

*Domesticating Enslavement through Group Discrimination
Mediterranean Systems of Enslavement from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*
Oxford, October 3-4, 2025
New College, McGregor-Matthews Room

First session – Friday, October 3rd, 9:30 am-1 pm

9:30 am

Matthew Hewitt (Turin Humanities Programme)

Identifying the Enslaved in Classical and Hellenistic Greece: Paranoia and Practicality

10:30 am

Coffee break, South Undercroft, New College Quad

11 am

Deborah Kamen (University of Washington)

Making and Recognizing Slave Bodies in Classical Athens

12 noon

Mirko Canevaro (University of Edinburgh)

Honour Denied: Rights, Humanity, and the Legal Domestication of Slavery in Classical Athens

Second session – Friday, October 3rd, 3 pm – 6:30 pm

3 pm

Bianca Mazzinghi Gori (Turin Humanities Programme)

Infantilising Enslaved and Foreign People(s) in Ancient Greece (and beyond)

4 pm

Tea break, South Undercroft, New College Quad

4:30 pm

Nino Luraghi (University of Oxford)

Identifying the Enslaved in Ancient Sparta: Helots and their Masters, again

5:30 pm

David Lewis (University of Edinburgh)

Slave-Naming in the Hellenistic Mediterranean: Perspectives from Parnassus and Carthage

Third session – Saturday, October 4th, 9 am-1:30 pm

9:30 am

Ella Karev (Tel Aviv University)

Ethnics and Pseudo-Ethnics: Enslavement and Privilege in Ptolemaic Egypt

10:30 am

Coffee break, South Undercroft, New College Quad

11 am

Laurie Venters (Turin Humanities Programme)

Oriental Stereotypes and Enslaved Labour in Roman Italy

12 noon

Sarah Levin-Richardson (University of Washington)

Ethnicity and Servile Emotional Labor in Roman Culture

Fourth session – Saturday, October 4th, 3 pm-6:30 pm

3 pm

Myles Lavan (University of St Andrews)

Slavishness in the Roman Imaginary

4 pm

Tea break, South Undercroft, New College Quad

4:30 pm

Janel Fontaine (National Museums of Scotland)

'Invisible' Archaeology? Investigating Slave Trading as a Link between Scotland and the Mediterranean in the 6th Century

5:30 pm

Antti Lampinen (University of Turku)

Unfreedom and Ethnography in the Cosmographia Aethici Istriotae (early 8th c. CE)

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Abstracts of papers

Mirko Canevaro

Honour Denied: Rights, Humanity, and the Legal Domestication of Slavery in Classical Athens

This paper asks how classical Athenians domesticated enslavement through a selective economy of honour (*timē*). While *timē* provided a grammar of dignity and rights for citizens, the free, and even slaves, Athenian law and ideology worked hard to make those claims strictly status-bound, denying their universalisation to enslaved people. The resulting contradiction is clearest in the public action for *hybris*: orators and philosophers concede that slaves can be victims, yet ground the prohibition not in slaves' claims but in the master's ethos—in his philanthropia—thereby policing citizens' character while ensuring that slaves remain, legally, nothing more than property. Drawing on Demosthenes, Aeschines, Plato, Aristotle, the pseudo-Aristotelian *Oeconomica* and more, this paper endeavours to show how everyday interdependence produced the recognition of enslaved persons' *timē* in practice, which the polis then strategically refused to translate into legal standing. This regime of group discrimination naturalised slavery, aligning democratic virtue with domination and casting 'humanity' as gratuitous benevolence. Yet in denying human rights, Athenian discourse paradoxically sketched their contours, casting into sharp relief the inherently problematic and self-contradictory nature - normatively, conceptually, and pragmatically - of enslavement.

Janel Fontaine

'Invisible' Archaeology? Investigating Slave Trading as a Link between Scotland and the Mediterranean in the 6th Century

Early medieval slavery has been described as having an 'invisible' archaeological footprint, but recent work has demonstrated that slaving in particular left its mark in the evidence of trade networks. This has highlighted a need to reevaluate existing archaeological evidence for long-distance trade and to think about whether slaving is truly invisible or simply in need of more critical evaluation. This paper will pose such questions within the framework of the sixth-century trade between western Britain and the Mediterranean, well-attested in the archaeological record through discovery of glass, amphorae, and luxury items at sites surrounding the Irish Sea. Mediterranean interest in an Irish Sea trade zone can be explained in southwest Britain by the desire for tin and lead, but reasons for trade with what is now Scotland are less clear. This paper will explore textual and archaeological evidence to query the existence of a slave-trading network and to think about what social and political factors may have driven Gaulish or Byzantine merchants to enslave people from the edge of the known world.

Matthew Hewitt

Identifying the Enslaved in Classical and Hellenistic Greece: Paranoia and Practicality

Modern scholarship frequently distinguishes slavery in the Greek world from its modern manifestations by emphasising the absence of racial justification: enslaved individuals were not regarded as physically distinct from their enslavers. While this usefully distances ancient slavery from the specific paradigm of the American South, it introduces new problems. It risks reifying 'race' as a category, implying that racism requires observable difference, and it

understates the extent to which modern slavery also relied on unstable markers of identity, as evidenced by phenomena such as “passing”. More fundamentally, it privileges “reality” over the perceptions and anxieties that underlie practices of othering.

Ancient sources themselves do appear, at times, to affirm the indistinguishability of the enslaved. Hence, the ‘Old Oligarch’ notes that citizens could easily be mistaken for slaves or metics, and forensic speeches attest to disputes over legal status, often framed as attempts by non-citizens to exploit ambiguity. Yet such evidence must be read against rhetorical strategies and civic paranoia, which may exaggerate the permeability of social boundaries. This paper therefore considers two interrelated questions: how slaveowners conceptualised the distinguishing features of the enslaved, and what practical mechanisms—social knowledge, cultural stereotypes, and documentary practices—were employed to identify and regulate them.

Deborah Kamen

Making and Recognizing Slave Bodies in Classical Athens

In his defense of slavery, Aristotle claims that nature makes the bodies of free men and slaves different. But he also recognizes that this is “often” not the case, and that some slaves are endowed with the bodies of free people (and vice versa) (Politics 1254b27-34). In this talk, I suggest that in classical Athens, too, an attempt was made to naturalize the distinction between slaves and free people (and especially citizens), but by different means: namely, through the differential treatment of enslaved people, including bans from the gymnasium, whipping and other corporal punishment, fetters and chains, tattooing and branding, manual labor, etc. In this way, legible “slave bodies” were made, thus justifying, albeit retroactively, their bearers’ enslavement. However, just as Aristotle’s argument breaks down, so too in Athens does the hard-and-fast distinction between slave and citizen bodies crumble when held up to scrutiny.

Ella Karev

Ethnics and Pseudo-Ethnics: Enslavement and Privilege in Ptolemaic Egypt

Documentary sources from Ptolemaic Egypt frequently designate individuals by ethnics (e.g. ‘Syrian’, ‘Libyan’) and pseudo-ethnics (e.g. ‘Persian of the Epigone’). For the enslaved, such labels marked difference and served the practical purpose of designating origin; for unenslaved persons, such labels situated individuals socially. Particularly striking is the designation ‘of the epigone’, which applied only to unenslaved persons as a label for descendants of cleurchs. Rather than stigmatising, this ethnic asserted privilege and affiliation with military-colonial elites.

Examining the use of ethnics and pseudo-ethnics across both enslaved and unenslaved populations demonstrates how ethnic labeling could simultaneously degrade and elevate, incorporating elements of identity, status, and ethnic origin. This paper situates these practices within broader Mediterranean systems of enslavement and discrimination, arguing that in Ptolemaic Egypt such ethnic categorisation functioned as a social technology which was capable of embedding both subordination and privilege within the structure of group difference.

Antti Lampinen

Unfreedom and Ethnography in the Cosmographia Aethici Istriotae (early 8th c. CE)

The *Cosmographia Aethici*, an unusual pseudepigraphic text of the early eighth century CE, cannot easily be described in terms of its genre. What is clear, however, is its interest in ethnographically framed material, along with a heady mixture of apocalypticism, Alexander-matter, and novelistic touches. Its author adapts and reworks material from Isidore of Seville,

Orosius, and other late antique sources, while also reflecting the disruptions of the late sixth and early seventh centuries in the Eastern Mediterranean. This paper explores how the *Cosmography* conceptualises freedom, unfreedom, forced mobility, and captivity within its ethnographic framing. Although the author's notional 'ingroup' remains elusive, the text's articulation of ethnic difference and its narratives of enslavement and displacement illuminate both the reapplication of inherited traditions and the cultural strategies used to pathologise outgroups. Reading the *Cosmography* in this light not only clarifies its ideological engagement with late antique authors but also helps trace the transmission of ethnographic models into the medieval imagination.

Myles Lavan

Slavishness in the Roman Imaginary

This paper will discuss a paradox identified by Henrik Mouritsen: the fact that elite Romans believed in slavishness, i.e. that (some) enslaved people were inherently inferior to free people, yet also practiced manumission on a relatively large scale, and even made many or most of the manumitted Roman citizens. After sketching the variety of theorisations of slavishness that we encounter in Roman texts, including the idea of natural slavery, I will focus on one that seems to be particularly important in the Roman social imaginary: the idea that the experience of slavery engenders slavishness. I will then go on to discuss how these beliefs were reconciled with the practice of manumission. The focus will be on texts of the late republican and early imperial periods.

Sarah Levin-Richardson

Ethnicity and Servile Emotional Labor in Roman Culture

In this talk, I explore the role of ethnicity in the selection of slaves to perform emotional labor (i.e., managing the emotional states of free people, mitigating their anger, providing pleasure). I first analyze enslaved wetnurses, showing how they were expected to control their affective states in order to impart that skill to free children; this led philosophers and doctors to articulate a preference for Greeks, since other ethnicities—according to prevailing theories of environmental determinism—were prone to anger. I then turn to enslaved children, from whom pleasing chatter was demanded. Enslaved children from Alexandria were known for being trained in this skill; in the poetry of elite Romans, however, that origin becomes a liability, exposing the performativity of enslaved children's emotional labor that the Romans desperately wanted to believe was natural, spontaneous, and authentic. Ultimately, I suggest that wetnurses and enslaved children were among the "ethnically coded experts" (to use Padilla Peralta's phrase) that were created by Roman imperialism.

David Lewis

Slave-Naming in the Hellenistic Mediterranean: Perspectives from Parnassus and Carthage

In tracing strategies of othering and the domestication of slavery, slaves' names provide a valuable resource, for we have many examples from inscriptions that relate to non-famous individuals (both slaves and the owners who named them), reflecting both the individual personality of the bestower of the name as well as the broader cultural milieu that shaped the stock of popular names. This paper takes historical soundings in two sanctuaries of the Hellenistic Mediterranean where large numbers of slaves' names are preserved: that of Apollo at Delphi, and the so-called tophet at Carthage. Examining Greek and Punic evidence in parallel will allow for commonalities to emerge and idiosyncrasies to come into sharper focus; it will also reveal the competing priorities, ranging from othering to integration, that slaveholders faced when naming their slaves, as well as general epistemological problems to do with inferring intent from names that are often ambiguous and polyvalent.

Nino Luraghi*Identifying the Enslaved in Ancient Sparta: Helots and their Masters, again*

From the fifth century BCE at the latest, the Spartiates, i.e. the oligarchic ruling elite of Sparta, owned enslaved people they called *Heilotes* or *Heilotai*, using what appears to have been an old Laconian word meaning ‘prisoner’ or ‘slave’. In the classical period, and perhaps already before, the Spartiates imposed on them a number of specific practices, mostly expressing ritualized despidal, but including apparently a yearly declaration of war. Speculating on the possible meanings of this declaration of war will lead the way to reconstructing how the Spartiated projected on their slaves a shared identity that was susceptible of being turned into a sense of distinct ethnicity, undermining the Spartan system of enslavement itself.

Bianca Mazzinghi Gori*Infantilising Enslaved and Foreign People(s) in Ancient Greece (and beyond)*

The paper focuses on the infantilisation of enslaved people in ancient Greece, as exemplified by the use of *pais* (‘child’, ‘son’) to denote and address slaves. In the first part of the paper, I shall consider its relationship with paternalism, in order to show that, while paternalism implies infantilisation, the reverse is not necessarily true. In particular, the Homeric ideology of slavery will be compared with that of Classical Athens, to highlight how the strategy of infantilising enslaved people might adapt depending on context. In the second part of the paper, I shall address the issue of the connections between infantilisation and racialisation. A cross-cultural perspective shows that these two strategies overlap in several historical context; in ancient Greece, by contrast, they seem to play complementary roles. I shall thus address the question of why that might be so. By drawing on literary as well as iconographical sources, the paper provides a reassessment of the phenomenon under question, highlighting its significance and implications for a deeper understanding of the attempts to justify, normalise, and control slavery.

Laurie Venters*Oriental Stereotypes and Enslaved Labour in Roman Italy*

This paper will investigate ethnic stereotypes surrounding the enslaved labour of Syrians, Anatolians, and Egyptians in Roman Italy, as represented in Latin literature from the late Republic to the Principate. While recognising that these orientalist stereotypes do not necessarily reflect the actual work performed by foreign-born enslaved individuals, they offer insight into the ideology underpinning the association of particular forms of labour with specific ethnic groups.