

A detailed marble statue of a muscular man, likely a slave, with long, wavy hair. He is looking upwards and to the left with a determined expression. His right arm is raised, and his left hand is clenched into a fist, holding a chain that is attached to his right wrist. The statue is set against a blurred background of classical architecture.

Theresa Urbainczyk

SLAVE REVOLTS in Antiquity

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Theresa Urbainczyk

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Chronology

BCE

- Unknown date Slaves rebel on Samos for six years. After their masters are unable to conquer them, they agree a truce and allow them to leave. The slaves board a ship and go to live in Ephesus.
- Unknown date After their masters are away on a long campaign, slaves in Scythia take their place; they marry their masters' wives and have children by them.
- 501 Slave revolt in Rome.
- 490 Battle of Marathon. Athenians and Plataeans defeat the Persians.
- 480 Battles of Thermopylae and Salamis; end of Persian invasion of Greece.
- 464 Taking advantage of an earthquake in Sparta, some helots rebel, and occupy Mount Ithome. After ten years the Spartans still cannot defeat them, so they are allowed to leave the Peloponnese and settle in Naupactus on the Corinthian gulf.
- 460 Slave revolt in Rome, led by Herdonius the Sabine.
- 431–404 Peloponnesian War, the war between Athens and Sparta and their respective allies.
- Late-5th century Herodotus is writing his *Histories*.
Threat of helot revolt affects Spartan policy during the Peloponnesian War.
- 425 Athenians land in Pylos on the Peloponnese, hoping to gain the help of the local helots. They score an important victory.

SLAVE REVOLTS IN ANTIQUITY

- 419 Slave revolt in Rome.
- Unspecified date Spartans kill 2,000 helots in an attempt to gain control.
- 415–413 Slaves desert in Sicily as the Athenians start to lose ground there.
- 413 20,000 slaves desert from Athens taking advantage of the Spartan occupation of Decelea in Attica.
- 404 Defeat of Athens. Thucydides is writing *The History of the Peloponnesian War*.
- Early-4th century Xenophon is composing *Hellenica*.
- 397 Cinadon leads a conspiracy of helots and others against the Spartans.
- 3rd century A group of rebel slaves survives in Chios with the leadership of Drimakos, and later without it.
- 275 The Romans conquer southern Italy.
- 264–241 First Punic (Carthaginian) War.
- 259 Slave revolt in Rome.
- 218–201 Second Punic War.
- 217 Slave revolt in Rome.
- 216 Battle of Cannae, victory for Hannibal.
- 202 Defeat of Hannibal's army at Zama.
- 198 Slave revolt in Setia in Italy.
- 197 End of Second Macedonian War. The Romans defeat the army of Philip V of Macedon. Roman territory in Spain is formally constituted into the provinces of Nearer Spain and Further Spain.
- 196 Slave revolt in Etruria.
- 192–188 Syrian War. Antiochus III surrenders territory in Europe and Asia Minor to the Romans.
- 191 Rome completes its conquest of Cisalpine Gaul.
- 186 Bacchanalian conspiracy involving slaves in Rome and southern Italy.
- 185 Slave uprising in the region of Tarentum.
- 184 Slave uprisings in southern Italy.
- 171–168 Third Macedonian War.
- 149–146 Third Punic War.
- 146 Physical destruction of Carthage and Corinth by the Romans. Macedonia becomes a Roman province.

CHRONOLOGY

- 141 First slave war starts on Sicily.
- 133 Tribune of Tiberius Gracchus, who attempts to introduce reforms to remedy the dangerous situation of too many slaves and not enough free people on the land, with a proposal to redistribute public land. He and many of his supporters are murdered. King Attalus leaves Pergamum to the Romans in his will. Aristonicus and a following of slaves revolt in Pergamum.
- 132 End of the first Sicilian slave war.
- 129 Annexation of the Roman province of Asia.
- 125 Fulvius Flaccus proposes Roman citizenship for Latins.
- 123 Tribune of Gaius Gracchus, brother of Tiberius. One of Gaius' reforms is to allow equites to sit as jurors.
- 121 Murder of Gaius Gracchus.
- 107 Marius enlists landless men to the Roman army.
- 104 Decree from Senate to release free citizens of allied states who had been enslaved.
- 104–100 Second slave war on Sicily.
 - 91–88 War between Rome and Italian allies, called Social War.
 - 89–85 First Mithridatic War, against Mithridates (also spelled Mithradates) VI Eupator Dionysus, king of Pontus.
 - 88 Roman general Sulla marches on Rome.
 - 87–86 Roman general Marius marches on Rome.
 - 83–31 Second Mithridatic War.
 - 81 Sulla appointed dictator.
 - 77 Pompey is sent to Spain against Sertorius.
 - 74–64 Third Mithridatic War.
 - 73–71 Slave war in Italy. The slave army is led by Spartacus.
 - 71 Defeat by Pompey of army led by Sertorius.
 - 71 Defeat of slave army by Crassus and Pompey.
 - 71 Pompey allowed to stand as consul, although not qualified to do so.
 - 70 Crassus and Pompey are consuls.
 - 67 Pompey receives command against pirates in the Mediterranean.
 - 63 Conspiracy of Catiline. There are fears that the slaves will join in.

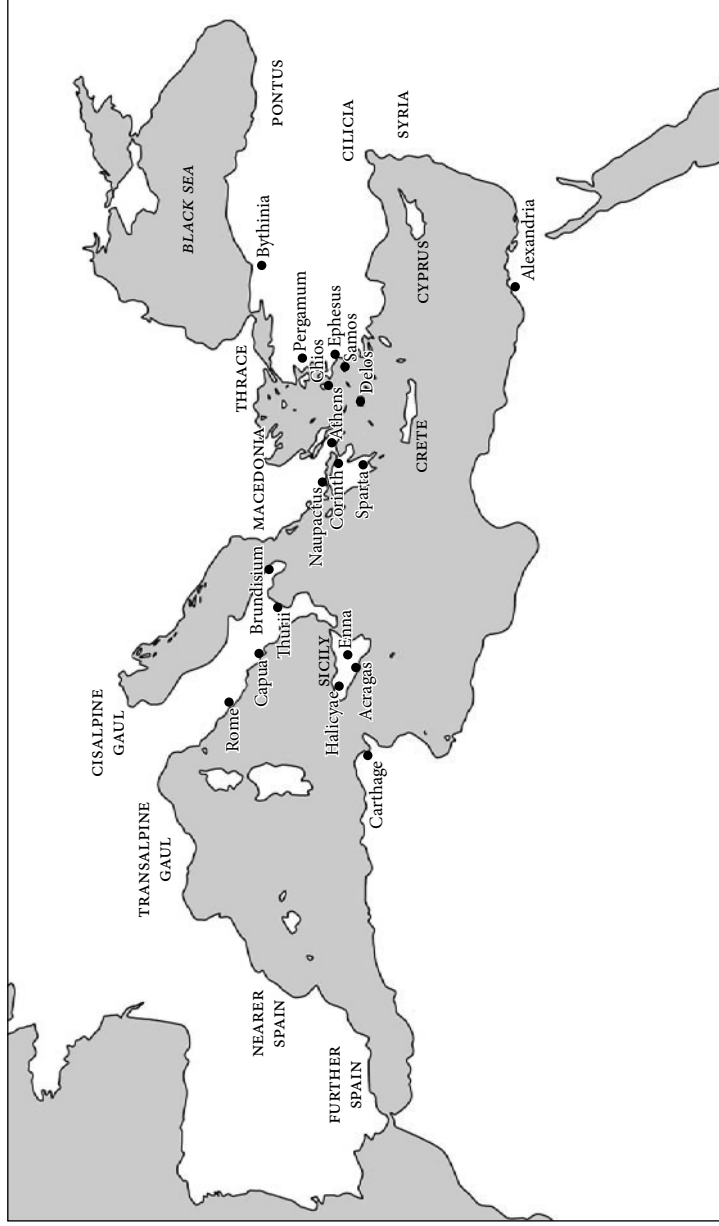
SLAVE REVOLTS IN ANTIQUITY

- 60 Remnants of Spartacus' army are still at large in southern Italy.
- 49–45 Civil war in Rome.
- 44 Julius Caesar is murdered.
- 43–31 Civil war in Rome.
- Mid-1st century Diodorus in composing history.
- 31 Battle of Actium. Octavian defeats Mark Anthony.
- 30 Egypt is annexed.
- 27 Octavian receives the title Augustus. During the reign of Augustus, Livy is composing his history.

CE

- 14 Death of Emperor Augustus. Strabo is composing his *Geography*.
- 21 Gladiators join Sacrovir's rebellion.
- 24 A slave war headed by Titus Curtisius is averted.
- 61 Gladiators break out of their school at Praeneste. There is talk of another Spartacus.
- Late-1st century Plutarch is composing his parallel lives.
- 1st–2nd century Cassius Dio is writing his history.
- Early-2nd century Florus is compiling his eiptome of Livy's history of Rome.
- 2nd century Appian is composing his Roman history.
- 2nd–3rd century Athenaeus is composing *The Deipnosophistae*.
- Early-3rd century In Italy a group of slaves and others led by Bulla successfully evades capture until betrayal of Bulla to the authorities.
- Early-5th century Augustine is composing his *City of God*. Orosius is composing his *History against the Pagans*.

The ancient Mediterranean



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The significance of slave revolts

Slaves rebelled in various ways in the ancient world. Sometimes, when they had the opportunity, they ran away. Sometimes they took up arms and fought their masters. Spartacus is a name familiar to many but he was only one of tens of thousands of slaves from antiquity who formed armies to fight for their freedom. We do not have as much information as we should like about these events from the ancient world, but there is more than might be assumed from a quick glance at modern histories.¹ One of the aims of this book is to remind readers that slaves *did* rebel in antiquity; another is to discover why the material that remains has been, to a large extent, ignored or dismissed as historically insignificant. One might reasonably suppose that this attitude simply reflects the ancient texts, and yet one of the results of this re-examination has been the gradual realization that ancient sources accorded far more importance to the actions of the slaves than have modern writers.

While one might expect modern commentators to be more sympathetic toward slaves than their ancient counterparts, the reason for a relative lack of interest in slave rebellion is perhaps not hard to find: slave armies might defeat those of their former masters for a while, even for years, but in the end slavery persisted.² There was no abolitionist movement among free people, nor even any text calling for the abolition of slavery. We do not even know that the slaves themselves wanted an end to slavery for other people. It is more likely that, on acquiring their own freedom, they would simply have gone on to become slave-owners themselves. Slaves who took up arms against their masters were simply groups of individuals taking rash, if not downright foolish, action, which could never have succeeded.³ At the time, it must have seemed threatening to the owners to find their slaves armed and hostile,

but with hindsight we can see that such groupings never had a chance of long-term success. And, it might be argued, they had no impact, or only a minimal one, on their own societies.

There are several reasons, however, why it is worth examining slave revolts from antiquity more closely. There is a failure to understand those texts from antiquity that do contain material about revolts if one dismisses the terror they reveal, and indeed it is terror, of rebellious slaves. We also fail to comprehend the true impact that such rebellions had on society at large if we take the view that they were doomed to failure before they even started. The crucifixion of 6,000 slaves along the Appian Way after the defeat of the army led by Spartacus did indeed hold up a gruesome illustration to other slaves of what would happen to them if they so much as had a rebellious thought, but at the same time it was the action of a society that had been terrified by recent events.

A study of slave revolts can thus give rise to a deeper understanding of the ancient societies in which they occurred; it also belongs to the history of slavery. The slaves of antiquity may not have abolished slavery or even wanted to, but their actions, and a history of their actions, is important for slaves of later ages. It is evidence that slaves rebelled, and have always rebelled, against an institution now regarded as unacceptable in a civilized society. Toussaint Louverture was called the black Spartacus, not because he was doomed to failure, but because he had dared to rebel.

At this point, it is worth noting issues raised by Niall McKeown in his provocative work *The Invention of Slavery?*,⁴ in which he looks at the works of well-known scholars of ancient slavery and reveals, with a careful precision, the emotional as well as the political attitudes behind their approaches. At the end of his first chapter he comments:

The problem is not so much that we invent the past as that, when we explore it, we tend to find what we are looking for. Often, when we appear to claim that “this is the way it actually was” we are, in practice, asking the reader to share our ethical ideals, which is something very different.⁵

No historian is free from bias, but it seems that it is more difficult than usual for a detached attitude to be maintained when discussing slave revolts, ancient or modern.⁶ Moses Finley comments⁷ that ever since Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) that all history was the history of class struggle, ancient slavery has been

a battleground for Marxists and non-Marxists.⁸ This is certainly true of the scholarship on slave revolts, the very essence, one might think, of ancient class struggle for Marxists.⁹ In the title of his study of slave revolt in the southern states of the US, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, Eugene Genovese used terms that are key in this debate. His argument is that the particular historical circumstances of, for instance, the rebellion in St Domingue, meant that, unlike their ancient counterparts, these slaves were revolutionary and had revolutionary aims.¹⁰ Until this age of revolution, when ideas about freedom and equality were formulated, slaves merely wished to withdraw from society, not change it.¹¹ In his Introduction Genovese writes: "The history of slavery and of slave revolts in the Americas corresponds roughly to the transition from seigneurialism to capitalism".¹²

Jacky Dahomay goes even further, writing that the slaves on St Domingue did not even understand the principles of the French Revolution and one cannot call this an anti-slavery revolution; rather, it was an anti-colonial revolution that incorporated anti-slavery uprisings.¹³ He goes on to ask: "is revolution thinkable before the advent of modernity?"¹⁴ It seems not and thus my use of the term "revolutionary" will not be in this technical sense, since the concern here is to find out more about the uprisings of slaves, even the more minor ones, in order to discover in what circumstances slaves could rise up. Another consequence of looking for this "revolutionary" content to the revolts is that modern observers tend to emphasize the inevitable failure. What comes across quite strikingly is that for the participants the prospect of escaping slavery overrode fears of a violent death.

The purpose here is partly to indicate the difference in responses between ancient and modern writers, so I have used examples that are better known in order to illustrate this difference more effectively. The nature of the sources, however, has meant that there is a greater focus on the Roman Republic than on other periods and in Chapter 8 I draw some wider conclusions about that particular period of history. The helots of Sparta are sometimes not discussed with other slaves at all, because of their particular nature; I have addressed the issue of their status separately (Chapter 7). I look at the conditions surrounding known episodes of slave resistance so that, by the end of the book, the reader will be more aware not only of ancient and modern attitudes to slave rebellions, but also of the conditions that are beneficial to the successful organization of rebels. This structure was prompted by the following quotation from Finley:

It is a fallacy to think that the threat of rebellion increases automatically with an increase in misery and oppression. Hunger and torture destroy the spirit; at most they stimulate efforts at flight or other forms of purely individual behaviour (including betrayal of fellow-victims), whereas revolt requires organisation and courage and persistence.¹⁵

Finley highlights the extreme difficulties the slaves had to overcome simply to be in the position of forming an effective army. While it is easy to focus on the ultimate military defeat of the slaves, it is vital not to overlook the successful organization that made a military confrontation possible.

Slavery has been with us since records began and although legal nowhere it has not disappeared from the face of the earth. Orlando Patterson started his book *Slavery and Social Death* with these words:

There is nothing notably peculiar about the institution of slavery. It has existed from before the dawn of human history right down to the twentieth century, in the most primitive of human societies and in the most civilized. There is no region on earth that has not at some time harboured the institution. Probably there is no group of people whose ancestors were not at one time slaves or slaveholders.¹⁶

In 1999 Kevin Bales documented the slavery that still exists in contemporary society. In the first chapter of his work he stated, "Slavery is not a horror safely consigned to the past; it continues to exist throughout the world, even in developed countries like France and the United States".¹⁷ He estimated that there are currently 27 million slaves in the world.¹⁸

Although one might argue that chronic persistence does not necessarily entail easy accomplishment, it would not seem illogical to suppose that it is not very difficult to enslave people; indeed, it seems to have been, and still be, shockingly easy. Resisting enslavement is another matter, to which Finley's remark draws our attention. In this book I attempt to illustrate how slaves in antiquity sometimes did succeed in rebelling.

In his book on slave revolts in the New World, Genovese identified conditions in which uprisings were more probable.¹⁹ They were: where the master-slave relationship had deteriorated; where there was economic distress and division between the masters; where there were large slave-holding units, in which slaves heavily outnumbered masters;

where most of the slaves were free-born; where there arose opportunities for slaves to become leaders; and lastly where the geography of the area enabled the slaves to hide.²⁰ Some of these factors overlap but Genovese's list provides a useful starting-point for this study. As we shall see, many of these conditions hold true for those episodes of slave rebellion in the ancient world about which we have evidence. They are especially true of the period of history during which the most famous episodes took place: the later Roman Republic.

Some issues faced by the historian of antiquity have apparent parallels in the slave revolts of more recent times. Cross-cultural resemblances can be very misleading, and it is easy to draw entirely mistaken conclusions from seemingly similar sets of circumstances. The classicist or ancient historian who teaches both Greek and Roman material is used to remaining conscious of the wide gap between the two societies of Athens and Rome and the dangers of anachronistic assumptions. The difference between antiquity and the New World, for instance, is many times greater and it is beyond question that one must be alert to the perils of drawing simplistic parallels. It cannot be denied, on the other hand, that some issues faced by slaves and slave-owners were not unique to their own historical period, and that therefore it would be unnecessarily restrictive never to refer to, or to consider, other periods of history.²¹ Therefore, while remaining conscious of the dangers of looking at modern material in order to speculate about the situation in the ancient world, it is worth remembering that there is a long tradition of scholars of slavery looking at other cultures to help them at least suggest possibilities for the ancient world. Mark Golden's remark is apposite:

Of course, reports on other cultures cannot in themselves replace missing data for Greece and Rome, but they can be useful all the same in providing models of the working methods of investigators into other cultures, in developing hypotheses, in identifying patterns from scattered scraps, in refuting generalizations.²²

There was a huge number of armed uprisings by slaves in more recent history and we have quite a substantial amount of information on them. For instance, as Patterson notes in his article about slave revolts on Jamaica in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries:

Few slave societies present a more impressive record of slave revolts than Jamaica. During the more than 180 years of its existence as