

*The Invention of Ancient Slavery?* By NIALL MCKEOWN. Duckworth Classical Essays. London: Duckworth Publishers, 2007. Pp. 174. Paper, \$22.00. ISBN 978-0-7156-3185-0.

The task of the modern historian working on the ancient world is never an easy one, as practitioners of the art know well: for civilizations as prone to writing about themselves as the Greeks and Romans were, there nevertheless exist gaps (and in some instances actual chasms) in the record, making the occasional use of conjecture and even imagination necessary. This is true even for analyses of persons, places, things and events that the ancients themselves thought significant enough to merit inclusion in the histories they composed. It is all the more the case for aspects of Classical society that receive little mention in the historical record, forcing those who wish to describe such aspects to make more extensive use of sources beyond those that referred to themselves as histories; it likewise makes such contemporary work more reliant on speculation and creativity. Slavery is just such an area. Full-fledged historians from the past had comparatively little to say about slavery, slaves and the slave experience; their focus is typically on what they would consider greater things, and since slaves were rarely the primary actors in these scenes, their role is usually that of scenery, and slavery itself becomes something of an abstraction. Indeed, even when slaves are actors, their deeds are seen through the filter of aristocratic bias under which all composers of history in the classical world operated.

For this reason, modern historians of slavery have grown increasingly dissatisfied with what can be gleaned from the ancient narratives. Many have turned to archaeology, epigraphy, laws, works of philosophy, plays, poems and novels to gain an additional perspective. In this way they "fill in the gaps" and often create new narratives entirely. This process, which Niall McKeown (M.) refers to as the "invention of ancient slavery," is the subject of this book. More specifically, what concerns M. is the way modern historians select, edit and interpret sources to produce works on ancient slavery, and the extent to which this method is shaped by the particular cultural, social, sexual, economic and political ideologies held by contemporary scholars. Very often, M. notes, modern scholars run the risk of reading the history they wish to compose *into* the sources, rather than drawing this history *from* them. He therefore takes upon himself the task of illustrating how the mindset of the modern author shapes the history he or she "invents," and how one "invention" is often discarded by later scholars who proffer an invention of their own.

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As a graphic illustration of this procedure, M. takes note in his first chapter of the way the origins of slaves in the late Roman Empire and the influence of freedmen of eastern backgrounds were discussed in the 1930s. Using data such as the names preserved in funerary inscriptions and other mentions of freedmen in various literary sources, scholars such as Tenney Frank and Mary Gordon tested the claim (frequently asserted by authors writing during the Late Empire) that slaves and freedmen brought from the east had an enervating effect on the Romans through "race-mixing." M. notes that this was a regular feature of the depiction of slavery and its effects in works written before 1939, and while the conclusions drawn may be repugnant to contemporary sensibilities, that repugnance is not necessarily due to the fact that this is bad history; the use of epigraphy and the literary historical sources underlying such claims is solid. Modern work on freedmen and their influence does not proceed under the hypothesis that there was any such deleterious influence of "race-mixing" and tends to reject claims made by the ancients to that effect as revolting. This can lead—and indeed has led—scholars to dismiss out of hand the work of those like Gordon and Frank, who are more willing to accept the assertions made by Romans of the time (and to conduct analysis on it). M. observes that while this tendency is understandable (one to which he admits he himself is prone), it must be recognized that it exists more because scholars today find the initial premise unsettling and less because works written under such premises used epigraphical and narrative evidence poorly.

It is not just the passage of time (and the changes in perception that have accompanied it) that has led to the invention and reinvention of slavery. M. also argues that there is a divergence produced by what he terms "geography." What M. seems to mean by this is a tendency among Anglophone scholars in particular to look at slavery in a way different from that which informed the opinions of their counterparts in Germany and the former Soviet Union. In Germany, and in particular at Mainz, scholarship has raised the possibility that slavery was not as dire an evil as is sometimes thought. [[1]] (M. entitles this section "Every cloud has a silver lining"). Evidence for this interpretation can be found in oracular questions, which can be mined to show bonds of affection and loyalty between masters and slaves. But such an invention must also ignore the many bits of contrary evidence in these selfsame oracular responses: some do show what appears to be affection between slave and master, but many others display the opposite (questions involving fugitive slaves, for example). This introduces a theme to which M. returns again and again:

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almost none of the sources used to support one view of slavery conclusively rules out others.

Thus, in contrast to the Mainz school, the Anglophone tradition [[2]] (which stresses the dreadful lot of slaves, the resistance they offered and the anxiety slaveholding created in masters, a tradition discussed extensively in Chapters 2 and 4) draws upon depictions of slaves and slavery in literary sources including philosophy, poetry, plays and novels. For practically every passage, however, that shows how brutal masters can be in the absence of laws to restrain them, others show that excesses of cruelty drew sharp condemnation and opprobrium that was likely as effective as any law. In Chapter 3, M. also discusses Marxist scholarship, [[3]] which attempts to portray the end of slavery as the result of slave resistance and of legislation that gradually made slavery too difficult and converted sharecroppers (*coloni*) into a more feasible and attractive option. As in the case of the Anglophone tradition, M. shows how the body of evidence the Marxists used to reach their conclusions is not impervious to being put to service to support entirely different hypotheses. Thus, use of Columella's call for increased oversight (*de rust.* 1.8.11, 1.9.4–8) ignores the possibility that Columella may have found such oversight desirable for its own sake (Xenophon's *Oikonomikos*, which Columella cites at 11.1.5, does the same thing), while laws designed to restrict slave behavior may simply have been occasioned by an increased legislative impulse in the late Empire. In this chapter and throughout this book, M. shows just how susceptible an invention may be to the use of the same evidence that created it to produce a reinvention that argues something completely different.

As M. notes from the beginning, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?* is not itself a history of slavery. Rather, its purpose is to show how works written to be histories of slavery are influenced by the opinions and prejudices of their authors. Indeed, M. himself not infrequently adds his own opinions, although usually as asides which, he is careful to state, should not be taken as a commentary on the scholarship he is investigating; no matter how much M. may like or dislike the conclusions drawn by the authors whose work he samples, his own preferences have nothing to do with how well or poorly such conclusions are reached. *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?* is not particularly informative about slavery (which is not its purpose), but it is fairly thought-provoking (which is its goal), and the analysis is greatly aided by the easy style the author adopts. All in all, this is a very interesting and very fast read, the sort of work that might be useful for a Methodology class for undergraduates or first-year graduate students. Indeed, M. suggests in his conclusion that the

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book may have been composed to provide precisely such a text, and if that is the case, he has been quite successful.

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[[1]] Specifically, McKeown analyses Fridolf Kudlien's *Sklaven-Mentalität im Spiegel antiker Warsagerei* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1991).

[[2]] Whose chief representative is Keith Bradley, an analysis of whose work primarily occurs in Chapter 4.

[[3]] Represented by E. Shtaerman and M. Trofimova, whose work is the principal focus of Chapter 3.