

Sara Forsdyke, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. 177. £18.99. ISBN 978-1107658899.

This book is a summary of Greek slavery intended to be easily accessible to undergraduates and others with an academic interest in, but only passing knowledge of, the field. In English, it is the first monograph specifically on Greek slavery aimed at this audience in nearly 30 years.<sup>1</sup> Such a project can certainly be justified on the grounds that ancient Greek slavery has been a consistently growing field. Advances have been made in our overarching approaches to the topic of ancient Greek slavery as well as our understanding of smaller, technical, issues related to the topic. Though Forsdyke's book should be commended for foregrounding valuable new approaches advanced by recent scholarship, this reader found a lack of engagement with some recent publications to be an occasional problem.

As she explicitly states in her first chapter, which serves as an extended introduction (2–4), Forsdyke intends her history of Greek slavery to construe the humanity of slaves. This is an important point, but it can be a difficult one to get across, primarily because slaves did not create the vast majority of our ancient evidence, and the society they lived in made them property and restricted their freedom. Nevertheless, a great deal of *Slaves and Slavery* is centered on the experiences of slaves and the ways in which they themselves contributed to the history of ancient Greece. Chapters 2 on the slave trade and Chapter 3 on the work slaves performed are titled “Becoming a Slave” and “Being a Slave” respectively, and the fourth chapter on “Slaves and Status”, while partially concerned with the second-class status of slaves, notes also the communities they participated in and the identities they formed. Within this framing, Forsdyke does a remarkable job (often with very little evidence) of capturing what life was like for Greek slaves. Take, for example, a thoughtful and largely original subsection discussing the “Cultural Dislocation” of slaves removed from their homelands and brought to Greek cities (83–9). The human agency of slaves and the ways Athenian masters tried to direct it towards their interests is the focus of the book's fifth chapter. Another notably original subsection therein argues for a classical Athenian equivalent to Noxal Surrender: a condition of Roman law that allowed a slave who acted illegally against someone who was not their master to be seized by the victim in lieu of damages (223–7). Forsdyke's analysis here shows how certain enterprising slaves might be able to use this practice as a means of escaping their masters.

The overall emphasis on capturing the humanity of slaves lends considerable value to the book and constitutes, in my view, its main strength. These strands culminate in Forsdyke's short final chapter, which makes a case for the importance of studying ancient Greek slavery in the modern world. To Forsdyke, emphasizing the fact that slaves were human just like their masters and their role in shaping Greek history exposes the “wholly arbitrary and wholly convenient constructions of difference” (250)

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<sup>1</sup> Most recently, Fisher, N. 1993. *Slavery in Ancient Greece*, Bristol.

in Greek ideology. This serves as a reminder of the unjustified grounds that form the basis of “discriminatory thought” more generally (249).

In several places, however, Forsdyke follows older orthodoxies over newer scholarship that challenges these orthodoxies robustly. For example, she states as fact the once unanimously held belief that Solon abolished debt-bondage in classical Athens (41; 69) while citing Harris to support the claim that it “seems not to have been entirely eradicated even in Athens” (41 n. 121).<sup>2</sup> In fact, Harris’ (in my opinion very strong) argument is that the existence of debt-bondage in Athens suggests it was never abolished, but rather that Solon outlawed permanent enslavement for debt (distinct from temporary debt-bondage). Gortyn is described as having a distinct class of more privileged slaves (*woikeis*); though one of several recent objections (and again justified ones) to this interpretation is briefly noted in a footnote, the objections are not engaged with (47).<sup>3</sup> Forsdyke also accepts without question the recently challenged traditional view that a set of dedications (*phialai exeleutheroi*) record the manumission of slaves (14; 116–7).<sup>4</sup> She repeats Demosthenes’ claim that a ship captain (Lampis) in one of his speeches was a slave without any acknowledgement of the modern controversy around his status (143–5).<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, the purpose of this book is not to engage in rigorous academic debate on controversial issues. At times, however, it conveys to its reader an unwarranted certainty about many of the particulars of Greek slavery it states as fact.

Finally, some further remarks on this book’s scope and its presentation thereof seem warranted. Forsdyke’s otherwise excellent critical survey of available evidence in her first chapter (7–17) does not address one major problem with our literary evidence and indeed much of our epigraphic evidence: it is Athenocentric in the extreme. This is a problem because, like many similar overviews that have come before it, what is described in this book is often essentially Athenian slavery, presented as if it were “Greek slavery”; entire subsections include little to no evidence outside of Athens. The slavery described in these (almost entirely Athenian) sources is then contrasted with the notably different Greek slave systems, chiefly Sparta and sometimes Gortyn (see especially 41–7), about which we have enough evidence to say much of substance. The case can be made that the slave systems of Athens and Sparta can be used to illuminate those of other Greek states and that such exercises are necessary due to the paucity of our evidence for the wider Greek world. Forsdyke, however, does not make this case, and any acknowledgement of how little we really know about slavery outside of Athens and Sparta and the differences that likely existed between different states are limited

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<sup>2</sup> Harris, E. M. 2002. “Did Solon Abolish Debt-Bondage?” *CQ*, 52, 415–430.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, D. M. 2013. “Slave Marriages in the Law of Gortyn”, *Historia*, 62, 390–416, 392–3; cf. Link, S. 2001. “*Dolos* und *Woikeus* im Recht von Gortyn”, *Dike*, 4, 87–112.

<sup>4</sup> Meyer, E. A. 2010. *Metics and the Athenian Phialai-Inscriptions: A Study in Athenian Epigraphy and Law*, Stuttgart.

<sup>5</sup> Discussion and references in: Kamen, D. 2013. *Status in Classical Athens*, Princeton, 23.

to a few cursory remarks that do not capture the magnitude of the problem (14; 47; 160). Where non-Athenian sources are included in this book, many either pre- or postdate Forsdyke's specified period of "roughly 500–300 BC" (3), i.e. Classical Greece. This begs a different question: why impose this chronological restriction at all, especially considering the broad coverage one would expect from the book's title?

There are reasons to recommend this book – above all its slave-centered approach to its subject. Forsdyke often provides a clear and concise summary of considerable complicated research and the frequent use of comparative evidence from later periods of history also adds interesting new perspectives to our Greek evidence. Others may not have the same misgivings I did about the studies left out of this book or the critically unexamined use of largely Athenian evidence, but it seems worth highlighting these points for those intending to use this book as an introduction to the topic of Greek slavery.

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