to 25 arouras, the presence of even one able-bodied adult agricultural worker alongside the family is not a trivial advantage. A farmer without a number of sons or other suitable male relatives would find it hard to work his farm himself without help. The effects of such rural slaves, therefore, though made up of very small units, may have been pervasive and decisive in the structure of the working of the land.

That is not to say it was universal. The poorer families, with barely enough land to support themselves, would not have been able to afford a slave. The average slave represented a capital of perhaps 20 to 30 artabas of wheat; to own two such might be likened to having a year's income in human capital. And those metropolitan, absentee landowners who had small amounts of land or had it widely scattered normally leased it out to villagers; slaves probably had no role in the working of this land, either.¹

We are, then, far from any statistical appreciation of the phenomenon—we do not even know what portion of independent

1. See the distribution of ownership in the Hermopolite land registers, as analyzed by Bowman 1985, with table on 158-59. 62% of the landowners listed (in Hermopolis and Antinoopolis combined) held fewer than 20 arouras in the countryside.

landowners had more than ten arouras, after all—but in qualitative terms the importance to this class of increasing by perhaps 50 or 100 per cent the available labor force was significant. Since this is the class which provided the villages with their rotating public officials of all kinds, it needed some means of freeing up time for these uncompensated duties. That precisely these men owned slaves can hardly be surprising. In terms of the economy and structure of the villages, then, the role of even a small number of slaves may well have been critical.¹

There is still the question of slavery on larger estates to be considered. Large estates in the fourth century are of all will-o'-the-wisps the most elusive. As Bowman's study of the Hermopolite land registers has shown, the larger the landholdings of an individual, the greater the likelihood that they are spread over the nome rather than consolidated (Bowman 1985: 154-55). Great landowners certainly had a substantial number of staff, with stewards in charge, and there is abundant evidence for a constant flow of orders, information and goods between estates and the master or mistress in the city. But we normally know only the function, not the legal status, of the employees involved in these interchanges.²

The one item of useful evidence for slavery in the management of large agglomerations is the long account of income and expenditures in wheat and various other commodities coming from an estate centered on Hermonthis and dated to the first four months of AD 338 (*P. Lips.* 97).³ Payments of wheat for salary, or at least subsistence, are made on a monthly or bimonthly basis to various groups of workers, whose numbers vary from month to month. Prominent are *organitai*, opera-

1. It is true that some tasks in the agricultural year fell at times when official duties were probably light; but at harvest time the pressure may have been considerable.

2. There are occasional indications, apart from *P. Lips.* 97, to be discussed below, of rations paid to slaves; see *P. Haun.* III 68 (AD 402) and *BGU* I 34; cf. *P. Charite* 36 for a discussion of date and purpose, along with re-edition of a small part of it. *SPP* XX 106, an account of payments by or for *paidaria* for contributions to the *vestis militaris* for the 14th indiction, seems to agree with this view also; it lists *paidaria* who are butcher, brickmaker and pastry-cook. The date seems likely to be AD 355-56 or later.

3. *P. Lond.* I 125 (p. 192), which is to be dated to July, AD 336, seems to pertain to the same places and probably the same entity. It is interesting that the Leipzig roll has an extensive text of Psalms 30-55 on the back, while the London one has a magical text.

tors of irrigation machinery, of whom 21 are paid in Pharmouthi; staff for animal care (cowherds, shepherds, donkey rearers), who number 18; transport workers (wagoneers, donkey drivers, camel drivers), totalling 11 at the peak; and gardeners, 14. But there are also some more undifferentiated groups: 20 *ergatai*, laborers; four *boethoi*, assistants; and 15 *paidaria*, slaves. Occasionally some specific information is given about one of these: one *ergates* is identified as a *hypoboukolos*, sub-cowherd, and one slave is a breadmaker, another a weaver (*tarsikarios*). Most have no particular occupational identity. The identification of the *paidaria* as slaves seems to me certain. Not only does the term always seem to mean this in the papyri of this period, but none of the people in question, with one exception, appears anywhere else in the long account in another capacity. Moreover, that one exception, with the nice slave name of Philokyrios, master-loving,¹ appears in another place with his name adjacent to that of a *doule*, a female slave.

It would be easier to interpret this information if we knew to whom belonged the substantial properties connected with this account. The amounts are not small: wheat expenditures total almost 2200 artabas in the four months; annually that would come to 6600 artabas, the income perhaps on 1500-2000 arouras, in line with the largest holdings found in the Hermopolite registers. The editor, Mitteis, argued that the estates could not belong to an individual; he preferred to think of them as held by a temple. For reasons I cannot go into in detail here, this view seems to me impossible, and Mitteis's arguments against individual ownership are devoid of substance.² If this is correct, what

1. Hardly found otherwise in the papyri, cf. *NB* and *Onomasticon*. Solin 1982: II, 752, lists a fair number at Rome, none of them demonstrably free-born.

2. Mitteis pointed out that the addressees of the account were *apo epitropon*, which he thought lent an official cast to things. But the term means that they are retired, and the Hermopolite registers are sprinkled with such terms, which simply identify the persons by their status. Nor does the appearance of a couple of priests, *hiereis*, among the people with whom business is transacted (one of them as agent for the owners, it seems) mean much. Priests owned or leased land and engaged in normal economic transactions like other people. The term *ousia* (v. 12) does not help much, either, as it may have a completely nontechnical meaning here. The term *phoros* can mean either rent or taxes and is thus unhelpful. An official government account would not be organized in this fashion, and there is no evidence for temples having large properties of this sort in the fourth century. In fact, it is well known that temple estates were confiscated by Augustus three and a half centuries earlier.

conclusions can be drawn about slavery in this context? The landholdings in question are distributed over several villages, and indeed in this pre-harvest season we have little evidence for the full extent of the property. Rather than think of an 'estate', we should perhaps think of the 'great house' which owned numerous properties and employed these people. But the conditions under which it employed them are obscure. The one obvious conclusion is that slaves coexisted with free labor in the pool of undifferentiated staff; those perhaps who filled multiple roles or who belonged to specialties whose members were not numerous enough to warrant their own heading in the account. The main groups of livestock and agricultural workers, however, were not slaves but free. Slaves make up about 15 per cent of the payroll in this particular establishment. I must emphasize that we cannot even be sure that these slaves were located in the countryside. The account could well have been drawn up at the urban headquarters of the great house, not at any of the rural locations mentioned, and the slaves could mainly have been located in the same place. The predominantly rural character of the free employees may speak against this possibility, but it does not quite exclude it.

In sum, rather than think about large estates and the role of slave labor on them, we will do better to think about great houses and their integrated operations, city and country. We are in no position to discern the pattern of these in general terms, but so far as slavery goes, we can see a significant slave component to the staff, but not any demonstrable role in agriculture or livestock raising themselves.

4. *Slaves in Urban Households*

Fikhman is undoubtedly right that little of the evidence for urban slaves shows any trace of their employment in craft production. The *tarsikarios* in the Hermonthis account, if he is in the city, is an exception. We do have one instance in which slaves—three Phoenician women—left behind for safekeeping by their owner with a brother were put out to work with an innkeeper until they could be taken upriver to Panopolis.¹ But they were doing it in Alexandria, after all,

Overall, the accounts impress one as highly similar to other accounts of wealthy landowners in Roman Egypt, not to official accounting.

1. *P. XV Congr. 22* (Panopolis, earlier part of fourth century), a part of the archives of Ammon. Cf. also *SB XIV 11929* for Harpocraton's slaves.

not Panopolis. On the occupational front, it may also be worth mentioning that we have a bit of evidence for freedmen's work in a Karanis papyrus of the early fourth century, in which a freedman agrees to work in a workshop belonging to another person for a period of five months at a specified salary, part of which he receives in advance. We do not, unfortunately, know what kind of workshop.¹

What we would call economic activities, however, play a small role in our documentation. Instead, the slaves we find are almost all household slaves or personal assistants for their master's business dealings. It is therefore hardly surprising that most of our evidence for urban slaves is connected with owners belonging to the upper stratum of society: members of the bouletic class, the military, and the imperial civil service. The use of slaves in households for domestic purposes, with their number in proportion to the grandeur of the household, is so universal a fact of life in the Roman world as to need no comment.² The slave as confidential personal agent of the master in business dealings is also a common phenomenon;³ it has been observed that the master's complete control over the slave and ability to torture him made slaves far more suitable than free persons for such positions. Even though production was hardly affected at all by slave labor, then, the importance of slave assistance for the ability of a small elite to manage business, civic, and military affairs should not be underrated.⁴ The urban elite was as dependent as the village elite on the use of slaves as support for their own activities.

It is, however, at the social level that the effects of slavery are more determinative for the character of life. First, we do not get a very

1. *P. Mich.* IX 574. The salary is specified as 500 per day, with the unit being lost. But the advance payment total is given in myriads, which must be denarii. The editor has argued that they are drachmas, on the completely specious grounds that 'a daily wage of 500 drachmas is a reasonable figure'. Reasonable when? A monthly wage of 10 talents would be perfectly 'reasonable' around AD 325, when we find 8 talents per month paid to a *boethos* in *SB XIV* 11592.

2. Some examples from the papyri: *P. Ross. Georg.* III 9 = Naldini 77 (house servants in Memphis receiving goods); *P. Stras.* IV 296 (Hermopolis); *P. Oxy.* VI 903 (both members of a couple own slaves in the house).

3. Some examples from the papyri: *P. Oxy.* XLIII 3146 (AD 347); *pais* is surely 'slave' here; a business transaction; *P. Oxy.* XLIX 3480 (c. 360-390; the staff of a tax collector); *P. Abinn.* 36 (general agent of a *praepositus*).

4. Even so minor a testimony as the slave of a *praepositus* in *O. Bodl.* 2152 helps show such usage.

favorable impression of master-slave relations. Slaves ran away when they could,¹ even those working for important people in what were probably responsible posts, like Magnus, a slave of an *officialis* in the office of the prefect of Egypt, who fled to Hermopolis. His owner gave another *officialis* an authorization to arrest Magnus and bring him back.² An Oxyrhynchite, who had won many prizes and high rank as an athlete and had consequently been awarded Athenian citizenship, had a slave run away to Alexandria; he authorizes his representative to imprison the slave, accuse him, beat him, pursue those harboring him, and bring him back (*P. Oxy.* XIV 1643, 298). The correspondence of a nome strategos in the Panopolis rolls in the Chester Beatty collection includes an acknowledgment of instructions from the *magister rei privatae* to send up to him an absconding slave (*P. Panop. Beatty* 1.149 [Panopolis, 298]). A letter from a slave of Abinnaeus to his master remarks, 'I am again your slave and don't secede from you as I did before' (*P. Abinn.* 36).

If slaves did not run away, they tried to get their freedom. We have few manumissions and few freedmen attested, as I have noted already, but the nature of the human relationships involved is made clear by an Oxyrhynchus papyrus from the early fourth century. A female petitioner alleges that some slaves came to her and to her brother Eustochios by inheritance from their parents, and that they owned them jointly and equally. Without effecting any written division of ownership, they divided them in practice (evidently two for each).³ The two slaves of her brother have persuaded him to manumit them, along with their child, but without the petitioner's consent. She objects and asks that the slaves be prevented from escaping the bonds of slavery.⁴ Legally speaking she was probably correct, but it is obvious that her brother behaved as if there had been a division of the property, leaving him free to do as he pleased with his slaves. Another Oxyrhynchite petition concerns a jointly owned slave (the petitioner's sister is the other owner) who, since the death of their parents, has

1. See for the general problem Daube 1952.

2. *P. Oxy.* XII 1423 (mid to late fourth cent., according to the editor).

3. Where there was only one slave in an estate, presumably some sort of time-sharing arrangement was necessary; but our evidence mostly concerns families with multiple slaves, where a de facto division seems to have occurred.

4. *PSI* V 452. Biezunska-Malowist 1977: 125 n. 78, thinks that there were originally four slaves, two of whom had a child after the division.

paid them an *apophora*; but now he refuses to pay it. It appears, despite the petitioner's terminology, that the slave had been manumitted by the father in his will, and that *apophora* is his due to them as patrons of a freedman. The owner's attitude—and perhaps the reality of being a freedman—is made clear enough by her request that the former slave be compelled to pay the *apophora* and remain in their service (*P. Oxy. Hels.* 26 [AD 296]).

Those who remained in slavery and did not manage to run away or be manumitted seem often not to have behaved as their owners would like. The Roman law of slavery takes cognizance of theft by slaves, regarding the tendency as a vice which could be warranted against, and we find confirmation in a complaint by a member of the council of Hermopolis that his slave has been 'kidnapped'—corrupted, it sounds like—by another person. Last night, we are told, the slave opened the door of the house while he was asleep and stole some of his goods. He caught the slave with the goods in the house of the other man. He asks to recover his property; curiously enough, he does not ask specifically for any punishment for the corrupter (*P. Stras.* IV 296 [AD 326]). In an affidavit of a wife against her husband, the ultimate insult on his part in household matters is that he trusts his slaves with his keys but will not let his wife have them (*P. Oxy.* VI 903). This affidavit, moreover, gives a dismal picture of the state of the whole household. 'He shut up his own slaves and mine with my foster daughters and his superintendent and son for seven whole days in his cellars, having insulted his slaves and my slave Zoe and half killed them with blows, and he applied fire to my foster-daughters, having stripped them quite naked, which is contrary to the laws.' Later on, he ordered his wife to send her slave Anilla away. Slaves, in short, could not be trusted.

Moreover, slaves talked back to their owners, and to other free persons. The writer of a rather obscurely written Christian letter complains to the recipient that he has been unable to bear the constant *hybreis*, outrageous remarks, of the addressee's *oiketes* Agathos.¹ A petition preserves the complaint of one Sarapion about the female slave of Melas the silversmith; the slave had come to his house the day before and inflicted *hybreis* on his wife and virgin daughter in a way contrary to the laws and to their station in life. He requests that she be

1. *P. Select.* 18 = Naldini 81 (provenance unknown; Bingen, *Cd'E* 41 [1966] 191 suggests the Hermopolite; IV century).

punished for what she shouted at them.¹ Ulpian tells us that the praetor's edict expressly provides the grounds for these complaints: 'One who is said to have loudly shouted at someone contrary to sound morals (*adversus bonos mores*) or one through whose efforts such shouting is effected contrary to sound morals, against him I will give an action'.² That particular remark has to do with the shouting of crowds, but individual acts are also punished if said for the sake of insulting someone. The jurists quoted in the Digest make it quite clear that the relative status of the parties involved was part of what defined how contumelious such remarks were, and the petitioners I have mentioned make it clear that their station in life makes such insults particularly reprehensible. That a slave's insults of a free person were punishable hardly needed to be said, indeed; the jurists were more concerned to deal with the less obvious cases, as where a slave insults another slave—and thus is taken to have insulted the other slave's master (*D.* 47.18.1).

With this matter we have passed from relations of slaves with their own masters to those of slaves with other free persons. It appears in general that though slaves provided much of life's comforts to the slave-owning class, they were also the cause of much of its trouble and even its danger.³ Apart from insults and theft from their masters, slaves appear to have been sources of violence for others. This is true most obviously when they beat someone on their master's behalf, as someone complains happened to him at the hands of a tax collector and his slaves (*P. Oxy.* XLIX 3480). But we also find complaints such as that to the police magistrates at Oxyrhynchus by a man whose wife was attacked in their house during the evening hours by one Tapesis and the latter's slave Victoria; it seems (the text is fragmentary) that a theft of gold was also involved. He asks that a midwife be sent to check his wife, who was thus evidently pregnant, and that the culprits provide guarantees in the event anything happens to her (*P. Oxy.* LI 3620 [AD 326]).

The prize document of this sort, however, is *P. Lips.* 40, a

1. *P. Lond.* III 983 (p. 229; no provenance or date). The discussion makes it clear that *hybreis* here (and elsewhere) means verbal, rather than physical, attacks.

2. *D.* 47.15.2, from *ad edictum* 77. The entirety of Book 47 of the Digest is devoted to contumelious action.

3. Conversely, of course, one might use slaves to protect oneself from such dangers.

Hermopolite report of proceedings before the governor of the Thebaid from the late fourth century or early fifth century. The accuser, one Philammon, reports that his son had been attacked, beaten to within an inch of his life, and robbed of a substantial sum in public funds which he was carrying (10-12 gold solidi), by a party of four slaves. Philammon says that one of them held the victim's hands, one knocked him to the ground, and the other two beat and robbed him. Only two slaves are in court, Acholius and a young boy. Acholius claims that the supposed victim actually attacked them; that there were only two of them until a third joined them after the incident was over. Acholius is tortured but sticks to his story. His master, Sergius, was and is out of town. A neighbor who came out, with his own slaves, when he heard the noise of the scuffle, says that there were two or three of them, thus incidentally supporting the story of the defendants more than that of the plaintiff, though he seems to imply that the slaves were the aggressors. Since the neighbor happens to be the highest-ranking official in town, the *logistes*, his testimony carries some weight.

All of these accounts convey an impression of town life as involving for the upper class significant risks, not merely of verbal abuse but also of theft by their own slaves who were suborned by others, of assaults by free persons assisted by slaves, and of physical violence in the streets at the hands of unsupervised slaves. Like all crime reports, this one no doubt gives such incidents more prominence than they occupy in normal daily life, but their contribution to the tone of urban existence is nonetheless unmistakable.

The society of later Roman Egypt was hardly unique, in antiquity or otherwise, in having a high concentration of wealth and a large degree of dependency of part of the population upon a rich elite. It has often been claimed that this concentration was growing, but so far the evidence stubbornly resists all attempts to make it show that it was (cf. Bowman 1985: 155). It was not only the very top elite in society which relied on a social structure in which some were relatively free and others relatively not. Plenty of farmers of modest means had a few slaves, as we have seen. The wealthy of the towns had more slaves and perhaps depended on them less for their economic survival. In fact, they had dependent tenant farmers of ostensibly free status to work their lands and provide them with their income in rent. Slavery is only one aspect of this pervasive set of relationships of power. If it

was declining in importance in the face of other such relationships in the fourth century—and I am not yet persuaded that this was the case—it had lost nothing of its character, either as a part of the rural and urban economy, or as a necessity for the public lives of the elites, or as a kind of human relationship.¹ MacMullen denies that the Roman world was a 'slave-owning society', on the grounds that slaves played a very small role in agricultural production. But that standard is excessively narrow in focus. Having slaves set the tone of existence; and the human face of slavery in the fourth-century papyri is on the whole an ugly one.²

1. This paper has perforce looked at slavery from the point of view of the slave in society—an owner's point of view, for the most part. Bradley 1984 offers an attempt to look at the mechanisms of control from the slave's point of view.

2. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Israel Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies, meeting at Bar-Ilan University in May, 1986. I am grateful to Ranon Katzoff for the invitation to speak on that occasion.

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