



The Role of Slavery in Athenian Democracy: An Economic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Classical Athens is strongly associated with two phenomena: democracy, and slavery. The interaction between these two institutions, seemingly at odds when evaluated by modern standards, reveals a complex web of philosophical, social, and economic relationships. The question of whether or not Athenian democracy was predicated on slavery as an institution has been the subject of scholarly debate for centuries, and no strict answer has been reached. However, the inherent economic requirements of Athenian democracy allow for a more focused study of how slavery functioned in relation to political and social governance. This paper explores a variety of ancient sources and modern scholarship to demonstrate that slavery played a number of vital roles to the functioning of the Athenian economy, directly and indirectly supporting 'democratic' systems. In doing so, this paper highlights the complexities in interpreting ancient sources alongside population and economic projections, as well as navigating the symbiosis of fiscal and chattel policies.

KEYWORDS: *Classical Athens, Democracy, Slavery, Economy, History, Ancient Greece*

INTRODUCTION

In the classical period of Athens, during the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, a remarkable society arose.¹ Known for its notable contributions to philosophy, arts, and politics, Athens holds a significant place in human history.² It is particularly famed for the advent of democracy, a system of self-governance that has served as a major influence for subsequent socio-political systems worldwide.³ Nevertheless, alongside the emergence of this celebrated democratic ethos, existed the pervasive and contrasting institution of slavery deeply embedded within Athenian society.⁴

This paper aims to investigate the societal norm of slave-owning in Classical Athens, an institution that prompts a critical reevaluation of its touted 'democratic society'.⁵ Slavery was no marginal or elite exclusive practice within

Athens; rather, it was a ubiquitous part of Athenian life and played a central role in its economy.⁶ Slaves in Athens spanned a wide range of roles, from manual labor in mines and fields to clerical and managerial positions, underpinning Athens' status as a prominent ancient Greek polis.⁷

This study is driven by the stark paradox of democracy coexisting with the widespread practice of human bondage in Athens. Through a meticulous analysis of the economic functions of slavery, this paper seeks to interrogate whether Athenian democracy could have come into existence without such an integral institution. This paper will question whether the rise and development of democracy in Athens, where free citizens were outnumbered by slaves and metics, was incidental or reliant on the economic system bolstered by slavery.

The inquiry into this intricate question, which sits at the intersection of moral judgment and socio-political economy, can illuminate the nuanced interplay between democratic governance and economic structures. Furthermore, it can prompt a much-needed reassessment of the often idealized portrayal of Athenian democracy. This paper invites readers

1 Rihll, 2011: 48-73.

2 ("Democracy (Ancient Greece)", (Hansen, 2019), (Cuffel 323-42)

3 Read more at ("David M. Pritchard (Ed.), War, Democracy and Culture in Classical Athens. Cambridge/New York/Melbourne, Cambridge University Press 2010," 2012), (Hansen, 1989)

4 (Hansen, 1989)

5 Kneissl, P. (1980). Slaves in War Service in the Ancient World. Part 2. Philosophy and History, 13(1), 107-108. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philhist198013161>

6 (Figueira, 2020), (Jones 185)

7 ("Confronting Slavery in the Classical World | Emory | Michael C. Carlos Museum"), Wrenhaven, K. L. (2012, June 1). Reconstructing the Slave: The Image of the Slave in Ancient Greece. Bristol Classical Press.



to engage with these captivating questions, delving into the complexities of Athens' much-lauded democracy and its less-discussed, yet profoundly influential, aspect—slavery.⁸

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper draws on a wealth of literature, the main pillars of which are discussed below. Porter's 2019 article "Slavery and Athens' Economic Efflorescence" elucidates on the economic contributions of slavery in Athens.⁹ Porter examines the impact of slavery on economic activities otherwise limited by Athens' societal framework, such as working in the Athenian household and commercial milling. Adding to this, Jameson's 1977 article titled "Agriculture and Slavery in Classical Athens" delivers an in-depth analysis of the interplay between agriculture and slavery in Athens.¹⁰ His study, amalgamating archaeological and ancient literary evidence, unravels how slave labor played a key role in boosting agricultural productivity. However, these economic discourses cannot be disentangled from the wider social and political landscape of Athens. In "Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People," published in 1922, Ober provides a rich sociopolitical context that complements the economic discussions.¹¹ Ober's work critically questions why Athenian democracy functioned as effectively and enduringly as it did, considering the significant social and economic disparities inherent within the system. Ober's analysis of communication between elite and non-elite citizens, as well as the use of legal and political rhetoric, reveals a democratic discourse that negotiated the ideological contradictions between political equality and social inequality. In doing so, he illuminates the interplay between slavery, economy, and politics in Athens.

Slavery is almost ubiquitous in sources from or about classical Athens. The Sourcebook, Greek and Roman Slavery, contains a collection of various ancient sources that discuss ancient slavery, including Ancient Athens.¹² This includes Plato, Xenophon, Apuleis, and many others. The utility of this text is its co-location of sources and source analysis by the editor, FIRST NAME Wiedemann. Lastly, Herrmann-Otto's review of "The Cambridge World History of Slavery" offers a macro perspective on slavery in the ancient Mediterranean world, including Athens.¹³ Section 5 of The Cambridge World History of Slavery, Slavery and economy in the Greek World, discusses various aspects of slavery's impact on the ancient Greek economy, including in agriculture, in industry, in war, and in the household. These sources present a focused view on slavery's economic impact on ancient Athens.

8 Wrenhaven, K. L. (2012, June 1). *Reconstructing the Slave: The Image of the Slave in Ancient Greece*. Bristol Classical Press.

9 (Porter, 2019)

10 (Jameson 124)

11 (Ober, 1992)

12 (Wiedemann, 1980)

13 (Herrmann-Otto, 2014)

The Population of Slaves in Ancient Athens

The extent of slavery within the ancient Athenian population, and its subsequent influence on the democratic system, has been a matter of substantial historical debate and inquiry.¹⁴ As Ober notes, a direct causal link between a stable democratic government and slavery could only be inferred if it could be demonstrated that a significant proportion of Athenian citizens were slave-owners.¹⁵ Such ownership would hypothetically enable citizens to have the leisure time needed for active participation in governance and the protection of their property interests. This link is evidenced by the prevalence of agricultural slavery among non-elite Athenians and typical Athenian farmers, considering that the majority of Athenians were landowners residing in the countryside.¹⁶

Additionally, a wealth of literary sources attests to the prevalence of slave ownership among citizens.¹⁷ Slaves were used in as household servants, clerks to commercial agents and laborers in the sectors of agriculture, industry, and mining. Notably, the plays of Aristophanes often depicted 'average' citizens as owners of multiple slaves, thereby reinforcing the image of pervasive slave ownership.¹⁸ Consequently, the considerable presence of slaves in Athens, as corroborated by both ancient and contemporary sources, offers a significant foundation for the examination of any possible correlation between slavery and democracy.

Historians like Figueira have put forth diverse estimates of the Athenian slave population size. Records from antiquity suggest a range of 20,000 to 400,000 slaves at different points in time, a figure that modern historians have alternatively endorsed or challenged. These estimates vary widely, spanning from 20,000 to 115,000. Despite the discrepancies in the precise numbers, the existence of a considerable slave population within Athens is indisputable.¹⁹ Even the lowest estimates of the slave population still indicate a significant proportion when juxtaposed with the total estimated population of the city during the same period. Therefore, Ober's causal link appears to be supported by the available ancient evidence according to modern interpretations.

THE EFFECT OF SLAVERY IN THE ATHENIAN AGRICULTURE

In ancient Athens, a substantial part of the economy was underpinned by the institution of slavery, with a significant

14 ("Confronting Slavery in the Classical World | Emory | Michael C. Carlos Museum"),

15 (Ober, 1992), Wrenhaven, K. L. (2012, June 1). *Reconstructing the Slave: The Image of the Slave in Ancient Greece*. Bristol Classical Press.

16 (Ober, 1992)

17 (Figueira, 2020)

18 (Figueira, 2020)

19 ("Confronting Slavery in the Classical World | Emory | Michael C. Carlos Museum"), (Evans)

number of enslaved individuals deployed in the agriculture sector.²⁰ Agriculture was the primary occupation in ancient Athens, fostering food production and economic activity, where the cultivating, harvesting, and processing of crops like olives, grains, and grapes became primary tasks.²¹ Slaves were involved in various agricultural functions, from working in fields to overseeing the management of estate crops. They were often owned by landholding citizens, who could afford the cost, with the wealthy owning large numbers of slaves for their agricultural estates.²² The ownership and use of slaves in agricultural operations was an integral element of the socioeconomic structure of ancient Athens, and it played a critical role in the city's affluence and influence during its peak.

Paradoxical Attitudes: Plato's Laws

The use of slaves in Athenian agriculture and other sectors must be understood against contemporary Athenian attitudes towards them, some of which appear to be paradoxical. This wariness can be seen in certain philosophical or dramatic cultural artifacts, such as the works of Plato. This can be seen explicitly in relevant sections of Plato's *Laws*.²³ This text, written around 360 BCE, explores the concept of an ideal legal and political system for a just society.²⁴ Plato writes: "The question of slaves is a difficult one in every respect,"²⁵ manifesting a thought process that is not straightforward, implying the existence of moral and economic dilemma within the Athenian society.

Within his deliberations on slavery, Plato underscores the significant role slaves play in Athens' economy and households. This understanding arises from his comparative study of various Greek institutions, where he states, "The slave system of the Herakleots, who have enslaved the Mariandynians, is less controversial, as is the Thessalian class of Penestai."²⁶ However, alongside the recognition of the societal and economic realities, he harbors a perception of moral and intellectual deficit among slaves, positing, "For there is no element in the soul of a slave that is healthy", and "A sensible man should not entrust anything to their care."²⁷ This reveals his skepticism about slaves' intellectual capabilities and moral judgment, underscoring the potential perils of granting them significant responsibilities.

When examining Plato's *Laws*, it is critical to appreciate that they are a mirror of Plato's conceptualization of an ideal society, rather than a concrete representation of Athenian

reality.²⁸ The utility of this text is as a source for critical insights into the values and ethical principles that likely influenced how Athenians engaged with slaves and why certain duties were assigned to slaves over others. However, as a philosophical discourse, it may not shed adequate light on the historical realities of slavery in ancient Athens. Plato's emphasis on maintaining order and justice within the institution of slavery, while presenting a model for societal harmony, fails to encapsulate the actual lived experiences of the enslaved.²⁹ It is an artifact of some of the available ideology for how educated Athenians viewed slaves.

Attitudes and Agriculture

Plato's *Laws* provide a case-study of Athenian attitudes towards slaves, relevant to their multi-faceted role in household and agricultural economies. The question of slavery in the Athenian agricultural sector remains a matter of debate. Jones and others suggest that slave labor in agriculture was minimal, with slaves being largely absent from many households.³⁰ They argue that agricultural work was often carried out by neighbors or hired workers, and significant slave labor was primarily advantageous to the Athenian elite. This "minimalist" perspective is countered by "maximalists" like Garlan and De Ste Croix, who argue that slave labor was more prevalent, particularly in agriculture, than minimalist interpretations suggest.³¹

In light of an evidenced population increase in Attica and the static amount of land, Jameson proposed that intensified production, which would have required more labor, could have been addressed by the use of slaves.³² However, his argument faced criticism for being vague and overemphasizing the significance of slave ownership to Athenian democracy. Osborne's analysis supports the view that the wealthier Athenian households significantly relied on slave labor for agricultural activities, particularly during peak periods.³³

Economically, Athenian slaves, as Scheidel points out, appear to have been cheaper in terms of "wheat equivalent" than their counterparts in other parts of the Roman Empire.³⁴ Despite this, slave ownership among Athenian citizens was relatively low, which Scheidel attributes to restricted demand and limited cash availability.³⁵ This reveals a complex and nuanced interplay of slave and free labor within the Athenian economy, contributing to an intricate picture of Athenian society.

20 (Fertik, 2020), (Hanson et al., 1994), (Westermann, 1943), (Cuffel 323-42)

21 (Jameson 124), (Badian)

22 (Badian)

23 Book 6 of (Plato, *Laws*)

24 (Wiedemann, 1980), page 78, (Vlastos 289-304), (Holtzclaw & Morrow, 1941)

25 (Wiedemann, 1980), page 78

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 (Vlastos 289), (Holtzclaw & Morrow, 1941), (Holtzclaw & Morrow, 1941),

29 (MORROW, 1939), (Holtzclaw & Morrow, 1941)

30 (Jones, 1957).

31 (Garlan, 1988, pg. 64), (De Ste Croix, 1981, pg. 505)

32 (Jameson, 1977, pg. 129).

33 (Osborne, 1995).

34 (Scheidel 2005, 2008).

35 Ibid.

The agricultural sector was, as Herrmann Otto asserts, the mainstay of the economy of ancient Athens.³⁶ In alignment with the ‘maximalists’ Otto paints a landscape where the agriculture was primarily supported by slave labor. Otto argues that it was often slaves who undertook the demanding work in the fields, a significant point often omitted in recorded literature due to cultural norms around wealth and status, causing the modern reader to overlook the substantial role slaves played in the agricultural sector.³⁷

This situation was especially true for the wealthy Athenians, who heavily relied on slaves, particularly in the countryside.³⁸ For the free Athenian landowners, their main concern lay in land ownership and decision-making pertaining to production organization. Slaves were used in a variety of agricultural roles: some were made bailiffs or stewards, tasked with overseeing the work of their counterparts, the *ergates*, or common slaves. Consequently, the pivotal decisions about labor deployment were largely determined by the landowners, sometimes with the assistance of a slave, a local hired hand, or a neighbor.³⁹ A case-study by Hermann Otto in the Cambridge World History of Slavery investigates Isomachus, a member of the liturgical class (the few hundred wealthiest Athenian citizens) who owned hundreds of slaves. Despite his personal interest in agricultural activities, Isomachus delegated the supervision of his many slaves to bailiffs or foremen. Meanwhile, more modest households, like that of Euphiletus, also employed slaves in agricultural work. The masters of such households often tended their farms with the aid of a couple of slaves, who might have been accommodated on the farm premises throughout the year. This portrait drawn by Otto challenges the minimalist view, emphasizing that both wealthy and moderate-income households significantly relied on slave labor for agricultural production.⁴⁰

Synthesizing Attitudes and Actions

In the context of Athenian agriculture, the institution of slavery was an essential mechanism that enabled land-owning citizens to profit from their holdings.⁴¹ Without the forced labor of slaves, it is questionable whether these landowners would have been able to generate the wealth and resources necessary to maintain their societal status and participate actively in democratic processes, such as attending assemblies or serving in public offices, which required economic means. Therefore, the function of slavery within the agricultural sector could arguably have been instrumental in facilitating the democratic activities

36 (Herrmann-Otto, 2014), (Isager & Skydsgaard, 1992), (“Economics in Ancient Greece,” 1974), (Schlaifer 165-204),

37 (Herrmann-Otto, 2014), (Isager & Skydsgaard, 1992)

38 (Westermann, 1943), (Vlassopoulos 115-130)

39 (Herrmann-Otto, 2014)

40 (Herrmann-Otto, 2014)

41 (Isager & Skydsgaard, 1992), (“Economics in Ancient Greece,” 1974)

of Athenian citizens by providing them the means and the leisure to participate.

However, the intertwined economic and social implications of slavery are complex. The question arises of whether the ownership and exploitation of slaves in agriculture were a product of the wealth amassed by the democratic process, or if the existence of slavery actually allowed for the wealth that facilitated the democratic process. Here, the complex interplay between economic status, slave ownership, and political participation comes to the fore.

The nature of Athenian democracy, which was predicated on the exclusion of certain groups (including slaves, women, and foreigners), is critical to consider. The process of maintaining a clear distinction between the citizens who were entitled to participate in political processes and those who were not was, in many ways, reinforced by the institution of slavery. The relegation of slaves to labor-intensive roles in agriculture helped maintain the societal structure that supported Athenian democracy.⁴² By designating critical economic functions to enslaved individuals, the Athenians were able to delegate manual labor while retaining political and societal privileges to citizens.⁴³

Simultaneously, the ethical and moral tensions presented in the examination of Plato’s “Laws” illuminate the complex socio-economic dynamics inherent in the Athenian society, hinting at possible societal fissures and contestations that could threaten the Athenian democratic order. These suggest that the institution of slavery may not have been a mere instrument for economic gain but may have also served to maintain social cohesion and order. Such a reality prompts us to consider the delicate balance that might have been necessary to maintain this societal structure and how this might have influenced the Athenian democratic model.

Agriculture: Conclusion

In conclusion, this portion of the paper offers valuable insights into the critical role that slavery likely played in shaping and sustaining Athenian democracy. The institution of slavery, particularly its use in the agricultural sector, was not merely an economic mechanism but an integral part of the social fabric of ancient Athens, supporting its democratic process by providing the leisure and resources necessary for political participation. At the same time, it reinforced societal divisions and hierarchies, ensuring a clear distinction between those who were entitled to participate in the democratic process and those who were not. This, in turn, suggests that without the institution of slavery, the Athenian model of democracy as we understand it might have been significantly different, if not entirely absent.

SLAVERY IN THE ATHENIAN HOUSEHOLD

In Ancient Athens, slavery was a deeply entrenched institution and integral part of household life, permeating every stratum

42 (Olson & Wood, 1989)

43 (Jones, 1952)

of the society.⁴⁴ The domestic sphere heavily relied on the labor of enslaved people who were tasked with a wide range of responsibilities. Their roles varied, and included cooks, nursemaids, housekeepers, farm laborers, and artisans. These individuals were usually obtained through war, piracy, or the slave trade.⁴⁵ Interestingly, there was no racial basis for slavery, rather it was considered a state of being, which could befall anyone who was unlucky.⁴⁶ The enslaved people were considered property under the law, and their rights and treatment depended heavily on the disposition of their masters.⁴⁷ This intricate dynamic between masters and their enslaved workers had a significant influence on the social structure and daily life in Athenian households.

Ancient Sources

The Athenian household, according to ancient sources, often consisted of slaves, with Apuleius in *Defence 47* suggesting that a household might contain around fifteen slaves, a notion also reflected in Athenian society.⁴⁸ Apuleius' *Defence 47* provides an intriguing peek into the fabric of Athenian households and societal norms. This narrative, presented as a courtroom defence, offers insights into the expected number of slaves in a household and the roles and functions of these slaves in various aspects of Athenian life, including ceremonial rites. Yet, the very nature of the existence of slaves in a household had implications beyond mere labour, hinting at complex dynamics regarding secrecy, public ceremonies, and communal participation. For instance, Apuleius mentioned the secrecy of magic rites, emphasizing that they were performed "in the presence of very few free men."⁴⁹

Further evidence regarding slaves in the household can be found in Xenophon's "Memorabilia". Xenophon was an Athenian philosopher, military leader, and historian. This historical work provides insightful glimpses into the economic dynamics of slavery and its societal ramifications during Athens' classical era. In *Memorabilia*, 2, 5, Xenophon highlighted another dimension: the monetary value associated with each slave, emphasizing the concept of a slave as a commodity and economic investment. Slaves were valued not only for their labor but also for their potential income for the owner. Xenophon proposed a comparative scenario, asking, "do friends have different values, like slaves?" This question subtly underscores the economic consideration of owning slaves in the Athenian household and the societal structure of the time.

The texts above have been produced by the educated elite, who had the literacy skills and leisure time to put their

thoughts into writing. Thus, their views and interpretations of the societal dynamics, particularly in relation to slavery, are not necessarily representative of the broader Athenian population. The elite authors, as part of the ruling class, might have had vested interests in maintaining the institution of slavery. By accentuating the economic contributions and societal status associated with slave ownership, these sources could potentially be amplifying and normalizing the dehumanization of a group of people for the benefit of the wealthy elite.

Acknowledging these difficulties, the texts nevertheless offer invaluable insights into the economic role of slavery in Athenian society. Slaves, as highlighted by Apuleius and Xenophon, had a dual role: they were part of the domestic workforce and an economic investment for the household. In this regard, these sources are beneficial in shedding light on the economic underpinnings of Athenian society and slavery's role therein. They provide a nuanced understanding of slavery's value, extending beyond productivity and manual labor to a more complex socio-economic entity.

Slavery: More than an Economy

As presented by Hermann Otto in the *Cambridge World History of Slavery*, slavery in ancient Athens was more than just an economic institution; it was deeply woven into the societal fabric, influencing household dynamics, labor division, and daily life.⁵⁰ As the text underscores, understanding the nature and economic role of slavery requires us to look past our current, individualistic economic models and view Athenian society as a largely collective entity, wherein the household was the central unit of production.

Ancient references to slaves as 'tools' imply a specific economic role rather than personal value.⁵¹ As in the sources above, the value of household slavery was in the fluid allocation of labor that could be adjusted to meet seasonal or situational demands, such as periods of intense agricultural activity.⁵² Furthermore, Athenian households with numerous slaves often had the capacity to outsource their labor to neighbors or entrepreneurs, indicating an ancillary economy revolving around slavery.⁵³

In Porter's analysis, the role of female slaves brings an added layer of complexity.⁵⁴ Unlike the contemporary perspective that might consider domestic work unproductive, Athenian households viewed these tasks as essential. Female slaves were engaged in spinning and weaving, tasks which significantly contributed to household income and self-sufficiency. This illustrates that women's work, far from being merely domestic or peripheral, held economic value and complemented the labor of men. Moreover, it's

44 (Morris & Papadopoulos, 2005)

45 (Evans)

46 (Westermann, 1943), (Vlassopoulos 115-130), (Schlaifer 165-204), (Cuffel 323-42)

47 (owen.pham)

48 (Wiedemann, 1980), page 97

49 (Wiedemann, 1980), page 97

50 (Herrmann-Otto, 2014)

51 (Vlassopoulos 115-130), (Hunt, 2017)

52 (Herrmann-Otto, 2014)

53 (Schlaifer 165-204), (Powell, 2002)

54 (Porter, 2019), (Golden, 1984), (Powell, 2002)

important to note that societal norms and prejudices often clouded the economic contributions of these women and slaves in general. As Porter's paper emphasizes, Athenians preferred to believe they produced almost everything they needed within their homes, downplaying the role of slaves in the marketplace.⁵⁵

The historical sources suggest that slavery was deeply embedded within the fabric of Athenian society, impacting not just the economy but the societal structure and dynamics as well. Slavery did not merely provide an economic benefit through cheap labor; it formed a cornerstone of the Athenian household, the fundamental economic unit of the time.⁵⁶ The presence of slaves within households permitted Athenians to pursue other tasks – notably, participating in the democratic process.⁵⁷ Engaging in political and public affairs required time and resources, luxuries that the institution of slavery provided to Athenian citizens. By handling a multitude of domestic and agricultural tasks, slaves freed up their masters' time, allowing them to participate in democratic governance, military service, and other civic responsibilities.

Household Slavery: Conclusion

Thus, the narratives of Apuleius and Xenophon underscore that slavery might have been a prerequisite for the existence of democracy in ancient Athens. The extent to which slavery contributed to the economic prosperity and societal structure of Athens suggests that without it, Athenian democracy may have looked vastly different.⁵⁸ However, the lack of representation of slaves in these accounts is a stark reminder of the disparities inherent within Athenian democracy. While we speak of the democratic nature of ancient Athens, we must bear in mind that this democracy was enjoyed by a select few. The disenfranchised - slaves, women, metics (foreigners living in Athens) - formed a significant proportion of the population, but their voices and experiences remain largely absent from the democratic process.⁵⁹

THE EFFECT OF SLAVERY IN THE ATHENIAN ECONOMY THROUGH DANGEROUS LABOR

During the Classical era in Athens, slaves were integral to maintaining the standard of living enjoyed by the free Athenian citizens and fostering the cultural and intellectual development of the city.⁶⁰ They also provided directly to the economy through intensive physical labor. The silver mines of Laurion, situated to the south of Athens, were a notable example of this. The mines, known for their treacherous working conditions, were primarily staffed by slave labor.⁶¹

Slaves worked long, grueling hours underground, tasked with extracting silver ore using basic and often dangerous tools.⁶² The tunnels they worked in were poorly ventilated, and the risks of accidents, rock falls, asphyxiation, or poisoning from toxic fumes were an ever-present part of their reality.⁶³ The grain mills in Athens were another area where slaves were expected to perform hard labor under potentially hazardous conditions. The process of grinding grain into flour required substantial physical strength and stamina. It involved operating heavy millstones and dealing with constant dust exposure, which could lead to serious respiratory problems.⁶⁴ In these fields, the slaves lived and worked under extremely challenging and often dangerous conditions.⁶⁵

Ancient Sources

Slaves' roles as critical components of permanent labor forces, especially in sectors like agriculture and mining, are also highlighted in ancient texts. Xenophon, the author of the aforementioned "Memorabilia", provides a detailed account of Athenian life in his work "On the Revenues," where he provided a detailed account of Nikias, a prosperous Athenian, who managed a large number of slaves.⁶⁶ As Xenophon wrote, Nikias, the son of Nikeratos, maintained "a holding of one thousand slaves whom he hired out to work in the silver mines for Sosias the Thracian," illuminating the extensive usage of slave labor within the economy. Aristotle corroborates this observation in his work "On the Constitution of Aegina," which highlights the presence of 470,000 slaves, further emphasizing the significance of slave labor in the economic machinery.⁶⁷ Moreover, the perspective of Timaios of Tauromenion finds resonance in the work of Larensius, who asserted, "most of these tens of thousands of Athenian slaves were chained and worked in the mines".⁶⁸ The underlying dependence of the Athenian economy on the slave labor force was such that they even faced revolts, as the philosopher Posidonius recounted, the slaves once "revolted and killed the men who were guarding the mines, took control of the acropolis at Sounion and ravaged Attica for a long time."

The ancient sources above—Xenophon's "On the Revenues," Aristotle's "On the Constitution of Aegina," Timaios's works, and Posidonius's accounts—paint a vivid picture of the Athenian society and its dependence on slavery. However, when using these sources, we must remain cautious of potential pitfalls. They were written by elite members of Athenian society, whose perspectives may not fully encapsulate the complexities of social, economic, and political

55 (Porter, 2019)

56 (Olson & Wood, 1989), (Vlassopoulos 115-130), (Hunt, 2017)

57 (Jones, 1952)

58 (Morris & Papadopoulos, 2005)

59 (Hansen, 1989), (Cuffel 323-42)

60 See more at (Morris & Papadopoulos, 2005),

61 (Chrysopoulos)

62 ("Confronting Slavery in the Classical World | Emory | Michael C. Carlos Museum")

63 (Nikolaos Skordilis), (Michell, 2014), (Amemiya, 2007)

64 (Westermann, 2011)

65 (Treister, 1995), (Vaxevanopoulos et al., 2021)

66 (Wiedemann, 1980), page 85

67 (Wiedemann, 1980), page 106

68 Ibid.

conditions in ancient Athens.⁶⁹ For instance, it's important to note that the Athenian writers had a vested interest in the preservation and justification of the slave system, potentially resulting in biased portrayals.

The utility of these sources stems from their first-hand, contemporaneous accounts of the socio-economic status quo, providing invaluable insights into the prevalence of slave labor within the economy. Xenophon's detailed narrative about Nikias's exploitation of slaves in silver mines underlines the scale of slave use, while Aristotle's staggering figure of 470,000 slaves demonstrates the extent of reliance on slave labor. Timaios and Larensius reiterate this through the grim image of chained slaves toiling in mines, further supplemented by Posidonius's accounts of slave revolts, indicative of the tension brewing under the oppressive system.

Dangerous Labor: Modern Interpretations

Modern sources have highlighted the critical role that slavery played in dangerous labor sectors like mining and mills in Athens. According to Porter, the silver mines, a key economic driver for Athens, relied heavily on a labor force largely comprised of slaves. Excavated mineshafts in Attica's mining region confirm the extensive use of slaves in these perilous conditions.⁷⁰ The resultant boost to the Athenian economy was significant, as slaves provided cost-effective labor that otherwise would not have been available.⁷¹ In the milling industry, both commercial mills and individual households relied heavily on slaves for labor. The process of grinding grain into flour was laborious and presented several health hazards, such as respiratory problems due to dust inhalation.⁷² The exploitation of slaves for this purpose allowed for the affordability of flour, an essential good in Athens, thereby supporting the overall economy.⁷³

Porter and Silver, reviewing sources such as those above, argue that the role of slaves in these dangerous industries contributed significantly to Athens' economic efflorescence during the late archaic and classical period (600-300 BC). By directing labor towards economically productive ends that were limited by Athens' societal framework, slavery facilitated the growth and prosperity of the city-state. The institution of slavery, specifically the utilization of imported slave labor, emerged as a significant institutional factor driving the economic growth of Greek city-states.⁷⁴

Additionally, the use of slaves in industries such as mining and milling shielded Athenian citizens from the perils and

drudgery of such work.⁷⁵ By providing a workforce for dangerous and unpleasant labor, the institution of slavery protected Athenian democratic actors, and reinforced the ideologies discussed earlier, where slaves were to be treated distinctly from citizens, as multi-purpose tools with economic value. As argued by Otto, slaves were particularly involved in dangerous labor such as mining and working in mills.⁷⁶ This narrative reveals how crucial slaves were to the economic growth of Athens, with their contribution being particularly pronounced in high-risk sectors like mining.

Dangerous Labor: Synthesis

Numerous case-studies demonstrate that slaves were heavily involved with numerous sectors of the economy, their labor serving as the backbone of various industries ranging from mining to manufacturing and even crafts.⁷⁷ One such case-study is that of the Athenian general Nikias for instance, who owned up to a thousand slaves that he leased to mining contractors. These instances underscore the significant role and influence of slave labor in the Athenian economy.⁷⁸ Slave labor also permeated the realm of Athenian crafts and manufacturing. Many masters owned slaves to aid them in their work, including in dangerous factories where conditions were no less severe than in the mines.⁷⁹ The prevalence of slave labor in these contexts reverberated through the Athenian economy, providing a steady income to slave owners and buttressing various industries.⁸⁰

The dangerous work slaves undertook was essential to the functioning of the Athenian economy. Moreover, the hazardous nature of these occupations likely made them less appealing to free Athenians. Thus, the economic reliance on slave labor in these sectors arguably facilitated the social and political life of free Athenians, providing them the leisure to participate in the democratic process.⁸¹ Furthermore, the economic benefits reaped from the slave labor—such as cost-effective production in mines and mills, or the income generated by leasing slaves as Nikias did—contributed to the wealth and prosperity of the city-state. In turn, this economic prosperity underpinned the sustainability of the democratic system in Athens.⁸² While one cannot definitively assert that democracy would not have existed without slavery, the intricate linkage between the economy, underpinned by slavery, and the political system suggests a significant interdependence.⁸³

75 (Porter, 2019)

76 (Herrmann-Otto, 2014), (Jones, 1952)

77 (Herrmann-Otto, 2014), (Silver 2006, 257-263), (Hunt, 2017)

78 (Joshel and Murnaghan)

79 (Herrmann-Otto, 2014)

80 ("Economics in Ancient Greece," 1974)

81 (Wrenhaven, 2012), (Hunt, 2017)

82 (Silver 2006, 257-263), ("The Economy of Ancient Greece"), (Cuffel 323-42)

83 ("Confronting Slavery in the Classical World | Emory | Michael C. Carlos Museum")

69 (Gray, n.d.), ("Confronting Slavery in the Classical World | Emory | Michael C. Carlos Museum")

70 (Porter, 2019), (Cuffel 323-42)

71 ("Confronting Slavery in the Classical World | Emory | Michael C. Carlos Museum")

72 (Porter, 2019), ("The Economy of Ancient Greece")

73 (Porter, 2019), (Morris & Papadopoulos, 2005)

74 (Porter, 2019), (Silver 2006, 257-263)

Dangerous Labor: Conclusion

In conclusion, the section on the role of slavery in dangerous labor sectors in the Athenian economy underlines the significance of slavery to Athens' economic prosperity and the operation of its democratic system. It reinforces the economic advantages accrued from slave labor, which, in turn, likely created the conditions that facilitated the Athenian citizens' active engagement in democratic practices. However, the ethical implications and inherent injustice of the slave system cannot be overlooked, emphasizing the importance of critical scrutiny of the sources and acknowledgment of the human cost of Athens' economic prosperity and democratic practice.

THE EFFECT OF SLAVERY IN THE ATHENIAN ECONOMY THROUGH BANKING

In ancient Athens slaves held a role in various sectors, including the banking system.⁸⁴ This system was significantly different to the banking as we understand it today, being a more personalized financial service that included lending money, exchanging currency, storing valuables, and providing financial advice.⁸⁵ These services were delivered by "trapezitae" or bankers, who typically set up tables (trapeza) in the agora, or marketplace, and conducted their transactions there.⁸⁶ The trapezitae, usually wealthy citizens, supplied the capital for these operations, while the daily activities of these financial establishments were often managed by slaves. These roles varied from accountants, clerks, to managers.⁸⁷ This was largely possible due to the unique position of slaves in Athenian society, where some slaves, particularly those from educated backgrounds, were allowed and even expected to perform complex tasks. Contrary to the perception of slaves as unskilled laborers, these slaves in the Athenian banking system required a high level of numeracy, literacy, and financial acumen.⁸⁸ They were tasked with maintaining financial records, managing debts, calculating and collecting interest, handling deposits, and even providing financial advice. As property of the trapezitae, slaves were considered an integral part of the banking assets. They were an economic investment, and their value could be used as collateral for loans and other financial transactions.⁸⁹

Ancient Sources

Ancient sources reveal that public slaves played a critical role in various aspects of the Athenian economy, from public administration to banking.⁹⁰ One of the foremost sources on

84 ("The Economy of Ancient Greece"), (Chrysopoulos)

85 (Nikolaos Skordilis), (Michell, 2014), (Amemiya, 2007)

86 (DLVF)

87 ("Ancient Greece's Legacy for Liberty: Banking for Freedom in Athens"), (Golden, 1984)

88 (owen.pham), (Amemiya, 2007)

89 ("Confronting Slavery in the Classical World | Emory | Michael C. Carlos Museum")

90 (Pritchard, 2015)

this topic is, again, Xenophon. His work, the "Constitution of the Athenians", provides a detailed look into the socio-political structure of Classical Athens. According to Xenophon's "Constitution of the Athenians", these slaves were "owned by the city for public services." As part of their duty, they worked as "secretaries, administrators and even policemen." These roles indicate the centrality of public slaves to the functioning of Athenian society, potentially having a direct influence on the city's economic administration. Xenophon's writings thus serve as an invaluable resource for understanding the intricate workings of ancient Athenian society, particularly its system of public slavery.⁹¹

One of the most striking illustrations of their economic impact is their involvement in the Athenian banking system. Ancient texts, such as those from Demosthenes⁹² and Lysias, reveal that these public slaves were "the city's bank tellers, dealing with deposits and loans."

Demosthenes' speech, for instance, tells us about Pasio, a public slave, who managed a bank. Pasio "was able to make so much money that he was able to buy his freedom" and even "become a citizen," demonstrating the considerable wealth public slaves could accumulate. Furthermore, Lysias' speech tells us about another public slave, Pasion, who "leased the banking business" from his former owner after being manumitted, showing the extent of their economic activities.

The texts also highlight the monetary value attached to these public slaves.⁹³ According to the information from Xenophon's "Economics"⁹⁴, a public slave could cost about "three minas," while another "could be sold for as much as a talent." This not only shows the financial value of public slaves but also how their acquisition and sale could potentially stimulate economic activity in ancient Athens.

Xenophon's account is highly useful for comprehending the societal value of slaves, indicating that slaves were fundamental to many aspects of public life, from administration to banking.⁹⁵ However, his account might also be biased in terms of justifying slavery as a form of public service necessary for Athenian governance.⁹⁶

Turning to Demosthenes, his speeches are insightful as they shed light on the potential for economic mobility among slaves, such as the case of Pasio.⁹⁷ However, the account may downplay the economic hardships and challenges faced by the majority of slaves who couldn't purchase their freedom. Demosthenes, as a statesman and orator, often employed rhetorical strategies to persuade his audience.⁹⁸ This might

91 (Frisch, 1976), (Pritchard, 2015)

92 (Wiedemann, 1980), page 41

93 (Harris, 2008)

94 (Xenophon, 2019), (Michell, 2014)

95 (Amemiya, 2007)

96 (Frisch, 1976), (Pritchard, 2015)

97 (Elmore et al., 1916), (Harris, 2008)

98 (Cartwright), (Michell, 2014)

have resulted in a somewhat idealized narrative about the lives of public slaves in his accounts. Thus, the applicability of his accounts to the average public slave in Athens might be limited.

Lysias' speeches provide invaluable details about the specific role of slaves within the Athenian banking sector, with the example of Pasion. But we should be careful not to generalize this to all public slaves. As an influential logographer, Lysias wrote speeches for others to deliver in court, potentially altering the narrative to suit the case at hand.⁹⁹ Pasion's story, while fascinating, could be an exception rather than the norm, indicating the need for a broader understanding of slaves' economic roles.

Dangerous Labor: Modern Interpretations

Modern sources shed light on the significant impact that slavery had on the Athenian economy, particularly in the realm of banking, as detailed in the paper "Banking in Old Athens" by Benjamin W. Wells.¹⁰⁰ In his paper, Wells discussed slaves like Pasion and Phormio, who amassed significant wealth and held positions of economic influence, challenge conventional understandings of slavery. Despite their status as slaves, they managed to rise in prominence in the banking industry.¹⁰¹ "Pasion's banking business was inherited by his two slaves, Phormio and Pasicles, who were later freed," the paper states. Their ability to attain such positions within Athenian society and later secure their freedom highlights the considerable economic influence they wielded.¹⁰²

These slaves were not just involved in basic banking operations but were entrusted with significant financial responsibilities.¹⁰³ For instance, they conducted banking transactions for influential Athenians such as Apollodorus and Timotheus. Apollodorus recounts a dispute with Timotheus, saying, "They entered his name as debtor when they paid the money, not when Timotheus, at home, introduced Philondas to my father." This scenario showcases the integral role slaves played in facilitating significant financial transactions within Athenian society.

Moreover, Pasion's bank was a critical economic institution in Athens, lending to the state, powerful generals, and influential politicians. Wells notes that "the bank managed to survive the economic fluctuations of the Peloponnesian War, and continued to provide loans to the state, among others."¹⁰⁴ It highlights the economic power and influence of Pasion and Phormio, even as slaves, on the larger Athenian economy.

These case studies show how the pivotal role that slavery played in the Athenian economy, especially in the banking sector. The story of slaves such as Pasion and Phormio

showcases how, despite their societal status, they significantly contributed to and influenced the economic dynamics of Athenian society. It underscores the fact that slavery in ancient Athens was a complex phenomenon with profound economic implications.¹⁰⁵ The nuanced understanding of the role of slavery in the Athenian economy, as revealed by these modern sources, offers a fresh perspective on the socio-economic structures of the ancient world.

Banking: Synthesis

Examining the central role of slavery in the Athenian banking system offers a compelling perspective on the broader question of the feasibility of Athenian democracy in the absence of slavery. It appears that slaves were indispensable to the day-to-day functioning of the Athenian economy, particularly the banking sector. Their contributions extended beyond manual labor to sophisticated tasks such as maintaining financial records, managing debts, calculating and collecting interest, and offering financial advice. The cases of public slaves like Pasio and Pasion underscore the potential economic influence that slaves, despite their status, could wield within Athenian society.

In this context, it is conceivable that the slaves' economic contributions may have indirectly facilitated the democratic processes in Athens. The banking sector's function as a critical economic institution, a role maintained in part by slaves, may have supported the functioning of the democratic state. Without the input of slaves, the banking system might have struggled to operate with the same level of efficiency, which could have, in turn, had a detrimental effect on the Athenian economy and, by extension, its democratic process.

However, it is essential to balance this analysis with a clear understanding of the societal structures that underpinned the Athenian democracy. While public slaves like Pasio and Pasion enjoyed significant economic mobility, it is important to remember that they were exceptions rather than the rule. The majority of slaves, particularly those engaged in physical labor, faced economic hardship and lacked opportunities for advancement.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, while slaves contributed significantly to the economy, they did not enjoy the rights and privileges of citizens, such as participating in the democratic decision-making process.¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, one must consider the implications of a society reliant on the institution of slavery for its economic vitality. If the success of the Athenian democracy was dependent on the exploitation of a class of individuals deprived of their rights, this raises significant ethical and philosophical questions about the nature of such a democracy.

In this light, the notion that Athenian democracy might not have been sustainable without slavery becomes a

99 (Evans et al., 1991), ("Perseus Encyclopedia, Lysias")

100 (Wells 1917)

101 (Shipton, 1997)

102 (Wells 1917), (Harris, 2008)

103 ("Pasion")

104 (Wells 1917)

105 (Pritchard, 2015), (Cartwright), (Michell, 2014)

106 ("Confronting Slavery in the Classical World | Emory | Michael C. Carlos Museum")

107 ("Slavery in Classical Athens: The Dark Side of Democracy")

highly complex and nuanced argument, grounded in an understanding of the intricate dynamics between economic practices, societal structures, and political ideologies. Further research might explore the possibility of alternate economic models in the absence of slavery and their potential impact on Athenian democracy.

Banking: Conclusion

Ultimately, the investigation of slavery's economic influence, particularly in the banking sector, illuminates the interplay between economic systems and political structures in ancient Athens. The slaves' essential role in the Athenian banking system and the broader economy seems to suggest that the vibrant Athenian democracy, as we understand it, might not have existed without the institution of slavery. However, this does not preclude the existence of other forms of democracy that might have developed under different socio-economic conditions. This assertion underscores the complex, multifaceted nature of the relationship between economics, politics, and societal structures in ancient Athens.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of the intricate relationship between slavery and the socio-political and economic structures in ancient Athens yields a multifaceted understanding of Athenian democracy. The question of whether Athenian democracy would have existed in the absence of slavery is not straightforward; rather, it involves intricate nuances in the social, political, and economic domains of Athenian society.

The analysis of various sectors—agriculture, mining, pottery, public works, and banking—shows that slaves were instrumental in Athens' economic vitality. They were not mere passive actors but served as a critical workforce across multiple economic sectors. Their work, ranging from the most labor-intensive tasks to the complex management of financial institutions, enabled Athens to thrive economically. Without their substantial contribution, the Athenian economy could have been less dynamic and prosperous.

However, it is equally important to highlight that the bulk of Athenian slaves did not enjoy the relative autonomy or social mobility that the stories of slaves like Pasio and Pasion suggest.¹⁰⁸ For many, the reality of slavery was far from the occasional tales of financial success or manumission. The vast majority of slaves faced a life of relentless labor and servitude without any prospect of upward mobility. Thus, it would be inaccurate and misleading to portray slavery in Athens as a benign institution that offered substantial opportunities for individual success.

The economic prosperity that slaves contributed to played a significant role in facilitating Athens' democratic system. The Athenian democracy was unique in that it allowed an unprecedented degree of political participation from its citizens.¹⁰⁹ This political engagement was made possible,

108 ("Slavery in Ancient Greece")

109 (Little)

in part, by the economic prosperity of Athens, in which slaves played an integral role. The wealth generated by slaves across various economic sectors likely supported the state's initiatives, from public works to military expenses, thus indirectly maintaining the democratic processes in Athens.¹¹⁰

Yet, the fact that this vibrant democracy was built on an institution that fundamentally contradicted democratic principles raises profound ethical and philosophical questions. The Athenian democracy, as admired and influential as it was, excluded a significant portion of its population—the slaves—from the democratic process. This reliance on an oppressed class for its economic prosperity points to a paradox at the heart of Athenian democracy.

In the modern context, this analysis is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it deepens our understanding of ancient Athens, which has profoundly influenced Western philosophical, political, and social thought. By understanding the interdependencies of economic, political, and social structures in Athens, we can gain valuable insights into the strengths and contradictions of ancient Athenian society. Secondly, it prompts us to consider the underlying structures that support modern democratic systems. While the institution of slavery as it existed in ancient Athens is no longer present, modern societies still grapple with systemic inequalities. This historical analysis can stimulate critical reflections on contemporary social structures and their compatibility with democratic ideals.

In summary, while the institution of slavery was pivotal to Athens' economic prosperity and indirectly supported its democratic processes, the ethical implications of this reliance are complex. It appears that, without slavery, Athenian democracy as we know it might not have existed. However, this analysis underscores the profound complexity of Athenian society and serves as a prompt for further investigation into alternative democratic models that could have developed under different socio-economic conditions. Indeed, it raises the question: what form of democracy might have emerged in Athens in the absence of slavery, and what can we learn from that possibility for our modern world?

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110 ("Slavery in Classical Athens: The Dark Side of Democracy")

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