Rethinking Slavery in the Ancient Near East
By Seth Richardson and Ella Karev

The word “slavery” first conjures up images of the racialized slavery of the American South or perhaps the slavery of the Hebrews depicted in Exodus. But our studies of slavery and enslaved persons in the Near East reveals a complex economic institution, an inseparable part of life in Egypt and Babylonia throughout their long histories. Yet these forms remain poorly understood.

Where did enslaved persons come from, and how did they end up in their status? Was that status permanent, or could they move into other strata of society if they wished? What was their status in comparison with other coerced laborers like prisoners of war or indentured servants? What was their economic role? Some of these questions we hope will be answered in our November 2021 ASOR panel (“Slaves, Prisoners, and Unfree Bodies”) but here we provide a brief overview.

The fact that ancient Near Eastern slavery was not a large-scale economic form, in contrast with the American South, is part of what makes ancient slavery studies so difficult. There were no slave markets and no households with hundreds of laborers. Rather, slaves were bought and sold on an ad hoc basis, traded between individuals who oftentimes knew each other before the sale. Slaves worked, as all people did, but the nature of the work they did was not discernably different from that of other individuals and did not provide much surplus income to their owner. Female slaves were often domestics, raising children and taking care of the household; in essence, doing little different from what a housewife or homemaker might do.

Non-slave workers could be contracted for their labor for specific tasks or for specific periods of time, and released at the end of their contract without any further responsibility. That being the case: why slaves? What did slavery accomplish that other socio-economic forms did not? Slaves most often played distinctive economic roles as fungible and mobile capital. They were used as solutions for debt and as credit for productive loans in an overwhelmingly agricultural economic environment that lacked financial institutions and instruments. An enslaved person could be sent to the household of a creditor to forestall default on an existing loan, or as collateral against a new one while goods were moved through the marketplace to the point of sale. No matter what household they resided in, they maintained economic value through their labor, but there is little indication that this produced significant profit. Slaves were primarily for credit, not for labor.
In economic terms, ancient Near Eastern slaves were repositories of fungible capital and credit in commercial environments with few other financial instruments. Their commodified valuation in silver allowed creditors and debtors to make transactions using slaves as collateral. Their value was established at the point of sale, sometimes with coils of wearable silver such as the Babylonian šewiru pictured here.

(Collections of the Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago)

This fundamental re-orientation moves us away from understanding slavery as a form of chattelhood and closer to something we might think of as human trafficking, where the purpose of enslaving someone was not to produce value through labor, but to invest capital with the potential for re-sale or redemption. An important corollary to this rethinking is that we find less compelling and frequent evidence for the formation of slave status from raiding or warfare during the periods we study. Status was more clearly and frequently formed as a result of debt. Even when slaves were acquired through trade, the satisfaction of debts often played a role in their sale.

Take the case, for example, of Shamash-tappe-iliya, a slave sold in the fortress town of Dûr-Abi-ešuḫ in 1631 BCE. He had also been sold at least once before, twenty years earlier, called “small” (i.e., a boy) and “houseborn” from the city of Nippur. The shifting cast of buyers and sellers in the sale documents suggests that Shamash-tappe-iliya had been sold and re-sold other times in between, shuffled about between different merchants. This series of sales shows that he was not “booty” from a foreign war; rather, the word kišittu used in this context just meant “(debt) seizure”. This man was not simply sold as chattel to live in one household permanently, but traded repeatedly between merchants as a credit chit.

Opening clause of the sale document of Šamaš-tappe-iliya, terming him a sag.ir tur, a “small male slave,” and wilid é Nibru, “houseborn of Nippur” (CUSAS 8 1). A second sale document dated 23 years later (CUSAS 8 6) terms the same Šamaš-tappe-iliya, now grown, as an “(debt) seizure,” illustrating his use as a credit instrument. Image courtesy of Karel Van Lerberghe and Gabriella Voet.
At the same time, slaves were part of the household. We may take as an example Tamet, an Egyptian slave-woman of the 5th century BCE. Her owner, Meshullam, brands her with his name on her arm, fathers two children by her — and yet simultaneously plays the part of her father, paying her dowry when she eventually gets married to a free man (who then adopts the children). Years later, when Tamet’s daughter gets married, her dowry is not paid by her adoptive father but rather by her self-styled “brother”, the son of her mother’s ex-owner. In this case, being enslaved provided some protections that a woman of Tamet’s status might not have been able to procure otherwise. This case study gives us insight into the complicated nature of this slave-woman as simultaneously a property item, an exploited woman, and a person with agency.

Marriage Document of Tamet, 449 B.C.E. Brooklyn Museum of Art 47.218.89.

Shamash-tappe-iliya and Tamet give us a segue into the next question: where did these people come from? Indeed, we have little evidence in most periods that slaves came from foreign places. Certainly, there were slaves who originated as prisoners of war, but owners showed little preference between foreign, houseborn, or even debt slaves who were until recently social equals. We do not find any compelling evidence for corporal punishment as a norm, or that mastery/slavery was organized along native/foreign dichotomies: we find northern Subarians enslaved in Babylonia and Nubians in Egypt, but just as often slaves were plainly Babylonian and Egyptian. Some of our evidence even suggests that the status of enslavement was entered willingly. Self-enslavement was sometimes demonstrably a rational economic choice in preference to starvation or homelessness.

Craftsmen, Tomb of Nebamun and Ipukyca. 1390–1349 B.C. New Kingdom. Norman de Garis Davies
Our documents indicate that Egyptian and Babylonian enslaved persons were generally trusted to move freely through communities, out to farms, and even to other towns. They carried messages, were asked to assess problems in business and farming, and make decisions about them. Their testimony was recognized in court, they could own property, and adoptions and marriages into the families of owners was not uncommon. This is reflected in the fact that slaves were almost always referred to by name, and not generically as “the slave” or “my slave” alone. Slaves are also not normally described physically or by appearance; it seems clear that owners and others knew their slaves by name and sight and needed no such descriptions. Slaves were enumerated among members of the household, where all the norms and limits of protection within a family could be assumed: children fed, dowries paid, identities formed. Even those slaves who fled can be shown to have fled to other households in which they continued to serve as slaves (and not to “freedom”).

None of this means that ancient slavery was not a site of exploitation or structured by violence — only that this made it similar to other social categories likewise entailing distributions of risk and benefit: children, wives, and dependents also held social status contingent on membership in households run by men, where other outcomes could include ostracization, homelessness, and starvation. The lack of alternatives formed the structural violence that backstopped ancient slavery. All this should suggest how radically this socio-economic landscape differs from the industrial-scale slavery of the 18th/19th-century Atlantic world, where the dehumanization of African people was commensurate to many political projects of the modern period (e.g., colonialism, the reservation system, the carceral state) and the need for labor embedded deeply in the productive and financial systems of industrial capitalism. The discontents of Egyptian and Babylonian slaveries were thus profoundly different from modern cases and need to be reframed on their own terms, as historically particular legal, social, and economic forms.

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