

CHAPTER 9

“ CRATES,
XENOPHON, AND
ARISTOTLE

“A LIVING POSSESSION” SLAVERY

It's hard for a modern person to imagine how much hard work ancient people had to do just to stay alive. About 80 percent of all Greek workers were involved in agriculture. Greeks who had their own land looked down on people who farmed someone else's land for pay, or made the useful clay pots, or hammered out the armor that soldiers needed.

Many upper-class Greeks mistrusted and disliked the laborers. It would be easy for us to think that these Athenians were ungrateful people who sneered at the workers who made their city wealthy and powerful. But most people, probably including the laborers themselves, thought that the gods put people in the position they were supposed to be in. If you were a bricklayer, it was because you were meant to be a bricklayer. If you could be useful being a sailor, then you had to be a sailor. By this reasoning, putting a sailor into a general's position would be like using a lawnmower to wash your dishes or using a computer as a paperweight.

And if you were meant to be a slave, the gods made you a slave.

Slavery was common throughout the ancient world. No one knows exactly when people started enslaving each other, although the practice started long before recorded history. This is certainly true in Greece. Documents



Both slaves and free people farmed the land. This sculpture shows a farmer plowing with his team of cattle.

from the very early civilization of Mycenae show a large number of slaves, many of them working for the *wanax*, or ruler.

This is not to say that everybody in ancient Greece thought that owning another human being was a good thing. In a play called *The Beasts*, written by the fifth-century BCE playwright Crates, one of the characters tells his friend about an ideal world he's dreamed up in which nobody is allowed to have a slave:

Everything will come to people as soon as they call for it. "Table, put yourself down right here next to me. . . . Fill up, jug. . . . Get moving, fish!" "But I'm not toasted on the other side yet!" "Well then, why don't you turn yourself over—and cover yourself with oil and salt while you're at it!"

But in reality, a high percentage of the ancient Greek population was made up of enslaved people, especially after the sixth century BCE. Some historians think that of the roughly 250,000 people in Attica, the territory of Athens, about 80,000 to 100,000 were enslaved.

We know much less about enslaved people than we do about free people. The Greeks kept very few records about slaves, so historians have a hard time figuring out some of the details about their lives.

Many slaves were foreigners who had been captured in wars or by pirates who seized sailors as well as their cargo. Since Greeks mostly looked down on people from other countries, they thought that it was only natural for these "inferior" people to be enslaved.

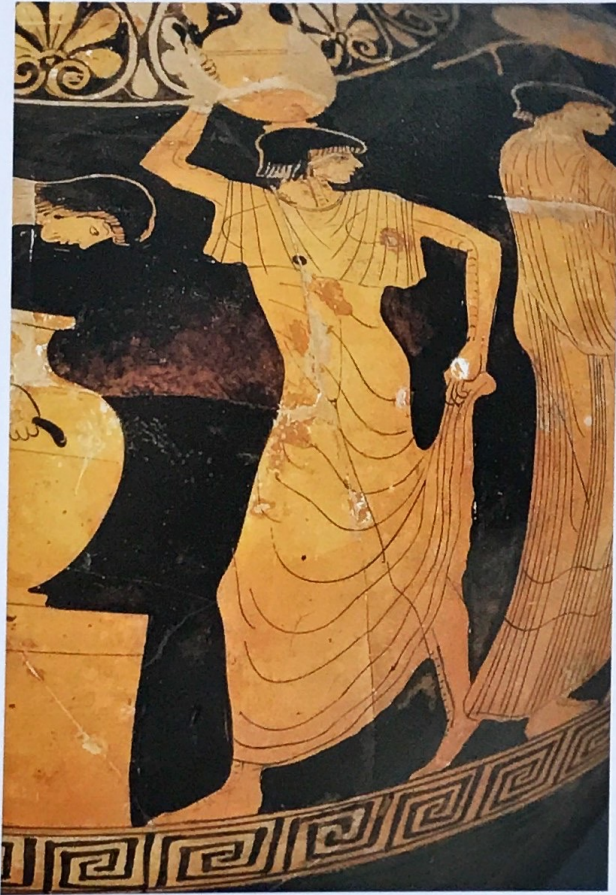
Sometimes Greeks enslaved other Greeks, although they preferred not to. In a long war between Athens and Sparta, the Athenians were sometimes so angry and frustrated that they would enslave the entire populations of cities that weren't fighting on their side. Criminals might be condemned to enslavement. Also, some people's desperate poverty forced them to sell themselves or their children. People who owed a lot of money might wind up paying off their debt with themselves, in place of the cash they didn't have. This

☞ Crates, *The Beasts*, mid-fifth century BCE

Who Is a Citizen?

Some Greek states did not allow manual laborers to vote. The philosopher Aristotle sounds like a modern-day snob:

There were some states, in the earliest times, where the class of laborers was actually composed of slaves or foreigners exclusively, which explains why so many laborers are slaves or foreigners even today. The best form of the state will not make the laborer a citizen.



Slaves wore tattoos to indicate where they came from. The tattoos on the arms and neck of this slave show that she is from Thrace, not from Greece.

setup could be temporary, with the person eventually working off the debt. Children of slaves were also slaves.

Slaves were looked on as tools, just like a computer or a chainsaw today. A few extremely wealthy people lived off the labor of their slaves. But many people who owned slaves also worked, just as many people today who own computers and chainsaws work. Another way to profit was to rent slaves out to other people who needed their labor for only a short period, such as during planting or harvest time. Cities and towns might own slaves who did public work such as street repair and construction.

Of course, most slaves worked harder than most free people. And some of the slaves' jobs were terribly dangerous and degrading. One of the worst fates was to be sent to the silver mines, where thousands of slaves died of overwork and accidents. Farm slaves also had hard (and usually short) lives. Some oarsmen on warships were slaves, although others were highly trained sailors.

Sometimes slaves were semi-independent. Craftsmen set up slaves in workshops and took a portion of what the slave earned by metalworking, pottery, tailoring, and other crafts. The slave could often keep the rest.

At least one slave managed to do even better than that. His name was Pasion, and he worked for two bankers in Athens's port city of Piraeus. He did such a good job and learned so much that the bankers freed him, and he started

"A slave is a living possession."

—Aristotle, *Politics*, mid-fourth century BCE

his own business. He set up shop in Athens as a banker, and also started a shield-making business. He became the wealthiest banker and manufacturer of his time in the area.

Pasion was a loyal member of his adopted *polis*, and made many charitable contributions to Athens. In return, the *polis* made him and his descendants Athenian citizens. His spending habits caught up with him, though: when he died, he owed more money than he left to his heirs.

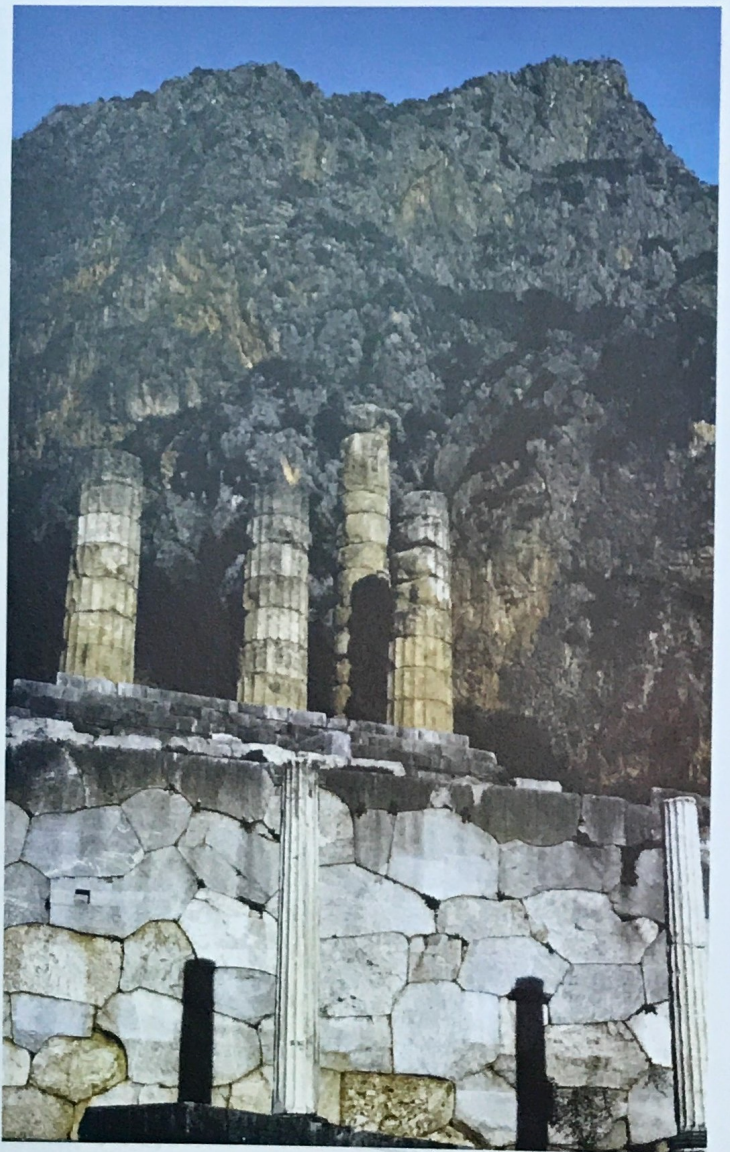
Pasion was an exception. Most slaves spent their entire lives without the hope of freedom, and very few of them were entrusted with such important and complicated work as banking.

Many of them worked in the household. They could be cooks, maids, gardeners, companions, and occasionally tutors to their masters' children. Female slaves performed many of the traditional women's jobs in the home such as weaving and cooking, sometimes alongside the free women, sometimes taking over the more difficult parts of the task.

If they were well educated, slaves might be assigned specialized work, such as copying books. Talented women might do fine needlework. Slaves also often took care of babies and small children.

Many people today would feel uncomfortable if the people protecting them and their property had lost their freedom. Apparently some Greeks were fine with this, because the police forces in many *poleis* were made up, at least in part, of slaves. When states were really worried about losing a war, they would

One way to buy freedom was for a slave to deposit money in an account at a religious site. The owner would then "sell" the slave to the god and take the money from that account. This wall at the city of Delphi records some of these transactions.



The Ants and the Grasshopper

Aesop was a Greek slave who wrote fables. This one may be familiar, although nowadays, storytellers sometimes change the ending to make the ants take pity on the grasshopper:

The ants were spending a beautiful winter day drying the grain they had collected in the summer. A grasshopper, desperately hungry, passed by and earnestly begged for a little food. When the ants asked him why he hadn't stored food up during the summer, he said, 'I had no time. I spent my days singing.' The ants laughed at him. 'If you were so foolish as to sing the summer away,' they said, 'then you must dance supperless to bed now that winter has come.'

66 Xenophon, *On Household Management*, early fourth century BCE

sometimes have slaves serve in the military. Most school-teachers were also slaves, as were many doctors.

The lives of these more privileged slaves were usually not as hard as those of agricultural workers or slaves who worked in mines. But nothing could change the fact that they were enslaved. They were owned in the same way that a chair or a horse was owned. If a slave was injured, the person whose fault it was had to pay a fine to the owner—not to the injured person. In fact, their only rights were that they couldn't be killed and the only person who could hit them was their owner.

Slaves could not participate in many religious sects. Religion was important to the Greeks, so this must have been a real hardship. And a law said that the only way a slave's evidence could be used in court would be if it was obtained under torture. It appears, however, that this method of getting evidence was rarely (if ever) used.

Generally, people were enslaved for life, but there were some exceptions. Occasionally a childless couple would adopt a young slave and raise the child as their own. Sometimes an owner would free a slave (who usually had to keep performing some service for the former owner) and sometimes slaves were freed in the owner's will. At times a really heartless slave-owner would free slaves who had become old or sick. It was cheaper than having to support them.

The historian Xenophon thought up a reward system to make his slaves work harder and seemed to recognize that they were human. He wrote in his book *On Household Management*:

I . . . reward the better worker with better clothing and shoes and give the worse clothing and shoes to the worse worker. Slaves get very discouraged if they see that they're doing all the work but the others get the same rewards. I personally think that better slaves should not be treated in the same way as worse ones.

But at times he also compares them to animals:

It's possible to make human beings more disposed to obey merely by explaining to them the advantages of

obedience, but things are different with slaves. With slaves, the training considered appropriate to wild animals is a particularly useful method of instilling obedience.

Greeks worried about slave revolts. Both Plato and Aristotle said that it was a good idea not to have all the slaves in the house come from the same part of the world and speak the same language. This would reduce the risk of a revolt or other problems for the owner. But it also must have made life very lonely for the slaves, who were forced to live among people with a different language and much different culture from their own.

It was very rare for slaves to gain freedom by running away. Where would they run to, after all? Slavery was legal everywhere they could go.

How could the same society make slaves teachers and doctors and also compare them to animals, without the ability to reason? In his *Politics* the philosopher Aristotle wrote that

the rule of the free over the slave is of one nature; that of the male over the female another; and that of the adult over the child another still. The slave utterly lacks the capacity for thinking; the female has it, but in an ill-defined form; and if children have it too, it is only in an immature form.

“ Aristotle, *Politics*,
mid-fourth century BCE

Yet he freed several slaves in his will. Did he think they would suddenly become smart the day he died? Or did he think that there was something about being enslaved that took away the ability to reason? If that was the case, wouldn't he be making society better by freeing as many slaves as possible, or even campaigning to abolish the practice? Then you would have many more thinking, reasoning people to participate in the community.

But that didn't happen. Life was good in Athens, as long as you were a free adult male. Slaves, women, and children enjoyed some great benefits from living in Athens, but only as second- (or third- or fourth-) class citizens.