



BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greece*

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Forsdyke, Sara. 2021. *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 277.

Sara Forsdyke's *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greece*, part of the *Key Themes in Ancient History* series, began as a set of lectures she presented in 2011 in Paris at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (p. xiii). The goal of her work is to answer the questions "What was it like to be a slave in ancient Greece?" and "How was the experience of slavery in Ancient Greece different from or similar to the experiences of slaves in other times?" (p. 2). Forsdyke attempts to answer these questions by covering many aspects of the lives of those enslaved in Ancient Greece through analyzing a range of primary sources.

Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greece is split into six chapters. Chapter 1 argues why the study of ancient slavery is profitable, explains Forsdyke's methodology, defines slavery and the term Slave Society, and distinguishes between ancient and modern slavery. Chapter 2 discusses the various ways one might become a slave, the experiences one had when becoming enslaved, and the population and demographics of slaves in Ancient Greece. Chapter 3 covers the wide range of occupations of slaves and includes a brief section discussing child labor and the role of slaves in warfare. Chapter 4 examines the ways the Ancient Greeks created distinguishing characteristics between freemen and slaves. Chapter 5 explores the ways masters attempted to control their slaves, and the variety of tactics slaves utilized to improve their station. Chapter 6 ends the book by returning to her argument for the study of ancient slavery.

Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greece is rich in detail but quite readable. Forsdyke opens with a spectacular hook, including a letter from the fourth century BC that stimulates the reader's curiosity and emotion (p. 1). The rest of her work is packed with primary sources that she translated, including portions of Homer, Aristophanes, Xenophon, Aristotle, and many more. These sources cover a wide range of literary types, such as bills of sale, personal letters, wills, biographies, plays, and poetry. While she includes a great number of primary sources, her scope is quite narrow, only covering from the eighth century BC to the third century BC, with most of her

time being devoted to the Classical period (p. 50). Aside from her narrow chronological range, she also mainly focuses on the lives of slaves in cities, primarily Athens. This is likely due to the prevalence of material from these areas. Despite these limitations in scope, Forsdyke handles her primary sources carefully by intentionally unpacking each one, explaining how it is relevant to the topic at hand, and addressing any potential biases that may exist. One common bias she mentions is that most of the primary sources are written by the freemen, so their depiction of slavery and the views slaves held cannot be accepted as gospel since they had not experienced being slaves (p. 99). In addition to a trove of primary sources, Forsdyke utilizes the work of many other scholars. In this, she is quick to mention areas of debate, such as the discussion regarding the size of the slave population in Ancient Greece.

All of these sources come together to address the two questions of her book: “What was it like to be a slave in ancient Greece?” and “How was the experience of slavery in Ancient Greece different from or similar to the experiences of slaves in other times?” (p. 2). While there are few sources from slaves in Ancient Greece, the wealth of ancient documents discussing slaves and slavery from the period can provide a broad picture of what the life of a slave may have been like. These documents cover the different ways individuals became slaves, the impact it had on them and their families, and the wide variety of work and responsibilities they may have had. With this picture in mind, Forsdyke reminds the reader that “there was no single slave experience, but rather a multitude of individual experiences” (p. 102).

The latter question, however, is handled inconsistently. Forsdyke attempts to utilize the similarities and differences between ancient and modern slavery to gain a deeper understanding of slavery in Ancient Greece. While this comparative analysis is sometimes helpful, such as when Forsdyke mentions that race-based slavery has historically been “the exception rather than the norm” (p. 6), there are times when Forsdyke uses modern realities to questionably answer some uncertainties surrounding ancient slavery. One example of this comes near the end of Chapter 5. In trying to answer the question of why ancient slaves would flee to sanctuaries to get a new master, Forsdyke proposes that being a runaway slave would grant them the ability to negotiate with prospective masters. To support this claim, she turns to Walter Johnson’s study of slavery in Antebellum America, where he notes that a slave would run away and hide and then have an intermediary negotiate with a potential master (pp. 231-233). The issue with this is that it is a speculative evaluation based on evidence from a different era and culture.

All in all, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greece* is a useful resource for those wanting a deeper dive into the topic. Because of Forsdyke’s wealth of resources, this work would be helpful for finding both primary and secondary sources from Ancient Greece before the 2nd century BC. For those who want a holistic overview of Greco-Roman slavery, especially during the late BCs

and early ADs, it would be best to look elsewhere. At just under 280 pages, it is a manageable length, but it may be too in-depth for those looking for a quick overview of slavery in Ancient Greece. While this book has a narrow scope, it is a highly informative and accessible contribution to the study of slavery in Ancient Greece.

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