Reconsidering the Fictionality of Enslavement to Deities in the Hellenistic and Roman East

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Abstract: In this article, I offer a critique of a common trend in classical and religious studies scholarship: the treatment of human enslavement to deities as fictional, metaphorical, or otherwise unreal. In conversation with postcolonial and feminist historiographical and philosophical interventions, I explore what assumptions operate in metaphorizing or fictionalizing ancient Mediterranean deities and their role in socioeconomic affairs, including slavery. After providing an overview of how historians and philosophers have challenged some Western historiographical norms that govern the treatment of deities as unreal, I examine inscriptions from three sites (Delphi, Leukopetra, and the Bosporan Kingdom) and how the sale, dedication, and enslavement of humans to deities occurs. I end by analyzing how scholars have often continued to treat such inscriptions, noting how there tends to be a common reading of enslavement to a deity as fictional or a religious smokescreen.

Keywords: ancient Mediterranean religion, epigraphy, manumission, metaphor, slavery.

In this article, I offer a critique from the perspective of a specialist in ancient Mediterranean religions of a common trend in classical and religious studies scholarship over the last century: namely, the treatment of human enslavement to deities as something fictional, metaphorical, or otherwise unreal. Recent scholarship in my primary discipline of early Christian studies, along with postcolonial and feminist historiographical and philosophical interventions, have interrogated several assumptions often at play in the metaphorization and fictionalization of the gods. Such interventions might lead to a reconsideration of how deities participate in ancient Mediterranean socioeconomic affairs, including enslavement, and allow more robust space for non-human actors in our historical reconstructions of the ancient world.

I break down my argument into three sections. The first provides an overview of how various historians and philosophers have challenged some Western historiographical norms that govern the treatment of deities as unreal and urge for more robust frameworks for discussing the gods. The second examines three sites dating between the second century BCE and second century CE—Delphi, Leukopetra in Macedonia, and the Bosporan Kingdom—to explore how the sale, dedication, and enslavement of humans to deities like Apollo, the Autochthonous Mother of the Gods, and the Judaean God may not be as emancipatory as often presumed. I end with a survey of how scholars have treated inscriptions from these sites, focusing on the commonality of reading enslavement to a deity as fictional and/or a religious smokescreen.

Before going further, I have three points of clarification to offer. First, my goal here is not to claim that all language of enslavement to deities in antiquity is meant to be taken as literal rather than metaphorical or fictional, since it is certainly the case that slavery was a widespread analogy used by ancient (and often free) writers to describe their experiences.

As Katherine Shaner has recently argued, the embodied experiences of ancient Mediterranean enslaved persons (such as containment and oversight, systemic scarcity, absorption of risk, exposure to torture and death) do not match the free positionality of some "slaves of god(s)" like the apostle Paul, whose self-designation as an enslaved person of Christ "does not obligate one to perform enslaved labour to the god."[1] In cases like that of Paul, he was not exposed to the same degree or type of experiences of enslaved persons and yet claimed the status of δοῦλος for himself.[2]

Second, as a religionist, I am invested in interrogating how ancient historians (whether classicists or biblical scholars) have often adopted as self-evident a problematic divide between the sacred and the secular. In doing so, gods are often left out of historical and legal analyses because they are deemed incapable of participating in historical and socioeconomic events, or are explained away as a religious smokescreen for the "real" sociohistorical reasons that humans took particular actions. A range of theoretical literature in religious studies has challenged such a treatment of non-human actors and post-Enlightenment historiographical norms, providing a foundation for analyses of ancient Mediterranean deities as full-fledged actors in their world.[3]

Third, regarding my use and critique of *fiction/fictitious* and *fake*, I am not claiming that slavery to the gods did not exist. Rather, I am taking issue with how some scholars argue that sales and consecrations to the gods that are done in the service of manumission tend to downplay or erase deities as historical and economic actors through language of fictionality. Manumission—if it legally occurs at all as it is attested in some eastern Mediterranean inscriptions—often involves enslavement to a deity that needs to be accounted for in our analyses of these legal, social, and ritual practices. Doing so will not only clarify the range of human and non-human actors involved in the transaction and exploitation of enslaved persons, but will help us clarify when, how, and to what degree deities in the eastern Mediterranean were understood to exercise their legal and social rights over humans.

There are certainly clear-cut cases of humans being enslaved to deities, such that enslaved persons were required to perform labor on behalf of gods and were susceptible to oversight and bodily harm. Shaner (2024, 115) points us, for example, to enslaved persons at Didyma responsible in large part for the construction of a temple to Apollo described as "enslaved persons [lit., bodies] of the god" (σωμάτα τοῦ θεοῦ) or "enslaved persons [lit. children] of the god" (παῖδες τοῦ θεοῦ), who were inventoried as part of the "building materials needed to build a colossal temple complex."[4] More ambiguous cases, however, have historically led some scholars to presume that enslaved persons cannot truly be enslaved to a god. My hope here is to advocate for scholars and students of classical and religious studies to more deeply consider the possibility that ancient Mediterranean religious-historical actors understood humans to be enslaveable by deities.

[1] Shaner 2024, 110–17, quote on 117. See a similar critique of Paul in Parker 2018.

[2] However, it is argued elsewhere (Bonar forthcoming) that other early Christian writers expand upon Paul's notion of an "enslaved person of God" such that the effects of enslavement (e.g., coerced labor, bodily possession and constriction, absorption of risk, torture and death) become possible and more likely.

[3] Asad 1993, 2003; Orsi 2016; Eire 2023; Keddie 2024, esp. 16–21.

[4] *SEG* 26, 1235 ll. 9–30, discussed further in Günther 1969–1970. On the term παῖς as referring to enslaved persons and its semantic range, see Golden 1985.

I. Gods as Historical Actors: Some Theoretical Advances

Over the last few decades, historians of religion have reexamined how historians write about religious phenomena and historical events. How much should we scholars *describe* events and ideas through the perspective of religious practitioners, and how much should we *explain* events and ideas in terms not available to religious practitioners?[5] Should we describe enslavement to deities in antiquity as something that religious practitioners experienced and wrote about, or should we explain it as a product of a religious imagination?

Many scholars turn to the language of metaphor, particularly Conceptual Metaphor Theory, in order to conceptualize how early Christian writers talked about enslavement. Such work often builds upon the groundbreaking scholarship of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), which sought recognition of the embeddedness of metaphors in material and social phenomena. For example, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow (2018, 21–46) argues that being enslaved to God pulls from two source domains—devotion to the Judaean God and Greco-Roman practices of slavery—in order to produce the target metaphor of "God's ensbslaved person." Others, like Sam Tsang (2005, 11–15), engage with Chaim Perelman and Lucia Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric* (1971) to argue that metaphors of enslavement stem from a *theme* that the author wants to convey and a *phoros* or picture that is used to convey the idea. In both cases, such scholarship begins with the presumption that enslavement to a deity is best understood as a metaphorical or analogical phenomenon—as an attempt to describe one's relationship to God by something that it is *not* (i.e., enslavement).

Other scholars working on various aspects of religious studies and historical methods, however, have offered ways to account for non-metaphorical approaches to deities as historical actors. Postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in *Provincializing Europe* that European colonialism brought with it a particular brand of historical narrative that presumed various stages of historical progress, homogeneous historical time, and post-Enlightenment social-scientific thought (2008, 3–16). One particular strand of Western historiography that Chakrabarty takes aim at is the secularization of global history. He argues that instead of writing off deities as belonging to a less-developed stage of historical development, deities need to be reckoned with (2008, 16):

> The second assumption running through modern European political thought and the social sciences is that the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end "social facts," that the social somehow exists prior to them. I try, on the other hand, to think without the assumption of even a logical priority of the social. One empirically knows of no society in which humans have existed without gods and spirits accompanying them. Although the God of monotheism may have taken a few knocks—if not actually "died"—in the nineteenth-century European story of "the disenchantment of the world," the gods and other agents inhabiting practices of so-called "superstition" have never died anywhere. I take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human, and think from the assumption that the question of being human involves the question of being with gods and spirits.[6]

Throughout his work, Chakrabarty does not treat deities as fictitious or as an aftereffect

[5] Here, I borrow the language of description and explanation from Hollywood 2004, 517–19.

[6] On the non-priority of "the social," see Latour 2005, 1–17, 27–42.

of larger social realities (as would traditional European theorists of religion like Marx or Durkheim), but instead argues that historians with a postcolonial/decolonial proclivity ought to reenchant historiography and treat deities as existentially present, agentic entities. As he notes: "Historians will grant the supernatural a place in somebody's belief system or ritual practices, but to ascribe to it any real agency in historical events will be [to] go against the rules of evidence that gives historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past" (2008, 104).[7] Western historians working within a closed natural-historical loop struggle to account for divine actors or supernatural interference in historical events. In *History and Presence* (2016), Robert Orsi makes a similar point regarding how Western theories of religion often make gods invisible and unintelligible by making them nothing more than mislabeled experiences of "the social" and an obfuscation behind which "real" historical actors are at play. In doing so, historiographers safeguard human experience from the danger and anxiety of divine presence; however, "constraints on the scholar's imagination become, by means of his or her scholarship, constraints on the imaginations of others, specifically those whose lives the scholar aims to represent and understand" (2016, 64).[8]

Building upon Chakrabarty, feminist historian of religion Amy Hollywood has examined how the thirteenth-century Mechthild of Magdeburg can be understood in light of the limits of modern Western historiography (2004, 514–28).[9] Hollywood wrestles with how to reconcile: (1) Mechthild's self-conception as a "weak, changeable woman" whose receptivity to God depends on her passivity, and; (2) contemporary Western feminist advocacy for women's emancipation and empowerment. Mechthild's conceptions of freedom and authority here are understood to exist in a radically different space than Western liberal feminist conceptions of freedom and authority, such that Hollywood concludes (2004, 528):

> Perhaps only a suspension of disbelief—one that allows Mechthild's self-abjection in the face of the divine other to pierce feminist historiography's emancipatory presumptions—will enable us to glimpse this other freedom.

Such a suspension of disbelief—a temporary repose from our secularized historiographical paradigm—is deemed necessary for the historian to fully wrestle with Mechthild's accentuated abjection. Just as scholars of slavery in the Atlantic World have wrestled in depth with how enslaved persons act in ways beyond liberal models of freedom and agency, Hollywood urges us to consider how subjection to a deity may offer modes of agentic action not legible to modern liberal paradigms.[10]

Other theoretical avenues like Actor-Network Theory and new materialisms have also opened the door for reconceptualizing the place of deities in historical accounts and networks of actants. Bruno Latour, for example, urges us not to begin with a predetermined list of actors (1988, 9):

> We do not have to decide for ourselves what makes up our world, who are the agents 'really' acting in it, or what is the quality of the proofs they impose

[7] More broadly, see 72–89, 103–4. In particular, Chakrabarty in analyzing Ranajit Guha's work on the 1855 rebellion of the Santals and how Guha resists allowing for divine interference in this historical account. Chakrabarty points to Rudolf Bultmann as an example of how even biblical studies traditionally functions under the belief that deities cannot interact with the world or disrupt a historical continuum.

[8] See also Eire 2023.

[9] See also Keller 2002, esp. 54–72.

[10] See Hartman 1997; Johnson 2003; Fuentes 2016. Relatedly regarding religious women and agency that challenges the preconceptions of liberal paradigms, see Mahmood 2011.

upon one another.[11]

Just as Latour offers this as a corrective to those who view Louis Pasteur as the "Great Man" who discovered the principles of vaccination, by instead highlighting the various other agents, networks, and events that made such an action possible, we might avoid treating deities as "Great Men" that stand outside of history or that are not embedded in networks of texts, objects, and people that act.[12] Within this Actor-Network Theory model, the components of a network cannot be divided hierarchically into *actors* and *those acted upon*, since any entity that does something or is part of a web of "doing" is inevitably an actor. When a network is flattened such that all "doers" are treated in terms of how they interact with one another and impact one another, deities can be viewed as one among many within a social site, whose presence—whose legally-binding contracts, whose threats of bodily harm, whose promise of reward—inevitably changes how other entities go about their own "doing" in the world. In short: deities act because their social presence impacts the actions of other actants.

Such reflections on writing about historical figures and their deities have begun to emerge in the study of religions of the ancient Mediterranean. For example, Stanley Stowers's model of "the religion of everyday social exchange" traces how humans interact with "non-evident beings" in non-systematic, practical ways in order to get by daily.[13] Through his distinction of a religion of everyday social exchange from the religious concerns of "literate cultural producers," Stowers argues that many ancient Mediterranean religious practitioners had no problem conceptualizing gods as beings active in human social life and historical events (2011, 37):

> Four characteristics of conceiving gods and similar beings in this mode of religiosity stand out: People interact with them as if they were persons; they are local in ways that are significant for humans; one maintains a relationship to them with practices of generalized reciprocity; and humans have a particular epistemological stance toward them.[14]

Stowers's work urges historians of the ancient Mediterranean to recognize that "this global move of claiming that these beliefs are essentially symbolic and metaphorical is precisely a move that belongs to the second kind of religiosity of the literate specialist and to modernist thought" (2011, 38). Recent scholarship often sides with Stowers's portrayal of ancient Mediterranean literate cultural producers in how scholars treat enslavement to deities as symbolic, rather than as a relationship and set of obligatory practices understood to be just as "real" as the gods themselves.

Early Christian studies in particular have taken note of non-metaphorical gods in recent years. In her work on Paul's letter to the Philippians, Jennifer Quigley coined "theo-economics" to describe how "people took seriously the possibility of entering into financial

[11] For a challenge to Latour and a defense of the uniqueness of human agency, see Schatzki 2002, 190–233, esp. 197–200.

[12] A helpful model to do so in terms of paying attention to "micropractices" and their linkages has been proposed by Keddie 2024.

[13] For a helpful summary of this model, see Stowers 2019, 301–25, esp. 301–6.

[14] Stowers goes on to clarify this "epistemological stance" as one of uncertainty about how deities will act based on their moods (39).

relationships with the divine" in the ancient Mediterranean (2021, 16).[15] She especially builds upon Latour's Actor-Network Theory and Jane Bennett's concept of vibrant materiality, which calls for more fervently dealing with the non-human and the "complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies" (2010, 4) and opens a door for treating deities as non-human bodies that cannot be merely collapsed into metaphor. Likewise, Chris De Wet's examination of the late ancient Christian language of enslavement has led to his coinage of *doulology*. Building upon Michel Foucault's treatment of discursive structures, De Wet defines doulology as (2018, 8):

> that enunciative process in which slavery and mastery operate together as a concept 'to think/communicate with'—in this process, knowledge and behaviors are produced, reproduced, structured, and distributed in such a way as to establish subjects in/and positions of authority and subjugation, agency and compulsion, ownership and worth, honor and humiliation, discipline and reward/punishment, and captivity and freedom.

Enslavement, then, is not merely a sociopolitical phenomenon or a religious metaphor, but a system by which ancient Mediterranean historical actors shaped their material and intellectual worlds. Enslavement as a discourse dictates power relations between humans, as well as between humans and deities, as it works to craft particular types of subjects as *enslaved* or *enslaver*. As De Wet notes, doulology in early Christianity impacted the development of Christology, the Trinity, cosmology, pneumatology, hamartiology, soteriology, eschatology, and ascetic practice.[16] De Wet envisions a different mapping of enslavement in antiquity—one that more fully encompasses and acknowledges the reality and impact of deities in human life. Rather than metaphorizing any language that falls beyond the realm of the human or the natural, he suggests that we imagine two intersecting fields of enslavement in antiquity: *horizontal slavery* (e.g., the Roman institution of enslavement; human-to-human enslavement) and *vertical slavery* (e.g., enslavement to God; human-to-deity enslavement) (2018, 18–21).[17] In line with recent scholarship on religious historiography, De Wet urges us to take seriously enslavement to God as something that impacts how one lives their life. (Vertical) enslavement to God can have a tangible impact on whether or not one can be (horizontally) enslaved to others;[18] the two fields of enslavement interact and impact one another.

Between postcolonial and feminist historiographical interventions, reconceptualizations of agency and agents via Actor-Network Theory and new materialisms, and novel applications of such theoretical lenses in early Christian studies, there may be room to reconsider how enslavement to deities is sometimes characterized in the eastern Mediterranean and treated by scholars.

[15] See theoretical considerations at Quigley 2021, 2–5 and Roman examples of theo-economics at 16–33.

[16] De Wet 2018, 8.

[17] For a similar approach that questions the slippage between metaphorical and literal language in Christian medical discourse and practice, see Mayer 2018, 440–63, esp. 451–58.

[18] A good example can be found in Leviticus 25:42–55, where the Israelite god claims to have brought the Israelites out of Egypt as his enslaved persons (עבדי) and notes that they are not allowed to enslave one another because they are already enslaved to him.

II. Enslavement to Deities: Three Case Studies

Here, I want to point to three examples of enslavement to a deity to highlight the difficulty of escaping from a historical perspective based on such modern Western ontologies and epistemologies: sales to the Pythian Apollo at Delphi, to the Autochthonous Mother of the Gods at Leukopetra, and to the Judaean God in the Bosporan Kingdom.[19] In these cases, classicists and religionists have often treated the deity's role in the sale, dedication, or enslavement as a disguise for "deeper" and presumably more "real" sociohistorical realities—especially in the case of manumission. While more recent analyses are treating the gods with more theoretical and methodological nuance, it is worthwhile to analyze these cases because they demonstrate how easily scholarship can mask or underplay the role that enslavement to deities plays in the economic transactions experienced by enslaved persons in the eastern Mediterranean.

Delphi, located in central Greece, is a famous site not only for its oracle—the Pythia—but also for the inscriptions placed upon the retaining wall of the Temple of Apollo. While the building itself was built in the 4th century BCE, the polygonal walls were covered from the 3rd century BCE onwards with various inscriptions recording hymns, professional organizations, and what have often been deemed manumissions.[20] Roughly 1,300 of these inscriptions deal with enslaved persons and follow a few general formulae to describe the transfer of the enslaved person away from their enslaver.

Some of these transfers of enslaved persons are often considered something close to unconditional manumission—that is, their transfer from the enslaver to the Pythian Apollo will guarantee their freedom in the future. For example (*CID* I 324 [163/162 BCE], 1–8):

> [...] Teleso, daughter of Mnasikrates of Delphi, with her son Kleon also consenting, sold to Pythian Apollo a female body named Ladika, Syrian in origin, for the price of three silver *mnae*. She holds the payment, accordingly as Ladika entrusted the sale to the god, on the condition that she will be free and untouchable by all forever, doing whatever she wants and going wherever she wants. The guarantor in accordance with the law of the city: Astoxenos son of Dionysios. If anyone should lay hands on Ladika for enslavement, let both the seller Teleso and the guarantor Astoxenos provide the sale as secure to the god; if they should not provide the sale as secure to the god, let them be fined in accordance with the law. [...][21]

[19] Note, alongside Zelnick-Abramovitz 2005, 148, that manumission inscriptions at such sites record only a limited range of manumission practices from the Greek East. Our limited archive affects what can and cannot be said about manumission practices in the Hellenistic and Roman eastern Mediterranean more broadly.

[20] I phrase this as "deemed manumissions" here to highlight the complexity of "manumission" as a reality experienced by those who were still forced to labor for their former enslaver. Much work has been done recently by scholars of American history, highlighting how freedpeople experienced an "incomplete movement from slavery to freedom" (Sharpe 2010, 4; See also Perrone 2019, 256–70). Manumission in Hellenistic and Roman antiquity, likewise, was an incomplete move. See Theophrastus, *Economics* 1344b15–22; Hopkins 1978, 118; Zelnick-Abramovitz 2005, 307–34; De Wet 2018, 21. As Henrik Mouritsen notes (2011, 5), the commonality of formerly enslaved persons going on to enslave others after their manumission makes writing an "'emancipatory' history of the freedman" difficult.

[21] Gibson 1999, 40 notes that even though these Delphic inscriptions are often treated as a fictitious sale by scholars, there is still little clear explanation for why this practice is concentrated in Delphi as opposed to other Greek cities.

> [...] ἀπέδοτο Τελεσὼ Μνασικράτεος Δελφίς, συνευδοκεόντος καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ Κλέωνος, τῶι Ἀπόλλωνι τῶι Πυθίωι σῶμα γυναικεῖον ἃι ὄνομα Λαδίκα τὸ γένος Σύραν, τιμᾶς ἀργυγίου μνᾶν τριῶν, καὶ τὰν τιμὰν ἔχει, καθὼς ἐπίστευε Λαδίκα τῶι θεῶι τὰν ὠνάν, ἐφ᾽ ᾧτε ἐλευθέραν εἶμεν καὶ ἀνέφαπτον ἀπὸ πάντων τὸν πάντα χρόνον, ποιέουσα ὅ κα θέλει καὶ ἀποτρέχουσα οἷς κα θέλει. βεβαιωτὴρ κατὰ τὸν νόμον τᾶς πόλιος· Ἀστόξενος Διονυσίου. εἰ δέ τις ἐφάπτοιτο Λαδίκας ἐπὶ καταδουλισμῶι, βέβαιον παρεχόντων τῶι θεῶι τὰν ὠνὰν ἅ τε ἀποδομένα Τελεσὼ καὶ ὁ βεβαιωτὴρ Ἀστόξενος· εἰ δὲ μὴ παρέχοιεν βέβαιον τὰν ὠνὰν τῶι θεῶι, πράκτιμοι ἐόντων κατὰ τὸν νόμον. [...]

In this inscription, Teleso sold (ἀπέδοτο[22]) the enslaved Syrian woman Ladika to the god Apollo with some of the funds that Ladika had herself procured. This money was likely handed over to the deity by Ladika with the expectation that Apollo would use the funds to purchase her from Teleso.[23] After doing so, Apollo is expected (according to some interpreters of the inscription, e.g., Sosin 2015, 328-30) to manumit Ladika "on the condition that she will be free and untouchable" (ἐφ᾽ ᾧτε ἐλευθέραν εἶμεν καὶ ἀνέφαπτον)—a phrase that I will return to below. Importantly, Ladika and Apollo require a guarantor during the process of sale and manumission who can "provide the sale as secure to the god" (βέβαιον παρεχόντων τῶι θεῶι τὰν ὠνὰν) in case anyone attempts to re-enslave her or claim her as their own. The goal of this guarantor, it seems, is to testify to the sale between Teleso and Apollo and demonstrate that no other person (or deity) can lay claim to Ladika as their own enslaved person, except for Apollo himself.

While many of these inscriptions describe a relatively clear-cut process of enslavement to Apollo (that is often characterized as "manumission" and downplays Apollo's social and legal role as Ladika's new enslaver), about one-third of the Delphi inscriptions contain a conditional *paramonē* clause by which the enslaved person is transferred to a new enslaver but remains obligated to their former enslaver. For example, in an inscription detailing the sale of Sostrata from Kallikrateia to Apollo, an additional clause is appended to the standard sale formula (*CID* I 77 [188/7 BCE], 6–16):

> But Sostrata shall remain by Kallikrateia so long as Kallikrateia lives, doing all that she is ordered that is possible, without reproach. But if Sostrata does not do any of what she is ordered by Kallikrateia, as written, though able, it shall be possible for Kallikrateia to punish her however she wishes, and for another on behalf of Kallikrateia, being immune to penalty and unliable to any action and penalty. But if Kallikrateia dies, then Sostrata shall be free, her own mistress, and doing whatever she wishes, in accordance as she entrusted the purchase to the god. But if anyone lays a hand on Sostrata when Kallikrateia has died, then the guarantors shall provide the sale as secure for the god, in accordance with the law. And likewise also those who happen to rescue her on grounds that she is free shall have authority (to do so), being immune to penalty and unliable to any action and penalty.
>
> παραμεινάτω δέ Σωστράτα παρὰ Καλλικράτειαν ἄχρι κα ζώηι Καλλικράτεια ποέουσα τὸ ποτιτασσόμενον πᾶν τὸ δυνατὸν ἀνεγκλήτως· εἰ δέ τί κα μὴ ποιῆι

[22] The verb ἀποδίδωμι is often read by scholars working on these inscriptions as pertaining to manumission or release from bondage, rather than as giving over or selling the enslaved person to the deity. See Gibson 1999, 39.

[23] On this form of sale, described as πρᾶσις ὠνή, see Zanovello 2021, 37–38 and 43–51.

> Σωστράτα τῶν ποτιτασσομένων ὑπὸ Καλλικρατείας καθὼς γέγραπτ[αι δυ]νατὰ οὖσα, ἐξέστω Καλλικρατείαι κο[λ]άζειν καθώς κα αὐτὰ δείληται καὶ ἄλλωι ὑπὲρ Καλλικράτειαν ἀζαμίοις ὄντοις καὶ ἀνυποδίκοις πάσας δίκας καὶ ζαμίας. εἰ δέ τί κα πάθηι Καλλικράτεια, ἐλευθέρα ἔστω Σωστράτα κυριεύουσα αὐτοσαυτᾶς καὶ ποέουσα ὅ κα θέληι, καθὼς ἐπίστευσε τῶι θεῶι τὰν ὠνάν. εἰ δέ τίς κα ἅπτηται Σωστράτας ἐπεί κα τελευτάσηι Καλλικράτεια, βέβαιον παρεχόντω οἱ βεβαιωτῆρες [τ]ῶι θεῶι τὰν ὠνὰν κατὰ τὸν νόμον. ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ οἱ παρατυγχάνοντες κύριοι ἐόντες συλέοντες ὡς ἐλευθέραν οὖσαν ἀζάμιοι ὄντες καὶ ἀνυπόδικοι πάσας δίκας καὶ ζαμίας.

In Sostrata's scenario, she is sold to Apollo but is contractually obligated to remain with and perform productive labor[24] for her former enslaver for the rest of the enslaver's life. During this time, Kallikrateia retains her ability to abuse and control Sostrata without restraint. Whether Sostrata is legally or socially "free" during the period of time under which the *paramonē* clause is active is debated by scholars. I read this inscription as stating that Sostrata will become a freedwoman only "if" (εἰ) and after Kallikrateia dies through an act of manumission by Apollo that has not yet occurred. This reading seems possible since guarantors are needed only after Kallikrateia's death to confirm that Apollo is Sostrata's legal enslaver through a secure (βέβαιον) and legal (κατὰ τὸν νόμον) sale, in order to stave off others who might lay claim to Sostrata as their enslaved person in this moment of potential ambiguity of her legal status.[25] Thus, Apollo is understood to be the legal actor through whom Sostrata can be manumitted after her former enslaver's death.

There are two points that I want to make here before examining the hermeneutical trend surrounding these and related inscriptions. The first is that Apollo, in both the conditional (*paramonē*) and less conditional formulae, functions as what Jennifer Quigley calls a theo-economic actor (2021). In the case of enslaved women like Ladika and Sostrata, Apollo uses the funds that they offer in order to purchase and enslave them, making Apollo the legal entity responsible for them as his property. Sales to deities like Apollo do not exist in a spiritual, otherworldly state that supersedes or circumvents Hellenistic law and economics; rather, they are themselves under threat if someone attempts to lay claim to enslaved persons sold to Apollo. Humans (e.g., guarantors) and deities work together to keep the cogs of the institutions of enslavement and manumission moving.

The second point is that referring to either of these inscriptions as "manumissions" in a straightforward or unqualified manner is potentially misleading. In a reexamination of *paramonē* inscriptions at Delphi and elsewhere in Greece, Joshua Sosin (2015) has suggested that enslaved persons forced to remain under their former enslaver are not in an intermediate half-enslaved, half-free stage.[26] Rather, when Apollo purchases an enslaved person with a *paramonē* clause, he waives the right to exploit their productive labor during the *paramonē* period and manumits the enslaved person only after this labor is finished (2015, 332–33)—as I noted above in the case of Sostrata. In particular, he points to the clause "by which she will be free" (ἐφ' ὥιτε ἐλευθέραν εἶμεν) and argues that the Greek construction "ἐπὶ plus the dative often voiced a required future action, stipulated a condition or

[24] On the category of productive labor as "activities undertaken to provide, and add value to, resources, goods, and services that fulfill needs and desires," see Keddie 2024, 22–28, quote on 22.

[25] *Contra* Zanovello 2021, 52–53, who interprets the ἐφ' ὥιτε formula as a legal protection that occurs "after manumission" rather than during the deity's time as enslaver.

[26] Examples of this type of argumentation can be found in Westermann 1945, 213–27; Hopkins 1978, 133–71; Finley 1981, 116–32.

provision" (2015, 330).[27] In other words, Sostrata was not immediately manumitted and transformed into a freedperson with a few laborious obligations to her former enslaver at the moment of the inscription's carving; rather, she was enslaved to Apollo even while continuing labor for her former enslaver. This future conditionality extends beyond the *paramonē* clause as well, since it is unclear if the Pythian Apollo necessarily followed through with the manumission of Ladika mentioned above. Rather, there is simply a promise for a *future* manumission of Ladika. In both cases, Ladika and Sostrata did not immediately move into a freedperson or half-freedperson category, but rather were enslaved to the Pythian Apollo until the *paramonē* clause expired or until Apollo moved forward with the process of manumission. Instead of downplaying the role of Apollo as enslaver, we might highlight Apollo's substantial role in the economic transaction and legal manumission of these enslaved persons, as well as the ambiguity regarding when Apollo relinquishes his status as enslaver over them.

While Sosin notes that the Pythian Apollo does not make explicit use of his right to ownership in these inscriptions (2015, 327), this does not mean that other deities did not exploit enslaved labor from those sold or dedicated to them. Of particular interest here is the temple of the Autochthonous Mother of the Gods at Leukopetra, Macedonia. Along with pledging property to the temple, various inscriptions also denote the dedication of enslaved persons to the Mother of the Gods in the late second and early third centuries CE.[28] In many cases, an enslaved person is presented as a gift or donation to the Mother of the Gods not for manumission, but to remain on the temple precinct or labor for the goddess during festivals and holidays (*IL* 16 [184/5 CE]):

> I, Kointa, daughter of Ioulia, [give] the enslaved woman Parmenea as a gift to the Mother of the Gods, whom I raised in the name of the goddess, for serving on the customary days. [Written] when Aelia Kleopatra was priestess in the 216th Augustan year.[29]
>
> Κοίντα Ἰουλίας Μητρὶ Θεῶν δῶρον παιδίσκην Παρμένεαν, ἥν ἀνέθρεψα τῷ ὀνόματι τῆς θεοῦ, ὑπηρετοῦσαν τὰς ἐθίμους ἡμέρας· ἱερωμένης Αἰλίας Κλευπάτρας, ἔτους ϛισ' σεβ(αστοῦ)

Similar types of inscription stretch across the eastern Mediterranean, such as a second-century CE statue base found in Akkent (Upper Meander Valley, Anatolia) that attests to a benefactor building a temple to Asclepius and providing the deity with "vineyards and

[27] For example, see *IG* IX(1) 3^2 709a (166/165 BCE), an inscription from Phaestinus in Aetolia, in which Lycon sells an enslaved woman named Eutychis to Apollo for five *mnae* "for freedom" (ἐπ' ἐλευθερίᾳ) under the expectation that the sale (ὠνή) to Apollo will lead to her manumission. See Zelnick-Abramovitz 2009, 307. Zelnick-Abramovitz treats both sales to deities with and without *paramonē* clauses as manumission contracts, eliding the distinction between the two and not discussing in depth the role of the deity in the transaction.

[28] Petsas et al. 2000, 29 note that various sanctuaries of goddesses around Beroea were involved in such acts of consecration (e.g., Demeter, Artemis, the Syrian Goddess, Dionysus). As above with the case of Delphi, scholars who work on these Macedonian inscriptions have tended toward reading the donations and sales of humans to the Autochthonous Mother of the Gods as actually signifying manumission, and thus functioning as a fictitious sale. See Petsas et al. 2000, 30–31 on the "motivation religieuse" and 60, where they claim that such consecration "undoubtedly constituted an amelioration of their situation and was almost equivalent to emancipation" ("qui constitutait une amélioration indubitable de sa situation et équivalait presque à un affranchisement"). Petsas et al. 2000, 32–33 argue that such enslaved persons did not function as temple personnel at Leukopetra *contra* Ricl 2001, 129 and 133–34, who argues that donated persons become enslaved to the deity and function as temple personnel.

[29] Leukopetra has roughly 120 of such inscriptions dating between 170–250 CE. See Youni 2010, 311–40.

workshops and enslaved persons, and arranged for their income to be worthy for worshipping the gods and the maintenance of the deeds" (ἀνπέλους καὶ ἐγραστή[ρια καὶ δούλ]ους καὶ διατετακχότα εἰς τὸ ἀπ[ὸ τοῦ πρ]οσόδου αὐτῶν θρησκεύεσθαι το[ὺς θεοὺ]ς καὶ ἐπιμελείας ἀξιοῦσθαι τὰ ἔργα) (Ricl and Öztürk 2014). Likewise, a first-century CE inscription of dedication from the Bosporan Kingdom (a Greco-Scythian client state of the Roman Empire) records an intriguing dedication (*CIRB* 1123 [41 CE]):

> To the Most High God, almighty, blessed, in the reign of King Mithridates, loving [...] and patriotic, in the year 338, in the month of Dios. Pothos, son of Strabo, according to a vow dedicated to the prayer house his home-raised enslaved person, whose name is Chrusa, on the condition that she will be inviolable and undisturbed by any heir under Zeus, Ge, and Helios.[30]
>
> θεῶι ὑψίστωι παντοκράτορι εὐλογητῷ, βασιλεύοντο βασιλέως [Μιθρ]ιδάτου φιλο[...] καὶ φιλοπάτριδος ἔτους ηλτ', μηνὸς Δείου, Πόθος Στράβωνος ἀνέθηκεν τ[ῇ] προσευχῆι κατ' εὐχὴν θ[ρ]επτὴν ἑαυτοῦ, ᾗ ὄνομα Χρύσα, ἐφ' ᾧ ᾗ ἀνέπαφος καὶ ἀνεπρηέαστος ἀπὸ παντὸς κληρον[όμ]ου ὑπὸ Δία, Γῆν, Ἥλιο[ν].

As E. Leigh Gibson notes, the dedication "in" or "to" a prayer house (τ[ῇ] προσευχῆι) is complicated, since it could conceivably be read as either the location at which the dedication occurred or as the entity to which the enslaved person was to be dedicated (1999, 114–23).[31] Despite the presence of non-Judaean deities in the formulaic dedication, Gibson convincingly argues that the inscription references a Jewish house of prayer.

While some have read this final inscription as only spiritually dedicating Chrusa to the Judaean God (e.g., Schürer 1897), we might push further and ask what obligations befell those dedicated to Jewish prayer houses. There is some evidence, at least in the Bosporan Kingdom, that enslaved persons were obliged to do productive labor for the maintenance of Jewish houses of prayer. Many of these first- and second-century CE inscriptions record the manumission of enslaved persons and the flexibility to move as they please, albeit with two exceptions: "except for flattery and perseverance for the prayer house" (χωρὶς εἰς τὴν προσευχὴν θωπείας τε καὶ προσκαρτερήσεως) and to "serve as a (joint) overseer of the assembly of the Judaeans" ([συν]επιτροπευούσης δὲ καὶ τῆς συναγωγῆς τῶν Ἰουδαίων).[32] Gibson argues that the enslavers in these instances essentially produced a *paramonē*-like clause, through which their enslaved persons were forever obligated to maintain a "labor-based relationship" with the Judaean God's building and community (1999, 144–50).[33] Such a characterization of this relationship between the enslaved person and their enslaver might lead us to reexamine how many of these inscriptions begin with a phrase like ἀφίημι ἐπὶ τῆς προσευχῆς or ἐν τῇ προσευχῆ. While often read as "I release [the enslaved person] at the

[30] Greek text from Gibson 1999, 166. I have slightly altered the English translation offered here.

[31] Gibson proposes this *contra* emendations offered by Latyschev 1895, 2:209. For example, *CIRB* 74 (Gibson 1999, 163) dedicates the enslaved Thallousa to the deities Ma and Parthenos under a *paramonē* inscription that claims she will be free "under Zeus, Ge, and Helios" after her enslavers' deaths.

[32] *CIRB* 70, 71, 73; *SEG* 43.510 (Gibson 1999, 126–27, 160–62, 172), particularly at the sites of Pnatikapaion, Phanagoria, and Gorgippia. Not all of these inscriptions evoke the Judaean God, but also evoke deities like Asbameus, the goddess of Ma, Zeus, Hera, and Theos Hypsistos (who may be the Judaean God). See also Harland 2014, 24–32. Harland suggests that θωπεία can be read as respect or subservience, whereas προσκαρτέρησις can be read as adherence to or participation in the Judean community through which they are (or will eventually be) manumitted (30).

[33] A similar argument can be found in Nadel 1976.

house of prayer" in light of Delphic manumission inscriptions, these inscriptions could conceivably record some enslavers handing over or transferring their enslaved person to the house of prayer.[34] Between the range of inscriptions that dedicate an enslaved person to deities, the explicit *paramonē* clauses, and the expectation to remain obliged to the prayer house, manumission was complex and did not always include instantaneous freedom from one's human or non-human enslavers. The Autochthonous Mother of the Gods, an Anatolian Asclepius, and the Judaean God are—in some times and some places—provided with enslaved laborers who assist in ritual performances and temple maintenance. Enslavement to a deity could have material, spatial, and bodily consequences for such enslaved persons who were coerced to work for the divine enslaver.

Turning back to Leukopetra, not every inscription necessarily seems to be aimed toward an enslaved person's manumission. In some cases, a *paramonē* clause led to an enslaved person being permanently transferred over to the Mother of the Gods (*IL* 31 [192/3 CE]):

> Good fortune. I, Nepon, son of Lamyrides, citizen of Beroia, inhabitant of Kyneoi, donated my enslaved person Zosimos to the Mother of the Gods Autochthonous, impeccable, so that he shall stay with me as long as I live, and after my death he shall belong to the goddess; if not, whoever disputes shall pay a fine of 15000 denarii to the treasury. The donation was registered when Kominia Philiste was priestess, Kominos Hieronymos curator.
>
> Ἀγαθῇ τύχῃ. Νέπων Λαμυρίδου Βεροιεῖος οἰκῶν ἐν Κυνέοις ἐχαρισόμην δοῦλον τὸν ὑπάρχοντά μοι ὀνόματι Ζώσιμον Μητρὶ Θεῶν Αὐτόχθονι ἀνεπίλῃπτον, προσμίνοντά μοι τὸν τῆς ζωῆς χρόνον, μετὰ δὲ τὴν ἐμὴν τελευτὴν ἶνε τῆς θεοῦ· ἰ δ' οὔ, ὁ ἀντιλέγων δώσι προστίμου ἰς τὸ ταμῖον μύρια πεντάκις χίλια. Ἐγράφη ἡ δωρεὰ αὕτη ἱερωμένης Κομινίας Φιλίστης καὶ ἐπιμελουμένου Κομινίου Ἱερωνύμου.

Donation to the Mother of the Gods involves a lifetime of enslavement for Zosimos—first to his (former) enslaver Nepon under a *paramonē* clause, and then to the Mother of the Gods, presumably to perform productive labor for festivals and temple maintenance. A substantial fine awaited anyone who attempted to dispute the Mother of the Gods' legal right to Zosimos' labor or attempted to enslave him for themselves after Nepon's death.

III. Religiosity and Fictionalization: A Classical Trend

Despite the legal complexity and considerable role of the deities in such inscriptions, scholarship of the last century has generally dismissed sales to Apollo and dedications to the Autochthonous Mother of the Gods as fictional. Instead, such scholarship has at times presumed that enslaved persons must have been freed because deities are not "real" historical actors and thus cannot actually enslave humans. Adolf Deissman, for example, understood manumission as a "solemn rite of fictitious purchase of the slave by some divinity" that did not actually enslave the person to the deity, but rather made them a "protégé of the god [...] a completely free man"—with only a "few pious obligations" remaining to their former enslaver (1910, 326). Likewise, in his examination of epigraphy from Greece and Asia Minor, Alan Cameron (1939) read around the language present in inscriptions so as to avoid the possibility that deities could enslave. Although many

[34] LSJ s.v. ἀφίημι I.3 and II.1.e.

inscriptions, particularly in Macedonia and Asia Minor, used "to grant/gift" (χαρίζομαι; δωροῦμαι) to indicate handing over an enslaved person to a deity, Cameron argued that "language appropriate to dedication was used even when the real purpose of the act was not simply to convey a slave from the ownership of the dedicator to that of the god" (1939, 145). Cameron decided beforehand that, whatever action the enslaver was doing by dedicating an enslaved person to a deity, it must exist in the realm of the "religious" while masking itself in, as he called it, "secular" terminology. He briefly admitted that enslavement to a deity and service to a temple was possible, but dismissed this as a less likely scenario than full manumission (1939, 146). Cameron goes so far as to create a paradox by arguing that enslavement to a deity actually means freedom: "εἶναι αὐτὴν τῆς θεοῦ (to belong to the goddess) means in effect ἐλευθέραν εἶναι (to be a free person) and does not imply any actual servitude to the goddess [...] the manumitted slave was by a fiction described as the slave of the god" (1939, 149).[35] Early twentieth-century scholars like Deissmann and Cameron made sense of enslavement to deities by claiming that it was fake—a legal fiction by which manumission occurred that just so happened to be called "enslavement" in ancient texts. Rather than reading the gifting of enslaved persons to a deity as terminology befitting even a votive offering,[36] they dismiss the possibility that deities were considered nodes of economic transaction.

Classical scholarship has often followed suit over the decades, treating enslavement to deities as anything but that. Conceptual slippage occurs between the sale (or dedication) of enslaved persons and the manumission of enslaved persons, since such inscriptions often attest to the former but only allude to the future possibility of the latter.[37] This is particularly the case when the adjective *sacred* is latched on (e.g., sacred slavery; sacred manumission) by scholars in order to distinguish it as *something other than* human enslavement and manumission, since such deities are often treated as economic actors that can be ignored in the process of a human's manumission from slavery. Pierre Debord's study of sacred enslavement across the Mediterranean argued that such consecrations to deities were "purely fictive" because enslaved persons could not legally amass funds in order to purchase their own freedom (1972, 136).[38] However, this argument overlooks how manumission might have benefitted the enslaver by providing them with obligated productive labor (*operae*) from the formerly enslaved persons *and* new funds to enslave another person, as well as how an enslaved person often saved funds to purchase manumission.[39] Keith Hopkins likewise states that such manumission is "the by-product of a religious ritual, in which the master set the slave free solemnly and publicly before the god Apollo, his priests and civil witnesses and guarantors," as well as that it gave "a religious sanction to the slave's freedom" (1978, 138, 142). Such a characterization, however, keeps Apollo at a distance from socioeconomic affairs through the language of ritual and religiosity, thereby stripping the deity of legal and historical weight.

[35] Cameron builds upon Calderini 1908, 70 here.

[36] See Gibson 1999, 47–48; See also Hatzopoulos 1994, 116 on enslaved persons gifted as votive objects.

[37] Zanovello 2018, 137 notes as well that interpreters tend to conflate consecration and manumission, even when the latter is not mentioned or legally enacted in a given inscription.

[38] See also Papazoglou 1981, 173–74.

[39] E.g. *Digest* 40.1.5 on enslaved persons saving a *peculium* that was still property of the enslaver but could be used for manumission. More broadly on the continued exploitation of formerly enslaved persons through the process of manumission, see Roth 2010.

In her dismantling of the concept of "sacred/temple prostitution" in antiquity, Stephanie Budin analyzed Strabo and argued that "it is generally accepted that the type of sacral manumission that led to *hieros* status was a fictitious 'sale' to the deity" (2008, 180). Various scholars and their lines of argumentation can be marshalled to support Budin's claim and highlight the conceptual treatment of gods as actors who can purportedly be sidelined—despite being the very entity to whom enslaved persons were sold. Maria Youni's work on Delphi and Leukopetra treats such inscriptions as evidence of manumission that "appeared as a party to a fictitious transaction of sale" (2010, 316, 327).[40] Kostas Vlassopoulos's discussion of enslaved persons' hopes for freedom presumes that Delphic sales to Apollo simply represented manumissions, and does not comment on the presence of Apollo as the purchaser in such inscriptions (2021, 162–64). Sara Zanovello claims that the sale of enslaved persons to Apollo at Delphi "is only the external form given to the act of manumission: there is no sale taking place between the slaves' masters and the god, nor can we envisage the fundamental legal effect of sale, that is, the transfer of ownership over the slaves from the masters to the god."[41] Deborah Kamen's analysis of consecration or sale to a god (as two distinct but overlapping forms of manumission) similarly tends toward presenting such sales as "effect[ing] freedom" because the enslaved person "lack[s] a human owner" or is "without the supervision of any owner" (2023, 88–92).[42] Even Joshua Sosin, who reads Delphi's inscriptions as indicating enslavement to Apollo rather than immediate freedom, refers to such records as a "sham sale" (2015, 325). Language of religiosity and fictitiousness generally dominate the scholarly landscape, often presuming that the sale cannot *actually* be a real transaction, but must instead be a religiously-cloaked manumission.

Such characterizations also affect scholarly analyses of consecration and dedication. Stephano Caneva and Aurian Delli Pizzi's work on acts of human consecration across the eastern Mediterranean similarly argue that expressions of submission to the deity's service are reasonably assumed to be "rather symbolic and attests a personal will to show one's piety" (2015, 174).[43] Here, they read the language of registration through the lens of "religion" in a way that presumes one cannot truly be registered to or enslaved to a non-human entity. Often, verbs relating to dedication or consecration (e.g., ἀνατίθημι) are treated as sacred manumissions,[44] despite how Roman jurists like Gaius specify that there is a legal category of *res sacrae* that are objects "consecrated to the gods above" (*quae diis superis consecratae sunt*), under "divine right" (*divini iuris*), and cannot be subject to human

[40] See also Forsdyke 2021, 243, as well as Belayche 2020, 91n18, for another example of treating Leukopetran inscriptions as evidence that the enslaved enter a patron-client relationship with the Mother of the Gods rather than an enslaved-enslaver relationship.

[41] Zanovello 2021, 55, in which she goes on to argue that "once payment is made, manumission has to be considered complete and the slaves immediately became legally free individuals" (55) and that the idea that "as an effect of consecration, slaves became immediately free individuals" (73) is scholarly consensus for inscriptions in Chaeronea as well.

[42] See also Kamen 2012; 2014, 285–89; Zanovello 2021, 93 regarding her claim consecrated individuals being *de facto* rather than legally free because of "the absence of an actual owner who could concretely exercise the powers and rights descending from ownership." *Contra* Zelnick-Abramovitz 2005, 91–99, who wrestles more robustly with the complexity of how the legal/social freedom of an individual might be understood in light of the legal/social status of a deity over them.

[43] Caneva and Delli Pizzi problematically describe *paramonē* clauses at Leukopetra as "actually improv[ing] their life conditions" (176) by reducing the time of obligation to one's former enslaver to *only* their lifetime.

[44] Papazoglou 1981; Youni 2010, 316–18.

ownership.[45] Enslaved persons could, in fact, fall into this category of property (*res*) which deities in the Roman Mediterranean could own and use.[46] Such examples underscore the commonality by which ancient historians have dismissed the possibility that deities might function as historical and economic actors in the ancient Mediterranean, particularly as it pertains to slavery and manumission. This reading strategy functions, as philosopher of religion Wayne Proudfoot argues, as a form of descriptive reduction: "To describe an experience in nonreligious terms when the subject himself describes it in religious terms is to misidentify the experience, or to attend to another experience altogether" (1985, 196). Deities are, at best, treated as a religious obfuscation behind which manumission must occur for vaguely pious reasons.

Enslavement to a deity is not an activity that is somehow more "religious" than other sales of enslaved persons to humans, nor does the fact that these sales often occurred in the vicinity of a temple make them necessarily more distinctly "religious" actions.[47] Such a description of sales to deities betray a modern religious/secular binary. Perhaps what distinguishes selling an enslaved person to a deity rather than to another human in this context, however, is that the deity is understood to have the rights and resources needed to uphold and maintain the transaction. For example, in Petronia Amilla's sale of the enslaved girl Sanbatis to the Mother of the Gods, she notes that "no one will be more of an enslaver than the goddess" (μηδένα κυριώτερον εἶνε ἢν τὴν θεόν) (*IL* 15 [179/80 CE]). This somewhat odd phrase, Youni suggests, highlights the "relative right" by which different parties could claim an enslaved person as their own property: the Mother of the Gods is *more enslaver-esque* than any competing party (2010, 327).[48] Instead of viewing enslavement to the deities as merely a pious ritual practice, it could also be viewed as dealing with some of the most reliable power-brokers in the ancient Mediterranean, whose authority would rarely be questioned—at least, not without substantial fines. The gods themselves participated in the economic *realia* of slavery and had to demonstrate their power over both the enslaved and fellow enslavers in order to remain key stakeholders in their socioeconomic world.

Of course, some have pushed back against the trend of fictionalizing these sales and, by extension, the fictionalization of these deities. William Westermann powerfully argued in the 1940s that Deissmann and others were wrong to read enslavement to deities as fictitious, since "it was clearly an entrustment sale" by which a deity legally enslaved a human (1948, 55; 1945, 215–16). However, he quickly backtracked and suggested that classical Greek deities like Apollo did not technically own enslaved persons, but rather that people were either immediately manumitted or that the assembly would decide what enslaved labor such persons would carry out (1948, 56–57).[49] F. Sokolowski followed soon after and challenged

[45] Gaius, *Inst.* 2.2–3, 2.9. Latin text from Du Zulueta 1958. On *res sacrae*, see Farag 2021, 11–40, esp. 15–18.

[46] Zanovello 2021, 77–81 on the shared features between Roman law regarding *res sacrae* and local Greek legal thought regarding the consecration of an individual to a deity.

[47] On the sale of enslaved persons (to humans) near temples in Hellenistic and Roman contexts, see Padilla Peralta 2017, 334; Zelnick-Abramovitz 2005, 72–73. Zelnick-Abramovitz (2005, 90–92) also notes the blurred lines between "sacral" and "civil" manumission practices, as well as between "consecration" and "sale," such that we cannot categorize them as wholly distinct from one another.

[48] On the importance of public records of manumission or sale for the protection of the enslaved person, see Zelnick-Abramovitz 2009, 307.

[49] For example, *IG* VII 3314 (second-century BCE) "dedicating her own enslaved persons" (ἀνατίθητι τὼς ϝιδίως δούλως) in a way that was "performed via the council according to the law" (ποιουμένα διὰ τῳ συνεδ[ρίω] κατὰ τὸν νόμον).

Westermann by pointing out how Greek temples often managed and exchanged enslaved persons, suggesting that enslavement to deities cannot be taken off the historiographical table (1954, 173–74). Franz Bömer suggested that the enslaved person formally becomes the property of the deity, in contrast to a wave of twentieth-century scholarship that labeled it as nothing more than a ritualized loophole to acquire freedom (1960, 32). Recently, Dominique Mulliez has noted that the Delphic sale is not fictive but is an actual entrustment sale to Apollo. However, he falls back into language of manumission even in the case of *paramonē* inscriptions, viewing such enslaved persons as merely forced to labor while legally free, despite such labor being labeled as "being enslaved" (δουλεύω) and being potentially punished "as enslaved persons" (ὡς δούλοις) (2017, esp. 14, 18–25). Likewise, Sara Zanovello has made the case that consecrations of enslaved persons to gods involved language of untouchability and lack of belonging to others not to signify *freedom*, but rather that their status as a god's *res* protected them from re-enslavement to others.[50] Such interpretations have challenged the consensus over the last century, but have not yet overturned the more dominant portrayal of the role of ancient Mediterranean deities as fictitious socioeconomic actors who were not truly capable of enslaving humans.

This run-through of classical scholarship is by no means meant to dismiss the excellent work done on sales of enslaved persons to deities throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Rather, I hope to have pointed out some theoretical gaps and assumptions that have led many to downplay the role that deities play in such transactions and in the life-worlds of ancient Mediterranean historical actors. Read in light of the insights stemming from religious studies, the Pythian Apollo, the Autochthonous Mother of the Gods, and the Judaean God are theo-economic actors whose ability to buy, sell, own, and manage property needs to be reckoned with. The avoidance of deities as historical actors in various humanistic fields stymies our ability to conceptualize how ancient Mediterranean people expected deities to interact and intervene in their lives, as well as unintentionally downplays the experiences of enslaved persons forced to labor for deities, temples, festivals, and former enslavers.

IV. Conclusion

The eastern Mediterranean in the Hellenistic and Roman periods was teeming with deities that participated in political and economic affairs, not least in the exploitation of enslaved persons. Due to Western historiographical, ontological, and epistemological assumptions, it has been common for ancient historians to see deities as a non-real stepping stone to some historical or economic *realia*, and thus have at times treated enslavement to a deity as pointing to something other than an enslaved-enslaver relationship between a human and a god. By pointing out this assumption, offering some theoretical approaches that begin to undo them, and examining three sites with enslavement to gods in mind as a tangible and corporeal possibility, I hope to make space for further exploration of deities as enslaving theo-economic entities. Enslavement to deities does not remain in the realm of the metaphorical or religious, since the belief held by ancient Mediterranean historical actors that deities *could* participate in the slave trade normalized and justified the practice of

[50] Zanovello 2018, 141–42 and 2021, critiqued by Kamen 2023, 88–92, who claims that "they are in effect free because they lack a human owner" (91). As noted above, Zanovello commits to an interpretation that views sold and consecrated individuals as immediately legally free, even though some specific formulae (e.g., regarding untouchability) do not necessarily reflect that freedom.

enslavement, trafficking, and exploitation of coerced labor. As Tyler Schwaller succinctly put it in his examination of enslaved persons in early Christianity: "It matters to understand slavery discourse as never 'merely' theological or metaphorical, since slavery is realized in material form, with corporeal and psychic consequences" (2017, 46). Human-to-human or *horizontal* enslavement makes possible divine participation in the slave market, but *vertical* enslavement gives divine precedent to the enslavement of humans. To overlook this vicious cycle runs the risk of misunderstanding human-divine relationships in the eastern Mediterranean.

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