



## Half a Man's Worth": Popular Ideology about Slavery in Democratic Athens

We see slavery as incompatible with democracy; the Athenians did not. What was their justification? Since slaves were not part of the polis, there is little coverage in our sources, but we can at least see what Athenians of the 5th and 4th centuries said about the institution of slavery and slaves.

Homer's comment (via Odysseus' faithful slave Eumaeus) that "Zeus takes away half of a man's *arete* (worth or excellence) once the day of slavery comes upon him" is the first explicit statement of the moral inferiority of a slave, though it is striking that the speaker is himself a slave who embodies *agathe* (nobleness, bravery). There was a universal acceptance of slavery as existing from the very beginning, but chattel slavery in Athens was relatively recent. As the rights of aristocrats spread in Athens to the middle and even lower classes, slaves increasingly filled the menial tasks, including public services, such as police, bookkeeping, cleaning the city. There were three or four private slaves per household, as domestics, farm laborers, or industrial laborers (used by the owner himself or rented out).

A few rich men owned numerous slaves. Most rich men would have owned about fifty, but even the most modest household would have at least one. An Athenian without a slave (or the money to buy a slave - about the same price as a mule) argues in one text that he ought to get public assistance. Manumission was infrequent and slaves were treated much differently than free: a slave witness can give evidence only under torture since a slave cannot be trusted to tell the truth - especially against his master - except through torture. This emphasized his slave status just at the point that he was being personalized as an evidence-giver. Yet Athenian society was not normally a cruel society and there were equal rights for all citizens and the laws were derived from the assembly of all the citizens. Athenians examined themselves and their institutions, so slavery had to be justified by them not only as practical but also as right.

Women were also a marginalized group - as seen in Athenian tragedy. *Oresteia*, illustrating all that is just and good about the new Athens, still relegates women to a subordinate role. Greeks also jumped from women's differences in appearance and body to inferiority of women. Basing the inferiority of slaves on physical differences (as in the US South) would have been a convenient counterpart, but there were no real physical differences between slaves, citizens and metics (resident aliens). In *Frogs* master and slave exchange clothes and then are indistinguishable. Slaves would not be Athenians, but they were either house-born or from diverse external sources - purchased from their own parents or from pirate kidnappers or, mostly, captives of war. Athenian slavery was a sampler of mankind. So, only status distinguished slave from free.

In Greek literature slaves are sometimes shown as noble. Euripides in *Trojan Women* shows how chance enslaves people, how slavery can befall anyone. All agreed that slavery was the worst fate on earth, but the notion that, therefore, slavery should be abolished was restricted to a very narrow intellectual circle. Aristotle's comment in *Politics* 1253b 20ff about control of slaves by masters being contrary to nature (*physis*) is not given as his own view but as that of others he cites.

The sophists' distinction between law/convention (*nomos*) and nature (*physis*) led to their insistence that only *physis* is a solid base for a position, but it never was generally applied to slavery. Thus, some argued that it was a rule of nature that the strong should subjugate the weak. But more believed slaves were inferior morally - not necessarily in their origin but in their roles. Slaves were shown as trouble, not in terms of revolts, because they were too diverse to unite, but as lazy, apt to flee/desert, hostile to their masters.

People who were exploited (deracinated and deprived) would be likely to be or seem inferior. Did the Athenians ever realize what they were doing to their slaves? Did they feel responsible for the corruption of their slaves? No. Athenians saw that many useful labors are nevertheless corrupting to those doing them - e.g., bookkeeping, artisan work, working for someone else (as opposed, for example, to working on your own farm, which was fine). Politics, warfare and directing your own household were seen as proper work for citizens. Corrupting work was thus relegated (mainly) to slaves and then used to explain slave inferiority. But in many instances slaves did do the same work as citizens, so that did not quite work out and did not justify relegating slaves to intrinsically inferior work.

Athenians instead argued that *barbaroi* (non-Greek speakers) were inferior to Greeks and therefore enslaving them was justified. Non-Greeks deserved to be slaves - but this ethnicity comes into focus only after 490 (Battle of Marathon) and especially after 480-479 with the Greek victory over the Persians. Herodotus and the Greek tragedians invented barbarians - the other - as lacking *sophia* (wisdom) or having it to excess (cunning), lacking courage (cowardice) or having too much of it (bravado, recklessness).

Athenian slaves were mainly either northern (e.g., Thracian) and seen as wild and reckless or eastern (e.g., Asian) and seen as effeminate. Because non-Greeks accepted political/metaphorical slavery, therefore they supposedly deserved literal slavery. Although seventy percent of slaves we know were non-Greeks, at least fifteen percent were Greek. How was this justified? Some may have been exposed in infancy and raised as slaves, but most were war captives (the fate of about twenty five of those taken prisoner). On Melos all the men were killed but the women and children were enslaved. In the failed Sicilian expedition, many Athenians were enslaved.

Euripides in *Andromache* represented Spartans as vile and cunning, to show how Greeks who are your enemies can be treated or viewed in the same way as barbarians. And the Athenians viewed the Ionian Greeks as not much different from the barbarians - weak and effeminate. Racism for Greeks did not include biologically different characteristics and could therefore be expanded to include any barbarian who had been enslaved. Plato and Aristotle argued for a theory of natural slavery, by which all barbarians and some Greeks were natural slaves. Slavery was an essential social institution and therefore had to be justified. But if slavery is natural, then it may even benefit the slave. When humane treatment of slaves was urged it was so violence against slaves would not corrupt their masters.