



# TOWARDS A HISTORY OF ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN SLAVE SYSTEMS

Rumo a uma história dos antigos sistemas escravistas do Mediterrâneo

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**DEBATE**  
**ESCRavidÃO ANTIGA E HISTÓRIA GLOBAL**  
**ANCIENT SLAVERY, AND GLOBAL HISTORY**

## **ABSTRACT**

Building on the excellent new framework of a Mediterranean slave system proposed by Joly and Knust, this short response aims to explore three main issues that can further elaborate future application of the framework. The first issue concerns the processes that entangled the epicurean slave systems during the first Mediterranean slavery. The second raises the question whether we need a transitional period during the last two centuries BCE as a link between the first and second Mediterranean slave systems. The third stresses the need to give economic processes and phenomena a more significant role during the second Mediterranean slavery.

## **KEYWORDS**

Slavery. Periodization. Mediterranean. Economic processes.

## **RESUMO**

Com base na nova e excelente estrutura de um sistema de escravos mediterrâneo proposta por Joly e Knust, esta breve resposta tem como objetivo explorar três questões principais que podem elaborar ainda mais a aplicação futura da estrutura. A primeira questão diz respeito aos processos que envolveram os sistemas de escravos epicóricos durante a primeira escravidão mediterrânea. A segunda levanta a questão se precisamos de um período de transição durante os últimos dois séculos a.C. como um elo entre o primeiro e o segundo sistemas de escravidão do Mediterrâneo. A terceira enfatiza a necessidade de dar aos processos e fenômenos econômicos um papel mais significativo durante a segunda escravidão mediterrânea.

## **PALAVRAS-CHAVES**

Escravidão. Periodização. Mediterrâneo. processos econômicos.

The study of slavery in antiquity is undergoing a major and radical reorientation; long shaped by approaches and concepts formulated in the 1960s, the field is currently searching for new approaches<sup>1</sup>. In a seminal contribution to ongoing debates, Fábio Duarte Joly and José Ernesto Moura Knust take stock of these developments, and offer a new way of thinking about the history of ancient slavery. In this brief response, I will attempt to trace how they visualize the limits of traditional approaches, what they offer as an alternative framework, and how that new framework can be further expanded and elaborated in the future.

As Joly and Knust rightly point out, the study of slavery in antiquity has been dominated by a conceptual framework that pays little attention to space, time, diversity and scale. This traditional framework is based on three key conceptual entities: Greek slavery, Roman slavery, and ancient or Greco-Roman slavery. What scholars have traditionally understood as Greek slavery is effectively tantamount to slavery in classical Athens; the key idea being that, once we explain away slave systems like those of Sparta and Crete as not being proper slavery, all Greek slave systems were effectively the same and changed very little, so we could simply concentrate on Athens as the example which is best known and has the most diverse available evidence. Roman slavery is usually understood as being tantamount to slavery in Rome and Roman Italy, primarily in the imperial period, which accounts for most of the available evidence; very little attention has ever been paid to the co-existence of very diverse slave systems within the Roman Empire and how these systems were interrelated. The concept of ancient or Greco-Roman slavery was justified by the assumption that Greek and Roman slavery were effectively the same in all important respects and could be treated as a single phenomenon. As Joly and Knust show, it is the underlying concept of the slave society that provides the foundation for the other conceptual entities. By focusing solely on the question of the role of slaves in how ancient elites derived their income, the concept of the slave society has justified the assumption that Greek and Roman slavery are essentially unitary and similar phenomena, thus discounting issues of diversity and scale. Furthermore, by omitting any parameters that concern space and time, the concept has de-incentivized scholars from asking such questions.

How can we escape the limitations of the traditional framework? As Joly and Knust acknowledge, an important recent step in the right direction is the concept of the epichoric slave system. Instead of assuming that Greek (or Roman) slavery was a unitary phenomenon, exemplified by the best-known example of Athens (or Rome/Roman Italy), we can now see that e.g. Greek slavery consisted of multiple and diverse slave systems which developed their own peculiar features as a result of the local concatenation of economic, social, political and cultural processes (Lewis, 2018). The great advantage of the concept of the epichoric slave system is that it creates a framework that can accommodate diversity and divergence; although it has so far only been applied to Greek slave systems, it is fairly obvious that it can also be applied to the multiple slave systems incorporated within the Roman Empire as a result of imperial expansion.

At the same time, though, the concept of the epichoric slave system leaves us with an important desideratum: it cannot illuminate the systemic entanglement between the different epichoric systems and it cannot account for processes of convergence. In the course of the Hellenistic period, the highly idiosyncratic epichoric systems of Sparta, Thessaly and Crete came to an end; a process of convergence brought them in line with the other Greek slave systems that depended on market mechanisms for the reproduction of

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<sup>1</sup> Research for this article was funded by the research project *SlaVEgents: enslaved persons in the making of societies and cultures in Western Eurasia and North Africa, 1000 BCE-300 CE*, funded by an Advanced Grant of the European Research Council (Grant Agreement no. 101095823).

their slave populations (Vlassopoulos, 2025). Given that this development is not restricted to either of the three epichoric systems, but is shared by all three of them, it is fairly obvious that there are wider processes at play; we need therefore to supplement the concept of the epichoric system with a wider framework of analysis.

Furthermore, Joly and Knust point out that a new framework should be able to account for issues of scale. It is truly remarkable that the concept of slave society has invited scholars to treat e.g. Athenian and Roman slave systems as if they were equivalent entities; by focusing on the single issue of the significance of slaves for how elites derived their income, the slave society concept has completely obliterated from our vision the major differences in terms of scale and complexity. A moment of serious reflection should make it obvious that the slave system of an empire cannot be analyzed through the same analytical framework that we apply to that of a city-state, however large the latter might be. This becomes even more important when we consider that the slave systems within the Roman Empire exhibit both diversity and convergence.

Finally, the new framework must deal with periodization and change. We have long been accustomed to a static account of the history of ancient slavery; between the emergence of slave societies in the archaic period and their demise at some point in late antiquity, we are led to believe that nothing substantial changed (Bradley; Cartledge, 2011). This attitude is truly incredible, if we consider that in the course of the millennium of ancient history, practically every aspect of the economies, societies, politics and cultures of the Mediterranean exhibited very substantial changes. But we are currently ill prepared to study change and periodization in the history of ancient slaveries, as our current frameworks cannot accommodate these issues.

Joly and Knust propose an alternative framework which is inspired by two key concepts from the global study of slavery. The first is the concept of the Atlantic world. Early modern historians constructed this concept in order to explore the systemic interconnections between the Native American, colonial American, African and metropolitan European societies, economies, politics and cultures. Research showed that it was impossible to understand nineteenth-century slave resistance in the Americas without paying serious attention to Islamic jihads in Atlantic Africa (Barcia, 2014); to understand the economic development of American slave systems without the triangular trade that linked Europe, the Americas and Africa (Solow 1991); to understand changes in the American slave systems without attention to important developments in the European metropolitan societies in which slavery had largely disappeared (Eltis, 2000; Tomich, 2020).

The other concept employed by Joly and Knust is that of the second slavery. This concept, coined by Dale Tomich, whose recent death was such a heavy blow to our discipline, aimed to transcend the ahistorical framework in which New World slavery was traditionally approached (Tomich, 2004, 2017; Marquese; Salles, 2016). By distinguishing between the first slavery, which took place within a geopolitical and economic context defined by the expansion of European colonial empires in the Americas and their mercantilist systems, and the second slavery, which emerged in a new context defined by the Atlantic anti-colonial revolutions, the Industrial revolution and the dominance of the capitalist mode of production in the modern world system, the concept of second slavery made possible a periodization of the history of Atlantic slavery which was based on changes in the systemic entanglements of the Atlantic world and of global history.

Inspired by these concepts, Joly and Knust offer a new framework for the study of ancient slaveries. They argue that we need to adopt a Mediterranean-wide vista and construct a unit of analysis which is equivalent to that of the Atlantic world for early modern slavery; they propose to call this wider framework the Mediterranean slave system. Furthermore, they offer a new periodization of ancient slavery, which distinguishes between

a first Mediterranean slave system, characterized by the distinctiveness of the epichoric slave systems of Mediterranean city-states and their increased entanglement, and a second Mediterranean slave system, which was shaped by the incorporation of the epichoric systems within the Roman empire and the converging effects of this process.

But what exactly are the systemic processes that hold together the various parts of the Mediterranean slave system in its various phases? Joly and Knust place paramount importance on the concepts of slaving and no-slaving zones (Fynn-Paul, 2009). Slaving zones are the areas from which a particular slave system draws its slaves; in cases where the enslavement of community members is allowed, the slaving zones of such communities include their own members; in contrast, a no-slaving zone includes the areas and populations that cannot be enslaved by a particular slave system. From the archaic period onwards, social struggles in many Mediterranean city-states led to the prohibition of the enslavement of their own citizens. This creation of no-slaving zones, was accompanied by the expansion of slaving zones to faraway places in the Near East and the Black Sea; coupled with the proliferation of Greek and Phoenician colonies and commercial expansion, the slaving zones of the first Mediterranean slavery created a huge network of interdependent slaving zones that entangled the whole of the Mediterranean, temperate Europe and the Black Sea. Roman imperial expansion and the incorporation of most of these areas within the Roman Empire had a substantial impact on the second Mediterranean slavery; a non-perfect, but still highly consequential no-slaving zone now included the whole of the Mediterranean. Joly and Knust also stress another important factor of convergence and systemic interconnection during the second Mediterranean slave system: the gradual impact of the Roman legal system on the slaving practices of the various communities subsumed within the Roman Empire.

The conceptual framework offered by Joly and Knust offers a fundamental transformation in the way scholars approach ancient slave systems; and like every serious conceptual transformation, it offers scope for further development and elaboration. In the remaining part of this contribution, I aim to offer some comments to serve this further development and elaboration. I commence with what the authors describe as the first Mediterranean slave system, during the first millennium BCE. They are surely correct that it is primarily local developments that play the key role, in particular in comparison with the highly centripetal effects of the Roman Empire upon the second Mediterranean slave system. Nevertheless, I would like to propose that it is possible to construct a more detailed framework of the processes that entangled the various epichoric slave system into a Mediterranean-wide system, which accords more importance to the significance of trans-local processes.

As I have argued elsewhere, we can delineate four such processes (Vlassopoulos, 2023). **Processes of growing connectivity** came to interlink various areas of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea from the archaic period onwards; these processes were partly based on decentralized networks moving goods, people, ideas and technologies, and partly on attempts by states and potentates to canalize connectivity for their own ends. Increasing connectivity set the stage for drastic changes in Mediterranean material culture; it made possible the utilization of Mediterranean micro-ecological diversity and fragmentation through large-scale **processes of exchange and redistribution**. The resulting specialization, production for the market, dependence on exchange and surplus accumulation went hand in hand with the emergence of the first consumer societies, in which substantial social strata desired and consumed goods from various areas of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Slavery was deeply inscribed in this process, not only in terms of the slave trade, but also in terms of producing a major part of these various goods and creating the surpluses that allowed the emergence of consumer societies.

At the same time, as Joly and Knust rightly stress, **processes of community formation and claim-making** transformed the socio-political settings of Mediterranean city-states. This process shaped the institutions of city-states and the meaning of citizenship and changed the ways in which communities formulated the distinction between insiders and outsiders. Finally, **geopolitical processes** redefined how violence and ideology affected enslavement and liberation across the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Most slaves were produced through warfare, raiding and international trade. This means that slavery was directly inscribed in the changing history of the forms of warfare, predation, exchange, state-building and empire-building that linked together communities into wider systems of international relations. The emergence of large states and empires in various parts of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, as well as their occasional collapse, enhanced the scale and stakes of warfare and the extent of slave-making, creating large and interconnected slaving zones; at the same time, the peculiar form of the Greek geopolitical system had also important implications for the emergence of various forms of no-slaving zones.

My next comment concerns the periodization proposed by Joly and Knust and their distinction between the first and the second phase of the Mediterranean-wide slave system. I think that their distinction is important and valid; but it remains to be seen whether it will be sufficient, or we will need to distinguish further phases. In this respect, I would stress the need to distinguish the last two centuries BCE as a crucial transitional period between the first and second phase of Mediterranean slavery with important characteristics of its own. Currently, this is a literal black hole in our understanding of the long-term history of ancient slavery. The study of Greek slavery has traditionally focused on classical Athens; scholars have explored particular practices which are widely documented through Hellenistic evidence, like that of manumission (Zelnick-Abramovitz, 2005), but there is no systematic study of Hellenistic slavery or Hellenistic slave systems (Blavatskaja; Golubcova; Pavlovskaja, 1972; Vlassopoulos, 2025). At the same time, the study of Roman slavery has either largely focused on the imperial period, or has treated republican and imperial periods as part of a single entity called Roman slavery. It is developments within the last two centuries BCE which constitute both the intensification of the processes of the previous centuries of the first Mediterranean slave system, as well as the emergence of new phenomena that paved the way for the second Mediterranean slave system in the first millennium CE. It is only by examining together developments in both the eastern and the western Mediterranean that we will be able to understand properly the long-term history of Mediterranean slavery.

This brings me to my third comment which concerns economics. The economic aspects of slavery were a key element of the concept of the second slavery; it is thus a bit surprising that Joly and Knust chose to privilege geopolitics in their conceptualization of the Mediterranean slave system and accord a rather secondary role to economics. Needless to say, the fact that the economic role of slavery was crucial in the second slavery of the modern Atlantic world does not necessarily require that it played the same role in the second slavery of the ancient Mediterranean world. But I think that a case for this can be made on empirical, rather than a priori grounds. I have already pointed out the key significance of processes of exchange and redistribution for the systemic entanglement of the first Mediterranean slave system; Knust's PhD dissertation makes a brilliant case for the significance of such Mediterranean-wide trends during the period of the first Mediterranean slave system, and it deserves to be read widely and with attention (Knust, 2016).

For me, one of the most valuable implications of the concept of the second Mediterranean slave system is that it enables us to understand that a significant part of what we traditionally understand as Roman slavery is not primarily Roman, but a consequence of the Mediterranean-wide transformations that created the second Mediterranean slave

system. I stress here one of the key developments: the emergence, during the last two centuries BCE, of the large elite household with hundreds of slaves in both its urban and rural operations and its major economic, social and cultural consequences. It is truly remarkable how little attention has been paid to this major development: Kyle Harper was able to trace the significance of the elite household for the late Roman slave system (Harper 2011, p. 100-200), but its earlier history is still shrouded in mystery (cf. Parkins 1995; Groen-Vallinga, 2022, p. 149-218).

The elite slaveholding household was a key aspect of the second Mediterranean slave system; but it was not tantamount to Roman slavery as such; not only because it did not exist during the earlier periods of Roman history, but also because Roman slavery also included diverse contexts and kinds of households, within which slavery was practiced in very different ways. Furthermore, while the elite slaveholding household expanded across the Mediterranean in the late Hellenistic and early imperial periods, its significance was highly divergent across the various epichoric systems that were subsumed within the Roman Empire. Finally, the role of slavery in the substantially increased levels of urbanization in the early imperial period and the economic consequences of this urban heterogeneity is another aspect of the economics of the second Mediterranean slave system which has received recent attention (Flohr, 2023).

Joly and Knust have offered us a new framework for the study of ancient slave systems that has truly revolutionary implications. Their article must form the basis of any future discussion about how to write both the history of the ancient Mediterranean, as well as the history of its slave systems. There will be plenty of issues to debate and develop further; but we can now finally start the kind of discussion that our colleagues exploring the early modern Atlantic have been having for over two decades, and which we urgently need for the study of ancient history from a global perspective as well.

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### SOURCE OF THE ARTICLE

Not applicable.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Not applicable.

### AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION



Conceptualization and elaboration of the manuscript, Data collection, Results discussion, Revision and approval: Kostas Vlassopoulos.

## FUNDING

European Research Council.



## IMAGE USE AGREEMENT

Not applicable.

## ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Not applicable.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

## PREPRINT

This article is not a preprint.

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## EDITOR

Fabio A. Morales.

## HISTORY

Received: November 20, 2024.

Approved: December 14, 2024.

How to cite it: VLASSOPOULOS, Kostas. Towards a history of ancient Mediterranean slave systems. *Esboços*, Florianópolis, v. 31, n. 58, p. 413-421, 2024.