

ISSN 1450-6998 | UDC 930.85(3)(082)

ЗБОРНИК  
МАТИЦЕ СРПСКЕ  
ЗА КЛАСИЧНЕ СТУДИЈЕ  
JOURNAL OF CLASSICAL STUDIES  
MATICA SRPSKA

23

НОВИ САД  
NOVI SAD  
2021

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## A NUMBERS GAME: THE SIZE OF THE SLAVE POPULATION IN CLASSICAL ATHENS

**ABSTRACT:** Slavery is one of the most prominent aspects of the ancient Greek civilization, yet exact role of slavery in Greek society and economy is still a matter of debate. The example that is most analyzed is Classical Athens, mainly on the account of the comparative abundance of primary sources. However, this wealth of sources is partially deceiving, because it allows scholars to see that slavery was of considerable importance, but only rarely to go beyond this general conclusion. One of the biggest obstacles is the lack of reliable numerical data: how numerous were slaves in ancient Athens, what percentage of the total population they were? This paper analyzes the primary source material that was used to solve the issue, as well as efforts of various scholars in that regard. Our knowledge of Athenian state and society makes fairly obvious that Athenians themselves did not know the number of their slaves. The conclusion is that we cannot ever hope to obtain anything resembling a precise number, but a reasonable range at best. The real number probably fluctuated from decade to decade, depending on rates of slave supply, mortality and manumission.

**KEY WORDS:** slavery, Ancient Greece, Classical Athens, Classical demography, numbers of slaves, social spread of slavery, historiography of slavery.

*It would be very helpful if we had some idea how many slaves there were in any given Greek community to carry on all this work...*

(M. I. Finley, 'Was Greek Civilization Based on Slave Labour?', p. 150)

*Within very broad limits, the numbers [of slaves] are irrelevant to the question of significance.*

(Same text, next page)

In 1959, in his seminal paper on the role of slavery in ancient Greek civilization, Moses I. Finley concluded that the classical Greek civilization was based on slave labor.<sup>1</sup> At the time his was a somewhat dissenting voice. Among classicists in the English-speaking countries in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a widespread tendency to downplay the spread and importance of slavery in the Ancient Greek world.<sup>2</sup> Slavery was usually seen as a marginal aspect of the ancient world, hardly worthy of serious scholarly attention. Ancient civilizations, most agreed, *were not* based on slave labor. Interest in ancient slavery could then be written off as a quaint hobby, a thing that belonged to the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist historiography, or – far worse! – as the exclusive province of the dreaded Marxists. Such attitudes were ultimately to the detriment of scholarship, leading to a seriously distorted picture of ancient societies.

Almost two decades prior to Finley's paper, Rostovtzeff already warned against this tendency: "*Modern scholars, recoiling from the grossly exaggerated and untenable Marxian doctrine regarding the role of slavery in ancient time, are inclined to minimize the numbers of slaves and the part played by them in pre-Hellenistic Greek economy. It must be emphasized, however, that antiquity was unanimous in believing that slaves were very numerous in the ancient city-states of Greece...*"<sup>3</sup> For its part, the contemporary Marxist historiography in the Soviet Union – that Rostovtzeff was so fond of bashing – produced an impressive amount of literature on ancient slavery. However, a great number of publications does not necessarily mean a multitude of original ideas, and Soviet scholarship is a good example to illustrate this point. While there were important exceptions, on the whole these works were highly schematic, ideologically and politically charged and relied on the firm and rigid presumptions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. I. Finley, 'Was Greek Civilization Based on Slave Labour?', *Historia* 8-2, 1959, pp. 145-164; reprinted in M. I. Finley *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*, London, 1981, pp. 97-114.

<sup>2</sup> This tendency found its classical expression in the works of Eduard Meyer (E. Meyer, 'Die Sklaverei in Altertum', in: Id. *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichtstheorie und zur Wirtschaftlichen und Politischen Geschichte des Altertums*, Halle, 1910, pp. 169-212, orig. published 1898) and Alfred Zimmern (A. Zimmern, *The Greek Commonwealth: Politics and Economics in Fifth-Century Athens*, Oxford, 1961, originally published in 1911). A typical albeit late example of the trend is C. G. Starr 'An Overdose of Slavery', *The Journal of Economic History* 18-1, 1958, pp. 17-32. His paper, though encumbered by (unwarranted) sweeping generalizations and false assumptions, also contains some rather good points. Starr's biggest blunder is the assumption (at the time rather typical) that, to consider a society as a slaveholding one, the majority of its populations must be slaves, or at least slaves must make up the majority of the work force. This was emphasized in the critique of the paper, cf. C. N. Degler, 'Starr on Slavery', *The Journal of Economic History*, 19-2, 1959, pp. 271-277.

<sup>3</sup> M. I. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World II*, Oxford, 1941, p. 1258.

<sup>4</sup> Obligatory attacks on non-Marxist historiography were a standard feature of these works. For an example, see Я. А. Ленцман, *Рабство в микенской и гомеровской Греции*, Москва, 1963, 5: "Currently, this problem [slaveholding in antiquity] has acquired a particular

At the same time, there were Marxist scholars in the West who tackled the problems of ancient slavery.<sup>5</sup>

One problem, evident both in Finley's paper and many even older works was almost total lack of reliable slave figures for any ancient culture. A modern historian bent on the study of ancient slavery will instantly run into this barrier. How can one make claims about the importance of slaves in the ancient society and economy without at least rough numerical data to support them? Finley acknowledged the problem, but only to downplay it almost immediately by asserting that "*There is too much tendentious discussion of numbers in the literature already, as if a mere count of heads is the answer to all the complicated questions which flow from the existence of slavery*", and: "*Within very broad limits, the numbers are irrelevant to the question of significance.*"<sup>6</sup> Oddly enough, immediately before discarding the whole number-assessment effort, he made an attempt of his own: "*What I consider to be the best computations for Athens suggests that the total of slaves reached 80-100,000 in peak periods in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.*"<sup>7</sup> The great historian of antiquity was trying to have it both ways, and not for the last time.

Today, more than six decades after Finley's article, discussion of the Classical Greek slavery still largely revolves around the Athenian example. In most cases, it is the only example that lends itself to deeper analysis of any kind: the numbers and variety of available sources dwarf that of any other Classical Greek state, Sparta and Cretan cities included. However, though the Athenian evidence may seem abundant, it is only so in the comparison to other Greek societies; viewed on its own it leaves much to be desired. While our knowledge looks superficially strong in some areas, it is weak in many others and nearly non-existent in some.

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*political relevance, since the question of whether ancient societies were slaveholding in nature is now the main one in the struggle between Marxist and bourgeois historians. The latter, as a rule, deny the slaveholding character of the ancient societies, in particular those of Greco-Roman antiquity, downplay the number of slaves, the degree of spread of slave labor in production, idealize the relations between slaves and slaveholders, defending the false thesis about the social peace in antiquity.*" ("В настоящее время эта проблема приобрела особо актуальное политическое звучание, так как вопрос, были ли общества древности рабовладельческими, ныне является главным в борьбе между марксистскими и буржуазными историками. Последние, как правило, отрицают рабовладельческий характер древних, в частности античных, обществ, преуменьшают численность рабов, степень расорIENTATION рабского труда в производстве, идеализируют отношения между рабами и рабовладельцами, отстаивая фальшивый тезис о социальном мире в древности.")

<sup>5</sup> Especially important works of Western Marxists are G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*, Ithaca, 1981 and Y. Garlan, *Slavery in Ancient Greece*, Ithaca / London, 1988 (English edition, expanded from the 1982 French edition).

<sup>6</sup> M. I. Finley, "Was Greek Civilization Based on Slave Labour?", *Historia* 8-2, 1959, p. 151.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 150. The mentioned "best computations" are those of S. Lauffer, *Die Bergwerksklaven von Laureion II: Gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse, Aufstände*, Wiesbaden, 1957, p. 909 (145).

If it were otherwise, we wouldn't still be wrestling with the basic questions such as whether the slaves had a significant role in the Athenian economy and agriculture, whether an average Athenian was a slave owner or not, or, indeed, the rough size of the slave population in Classical Attica.

But if Finley was not eager to play numbers games (any more than he already had, that is), others certainly were. The number of Athenian slaves was, for the most part, the research subject of two distinct historiographical niches: the study of ancient Greek demography and the study of slavery in Greco-Roman world.<sup>8</sup> It is necessary to point out just how little overlap there is between these two sub-fields and how dissimilar are the results obtained by them. Demographic studies seek to approximate the population of classical Athens using one of the more available methods, normally with the assistance of statistical analysis and some type of demographic models, and they are usually fully aware of the economic, environmental and geographical limitations that forbid assigning just any quantity to population. On the other hand, historians of ancient slavery and economy, often *assume* figures and population ratios on the bases of the role they ascribe to Athenian slavery. Thus, if historians see the Athenian economy as driven mostly by slave labor, they will maintain that slaves were numerous, sometimes even in the hundreds of thousands. If the opposite is the case, the numbers and roles of slaves will be underestimated and downplayed. Needless to say, either approach is unacceptable and reveals the lack of care for proper methodology.

This is not the place to produce a lengthy discussion on the Athenian demography, but we must emphasize a very basic but unavoidable limitation: it is out of question that classical Attica could have the population of anything close to half a million, let alone more than that. The size of Attica, its agricultural capacity and its food imports impose a firm

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<sup>8</sup> It goes without saying that study of the slave population was never the exclusive preserve of historians; philosophers, economists, sociologists, politicologists as well as many non-scholars tried their hand at the question. As one would expect, the results were of uneven quality and influence. Especially problematic was an opinion widespread in the 19th but also in the 20th century (remnants of which can be heard even today) that free population of ancient societies consisted primarily or only of slaveholders. Athenian democracy itself was (and partially still is) seen as a direct product of slavery: allegedly, slavery freed Athenian citizens from need to do any real work, thus enabling them to spend their time and energy on public affairs. In actuality, many Athenians were comparably poor and forced to do manual labor for living. The origins of this idea are unclear, but it has a very long history and a deep impact. Among many others who held similar views, Alexis de Tocqueville said that "*in Athens, all citizens took part in public affairs; but there were only twenty thousand citizens out of more than three hundred fifty thousand inhabitants; all the others were slaves*" (A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of De la démocratie en Amérique I-II*, Indianapolis, 2010, p. 815); Friedrich Engels confidently claimed: "*diese [Volksherr und Flotte] schützten nach außen und hielten die Sklaven im Zaum, die schon damals die große Mehrzahl der Bevölkerung bildeten*", and "*Auf jeden erwachsenen männlichen Bürger kamen also mindestens 18 Sklaven*" (K. Marx, F. Engels, *Werke. Band 21*, Berlin, 1962, p. 116). Cf. J. T. Roberts, *Athens on Trial. The Antidemocratic Tradition in the Western Thought*, Princeton, 1994, pp. 265-268, 365-366, n. 28.

celling to the number of its ancient residents. At its height, in the years preceding the Peloponnesian war, Attica may have as much as 300,000 inhabitants, perhaps as much as 350,000 at a major stretch, but hardly more and these numbers were soon to fall.<sup>9</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> century population never recovered to the Periclean levels. With the free population of over 200,000, the existing room for slaves is significant but not limitless. This is one of the main reasons that, as we will see, even the highest realistic estimates seldom go over 100,000 slaves in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC – not quite the one third of the population – and most are below that. But let us first examine ancient testimonies on the numbers of Athenian slaves. This will enable us to understand the difficulty inherent in this discussion and why it hadn't been resolved thus far.

### DIRECT CONTEMPORARY TESTIMONIES

There is very little direct evidence on slave numbers and almost nothing that is both credible and useful. We are well past that time when numbers recorded by ancient authors were taken at face value. Few would nowadays seriously consider millions of soldiers in armies of Persian kings,<sup>10</sup> or hundreds of thousands of Celtic warriors pouring into Greece in 279 BC.<sup>11</sup> Some of these numbers are exaggerations or mere guesses on the part of their authors, others are simply made up, with no basis whatsoever. Before accepting any figure offered by ancient historians, philosophers or orators, we should ask how realistic the number is, if it is corroborated in any way by other sources, and – an often neglected but vital point – was the author even in the position to know?

What, then, of Athenian slave figures? Athenaeus of Naucratis in his *Deipnosophistae* quotes certain Ctesicles, a Hellenistic author of a *Chronicle*, who stated that, during the 117<sup>th</sup> Olympiad (312-308 BC), Demetrius of Phalerum carried out a census in Athens, according to

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<sup>9</sup> There are still modern historians who entertain the possibility of 400,000 residents of Classical Attica. Lengthy discussion of Athenian demographics would be out of place in this paper, but it should be made clear that such high estimates are problematic in many ways. B. Akrigg, *Population and Economy in Classical Athens*, Cambridge, 2019, p. 176 takes 200,000 as “realistic minimum” and 400,000 as “perfectly possible” maximum. The minimum seems too small (certainly for the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC), the maximum far too high, 250-320,000 is a much safer range, and more in accordance with what we know of Athenian population and food supply.

<sup>10</sup> Hdt. 7.60; 7.228 (millions of soldiers in the army of Xerxes); Xen. *Anab.* 1.7.12 (900,000 men in the force of Artaxerxes at Cunaxa); Arr. *Anab.* 2.8.8 (600,000 Persians at Issus); 3.8.6 (1,000,040 at Gaugamela) etc. Cf. B. Akrigg, *op. cit.*, p. 51: “*There really is no way that Herodotus' figures here (a total of more than 5,000,000) can be true. It would be futile to try to infer anything at all about the size of the population of the Persian empire from this (except that the Greeks thought that it was big).*”

<sup>11</sup> Paus. 10.19.9 (152,000 Celtic infantrymen and 61,200 horsemen assaulting Delphi); Just. 24.4.1 (300,000 Gallic warriors moving south).

which there were 21,000 Athenians (Ἀθηναῖοι), 10,000 resident foreigners (μέτοικοι) and 400,000 slaves (οἰκέται) in the city!<sup>12</sup> Figures are obviously rounded, but the first two seem roughly in accordance with what we know about late 4<sup>th</sup> century Athenian population, if we understand “Athenians” as adult male citizens. The third number, however, is out of all proportion and obviously useless, because at no point in antiquity Attica had 400,000 inhabitants, let alone slaves, or anything close to that number. The number is even more incredible if we take οἰκέται to mean adult males, which is often done because it is implied by the context.<sup>13</sup>

There is nothing to compare Athens with, as there are no reliable sources for the slave population in other Classical communities. True, Athenaeus provides some numbers for other cities, but these are even less realistic. Relying on historian “Epitimaeus” (nickname of Timaeus of Tauromenium), he claims that Corinthians of old were so wealthy as to have 460,000 slaves.<sup>14</sup> Aristotle’s lost *Constitution of Aegina* is used as a source for alleged 470,000 slaves in that city.<sup>15</sup> Again, both numbers go far above the maximum possible population of either city, the claim of nearly half a million slaves on the tiny island of Aegina being especially bizarre. Another claim by Timaeus is preserved in a paraphrase by Diodorus, about more than 20,000 citizens in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Acragas; when settled foreigners are added the number goes over 200,000.<sup>16</sup> No slaves are mentioned, but the total is out of the question for the known size of the city, even if the existence of the extensive suburbs outside of the walls is assumed.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes it is claimed that 20,000 are adult male citizens, while 200,000 represents the total population (citizen families, foreigners, slaves) but this is not the meaning of the passage. Diogenes Laertius gives 800,000 (!) as the total population of the city, presumably by adding three slaves to each of the Timaeus’ free residents.<sup>18</sup> Again, a ridiculously high, useless figure.

<sup>12</sup> Ath. *Dei.* 6.93 (272c) = *FGrH* 245 F1, *FHG* IV 375: Κτιστικλῆς δ’ ἐν τρίτῃ Χρονικῶν κατὰ τὴν ἑπτακαιδεκάτην πρὸς ταῖς ἑκατὸν φησιν ὀλυμπιάδα Ἀθήνησιν ἐξετασμὸν γενέσθαι ὑπὸ Δημητρίου τοῦ Φαληρέως τῶν κατοικούντων τὴν Ἀττικὴν καὶ εὐρεθῆναι Ἀθηναίους μὲν δισμυρίους πρὸς τοῖς χιλίοις, μετοίκους δὲ μυρίους, οἰκετῶν δὲ μυριάδας μ’.

<sup>13</sup> M. H. Hansen, *Demography and Democracy: the Number of Athenian Citizens in the Fourth Century B.C.*, Herning, 1986, pp. 30-31 concludes that there actually was a census (hence the first two figures), but that third figure is taken from another source.

<sup>14</sup> Ath. *Dei.* 6.93 (272b): κὰν τῇ τρίτῃ δὲ τῶν ιστοριῶν ὁ Ἐπιτίμαιος ἔφη οὕτως εὐδαιμονῆσαι τὴν Κορινθίων πόλιν ὡς κτήσασθαι δούλων μυριάδας...

<sup>15</sup> Ath. *Dei.* 6.93 (272d): Ἀριστοτέλης δ’ ἐν Αἰγινήτων πολιτεία καὶ παρὰ τούτοις φησὶ γενέσθαι ἑπτὰ καὶ τεσσαράκοντα μυριάδας δούλων. In the last two examples term δουλοῖ is used instead of οἰκέται. Not much importance should be placed on this, since Athenaeus uses the two words interchangeably.

<sup>16</sup> D. S. 13.84.3 (= *FGrH* 566 F 26a): Κατ’ ἐκεῖνον γὰρ τὸν χρόνον Ἀκραγαντῖνοι μὲν ἦσαν πλείους τῶν δισμυρίων, σὺν δὲ τοῖς κατοικοῦσι ξένοις οὐκ ἐλάττους τῶν εἴκοσι μυριάδων.

<sup>17</sup> P. McKechnie, *Outsiders in the Greek Cities in the Fourth Century BC*, London / New York, 1989, p. 61, n. 19.

<sup>18</sup> D. L. 8.63: Μέγαν δὲ τὸν Ἀκράγαντα εἰπεῖν φησὶν ἐπεὶ μυριάδες αὐτὸν κατῴκουν ὀγδοήκοντα...

Another figure is provided by a fragment of Hyperides (*Against Aristogiton*, preserved in Suda). In the immediate aftermath of Chaeronea, the orator proposed to mobilize slaves for the desperate resistance against Philip II: Athenians should arm “more than 150,000 slaves from silver mines and from all over the countryside...”<sup>19</sup> Again, the number is incredible and cannot be in any way close to the truth. If it were the number of total slave population it could at least have been explained as a gross exaggeration, but here we are obviously dealing with able-bodied adult males, which would imply, with the inclusion of women, children, older and less than able males, a slave population of close to half a million.

These sources refer only to the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. The sole contemporary source for the number of Athenian slaves in 5<sup>th</sup> century BC is Thucydides,<sup>20</sup> who speaks of more than twenty thousand Athenian slaves (ἀνδράποδα) fleeing from their masters during the Decelean war.<sup>21</sup> While sounding more likely and coming from a much more reliable source, there are problems with this figure as well, namely how could the historian obtain it? Unquestionably, there was no general census of slaves in Attica. “In the ancient Greek city states slaves were never counted since they were neither taxable nor liable to military service.”<sup>22</sup> Was there, then, a list of runaway slaves? Unlikely, and certainly nothing of the sort is mentioned in the preserved sources. But if there was no official and public list, how would Thucydides know the number? It could be just hearsay or a mere guess on his part. It was also suggested that πλέον ἢ δύο μυριάδες is not a number at all, but a variant of a standard phrase μυριάς or μυριάδες meaning not ten or tens of thousands exactly, but “a lot” or “great number of”.<sup>23</sup> Anyway, even if it is taken as a literal figure, and a reliable one too, we are still a long way off from determining the whole number of slaves in Attica. Twenty thousand would be just a portion of the total, but how large?<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Hyp. Fr. 29: μυριάδας πλείους ἢ ἰε΄ τοὺς δούλους ἐκ τῶν ἔργων τῶν ἀργυρείων καὶ τοὺς κατὰ τὴν ἄλλην χώραν... (frag. 18.2-3 in the old Loeb edition of *Minor Attic Orators II*).

<sup>20</sup> D. S. 11.62.1 is sometimes used in this way as well. After the victory at the Eurymedon, Cimon took huge spoils of war, including “more than twenty thousand men” (ἄνδρας δὲ ὑπὲρ τοὺς δισμυρίους). This should, supposedly, say something about the vast numbers of slaves that reached Athens. However, even if the figure is reliable (Diodorus is the only source), the Eurymedon campaign was a singular, huge success, not to be repeated again. And, the source does not claim that all of the prisoners were made into slaves (less so Athenian slaves). In fact, most of them would probably be ransomed and not all of those sold as slaves would end up in Attica.

<sup>21</sup> Thu. 7.27.5: καὶ ἀνδραπόδων πλέον ἢ δύο μυριάδες ἠτόμομολήκεσαν...

<sup>22</sup> M. H. Hansen, *Three Studies in Athenian Demography*, Copenhagen, 1988, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> B. Akrigg, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>24</sup> A. W. Gomme, *The Population of Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC*, Oxford, 1933, p. 21 discarded the figure as unreliable, similar opinion was expressed by Finley 1973: 24 (cf. 72) and Hornblower 2010: 591. Hanson 1992 interpreted the figure as Thucydides’ rough guess at the size of population of agricultural slaves in Attica. The implication is that the deserting slaves were mostly farmhands and that the majority of those abandoned their masters, even if the number is incorrect.



## IMPRESSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In light of this, it is no surprise that historians today rarely rely on this type of evidence, though it was more common in the distant past (see examples in the next section). Instead, historians rely on impressionistic evidence from literary texts – does slavery seem widespread or not? It does, of course, but problems begin when one attempts to translate these impressions into demographic data. Needless to say, any conclusions so reached will be questionable at best. In spite of possible objections, the very fact that Attic comedy frequently displays citizens as slave owners, and that 4<sup>th</sup> century BC orators usually take slave owning for granted was interpreted to mean that most citizens owned slaves or even that every free Athenian had at least one slave. And if this is the case, the argument goes, then the slave population must have been at least as large if not larger than free population – and we are back in the realm of impossibly high figures, with hundreds and hundreds of thousands of slaves.

Aristophanes' plays are frequently utilized in the debate about the role of slavery in the Athenian agriculture, and rightly so. They are, however, sometimes used to support the idea that all but the poorest citizens owned slaves, and that therefore the slave population was at least equal in numbers to the free. Edmond Lévy employed plays of Aristophanes to conjure up statistical data about slave ownership. He calculated averages for those characters that are reported to own slaves and decided that the typical Athenian owned at least three to four slaves.<sup>25</sup> There is so much to criticize about his methodology: far too small a sample – ten or so, random nature of the sample, dubious quality of data (there is no reason to think that this is the total number of slaves owned in each case, merely the slaves we are told about), the very idea of treating comedic literature as a useful source of statistics, and many, many more. But here I will restrict myself to one general objection: we should not consider these people as examples of poor or even average Athenians *stricto sensu*. Aristophanes' farmers that own slaves are certainly not meant to represent large landowners, rather a kind of middle class proprietors. However, "middle class" is not some as poor and there is upper and lower middle class, these farmers likely belonging to the former. Most of them are not wealthy enough to escape manual labor completely (that

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<sup>25</sup> E. Lévy 'Les Esclaves chez Aristophane', in: *Actes du colloque 1972 sur l'esclavage*, 1973, p. 31: "Le nombre d'esclaves possédé par les Athéniens du Ve siècle est inconnu et a de ce fait suscité de nombreuses controverses. Aussi serait-il intéressant de tirer du théâtre d'Aristophane des statistiques précises." It certainly would be, if possible, but there are no precise statistics to be found there (cf. table of slave owners and numbers of slaves *Ibid.* 33). Lévy's interpretation was accepted by D. M. Lewis, *Greek Slave Systems in their Eastern Mediterranean Context, c. 800-146 BC*, Oxford, 2018, 183-185.

is what being middle class in this context means),<sup>26</sup> but they are better off than most, being in possession of some slaves, decent tracts of arable land, gardens, orchards, olive groves and livestock, in some cases even horses. There was nothing atypical or uncommon about them, nevertheless, they did enjoy some degree of economic success and privilege compared to most of their compatriots (at least before Peloponnesians came and ravaged the countryside). There is also nothing in these characters that would allow us to gauge the size of the slave population. After all, are Aristophanes farmers who possess several slaves more typical than some of his other characters, who own none?

Certain sentences in Plato's *Laws* were sometimes taken as a proof that slaves were normally one third of the population in Greek cities,<sup>27</sup> or that at least this was so in Athens: "*Everything that is produced by the soil will be divided into twelve portions, according to the needs of consumption. And each of the twelve portions... will be divided according to reason, one part for free folk, the other for their slaves, and the third for people's craftsmen and all other foreigners.*"<sup>28</sup> But this is merely a theoretical proposition by a philosopher, a concept for his imaginary, ideal state, and the proportions implied do not reflect the Athenian situation, where, for example, foreigners were never anything close to a third of the population.

One often used text in this debate is a fragment of a speech by Lysias (*On behalf of Callias*), where the orator says, apparently to warn against testimonies of slaves directed against their masters: "I think that this trial should not be merely a private concern of these men, but a shared

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<sup>26</sup> Attempts have been made to take Aristophanes' words out of their context and claim that some of these slave owners were actually considered poor (for example De Ste. Croix, *op. cit.*, p. 505), which should give weight to the thesis that slaveholding was widespread among all classes. For example, Strepsiades in the *Clouds* describes himself as wretched peasant, overburdened by work (Ar. *Nu.* 1-24, 39-55). However, context is important: the claims are made in a self-pitying monologue; Strepsiades was a rural man of considerable means but now he faces piling debts and ruin, because he married a woman from a wealthy family, whose luxurious lifestyle he could not support. Similarly, Chremylus in *Plutus*, while talking to one of his slaves, calls himself (Ar. *Pl.* 29) a πέννης (lit. *worker, laborer*, but here obviously *poor*). Again, self-pity is the driving emotion here, and there is a great deal of comedic exaggeration (Cf. Ar. *Pl.* 28-31: Ἐγὼ θεοσεβῆς καὶ δίκαιος ὢν ἀνὴρ κακῶς ἔπραττον καὶ πέννης ἦν... Ἐτεροὶ δ' ἐπλούτουν ἱερόσυλοι ῥήτορες καὶ συκοφάνται καὶ πονηροί.)

<sup>27</sup> G. Glotz, R. Cohen, *Histoire ancienne, deuxième partie: Histoire grecque II: La Grèce au Ve siècle*, Paris, 1938, p. 227 interpreted the text as an indication that there were *more* slaves than free. Its meaning is obviously that as many resources would be devoted to the slaves, as to citizens or foreigners, but they found a workaround for this problem: "*Il ne peut s'agir, dans l'idée du philosophe, de placer les esclaves sur le même pied que les citoyens pour la nourriture. A ceux-ci la ration forte, à ceux-là la ration faible.*"

<sup>28</sup> Plat. *Leg.* 8.847e-848a: Δώδεκα μὲν γὰρ δὴ μέρη τὰ πάντα ἐκ τῆς χώρας γιγνόμενα νέμειν χρεὼν πάντας, ἥπερ καὶ ἀναλωτέα: τὸ δὲ δωδέκατον μέρος ἕκαστον... τριχῆ διαίρεισθω κατὰ λόγον, ἐν μὲν μέρος τοῖς ἐλευθέροις, ἐν δὲ τοῖς τούτων οἰκέταις: τὸ δὲ τρίτον δημιουργοῖς τε καὶ πάντως τοῖς ξένοις...

one for all in the city. Because these are not the only men in possession of servants, everyone else is as well.”<sup>29</sup> Should this be taken as a proof that every single free Athenian owned house slaves? This is merely a tiny fragment of a much longer speech, and most of the context is lacking. And the orator is trying to convince the jury that the testimonies of slaves are not only untrustworthy, but also potentially dangerous for all free inhabitants, a beginning of a menacing trend. A recent commentator of the text noted: “It is extremely dangerous to draw demographic conclusions from a remark like this, not least because Lysias is seeking to magnify the argument from social consequences by generalizing the threat.”<sup>30</sup>

In another speech by the same orator (*For the Disabled Man*) we meet an elderly citizen who obviously owns no slaves. It is therefore interesting to note that this text was used both by scholars who see slave ownership as widespread in almost all *strata* of Athenian society, as well as those who would deny anything of the sort. The man in question asks for the state support on account of his age, poverty and (unspecified) disability. His opponent denies that man is actually poor and disabled, rather, he is an established craftsman, he engages in leisurely activities, keeps the company of the wealthy and even rides horses.<sup>31</sup> Obviously, in Lysias’ speech most of this is repudiated and the rest is explained off. The defendant says “*I have mastered a somewhat helpful craft, but now I am incapable of work without difficulties, and so far I’ve been unable to find a replacement to take it over.*”<sup>32</sup> It is amusing that he admits to horse riding, a distinctly elite activity in Classical Greece, but insists that horses were not his but borrowed.<sup>33</sup> Is he, then, being deceitful about his poverty, or is his opponent lying about him being well off? There is no way to know. If we could be sure that he actually is a typical middle-class proprietor but not a slave owner, this episode would tell us something about the spread of slavery. If he truly is a citizen of humble means, then we really learn nothing new: of course poor owned no slaves, how could they? But since we can’t be sure of anything, the example is not particularly relevant for the present debate.

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<sup>29</sup> Lys. 5.5: Ἄξιον δέ μοι δοκεῖ εἶναι οὐ τούτων ἴδιον ἡγεῖσθαι τὸν ἀγῶνα, ἀλλὰ κοινὸν ἀπάντων τῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει. Οὐ γὰρ τούτοις μόνοις εἰσι θεράποντες, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἄπασιν...

<sup>30</sup> S. C. Todd, *A Commentary on Lysias, Speeches 1-11*, Oxford, 2007, p. 396.

<sup>31</sup> Lys. 24.4-5.

<sup>32</sup> Lys. 24.6: Τέχνην δὲ κέκτημαι βραχέα δυναμένην ὠφελεῖν, ἣν αὐτὸς μὲν ἤδη χαλεπῶς ἐργάζομαι, τὸν διαδεξόμενον δ’ αὐτὴν οὐπὼ δύναμαι κτήσασθαι. There is no indication that this “replacement” (διαδεξόμενος) is meant to be a slave, though the passage is usually understood as an allusion to slave purchase. If the defendant was actually so poor, how could he even contemplate buying a slave, given what we know of the slave prices at the time? And would mentioning of such possibility be a good tactic in this litigation? It seems equally likely that a free apprentice is suggested.

<sup>33</sup> Lys. 24.6-12.

Other instances that seemingly confirm widespread slavery could be brought up. In a speech (*Against Stephanus*) Demosthenes warns the jury: “Each of you must carefully consider what slave is left home...”<sup>34</sup> All jurors were expected to own slaves, then? For Aristotle the complete household consists of free persons and slaves.<sup>35</sup> Can we conclude from this that a typical Athenian household own slaves? Before we do, it should be noted that opposite claims in the literature can be found just as easily. Aristotle himself states that common folk have no slaves, “to poor, ox serves in place of slave.”<sup>36</sup> And: “Those of humble means are forced to use their wives and children as servants, because they have no slaves.”<sup>37</sup>

Far be it for me to say that the impressions gained from literary texts should be dismissed wholesale. The idea that we can glance common, everyday realities of the past is certainly sound, nevertheless, in this case there seems to be a confusion of common or widespread with universal or total. For existence of slaves to be treated as typical and as a part of everyday life it is unnecessary, indeed wrong, to assume that most Athenians, even the poor, were themselves in the possession of human chattel. With numerous slaves living and working in the city of Athens and the Attica countryside, low and middle class citizens and *metics* would encounter them regularly, on the streets, in shops and fields, sometimes even in their houses. Historical analogies seem to confirm this: for example, slavery was common and widespread throughout the Antebellum American South, yet around 70% of the free population owned no slaves; even possession of one or two slaves made a person moderately prosperous.<sup>38</sup> In Classical Athens, too, owning a slave must have implied a certain degree of prosperity and privilege.

To conclude this section, the indirect “evidence” and subjective impressions will not take us very far. There is simply no useable and reliable way to create demographic data from comedic scenes or charged oratory. Most that can be said is that the slaves were obviously common and present in large numbers, involved in all kinds of economic activities, and that free Athenians encountered them constantly in everyday life, even if many were not slave owners themselves.

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<sup>34</sup> D. 45.86: Εἰ σκέψαιτο πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ἕκαστος ὑμῶν τίν' οἴκοι κατέλιπεν οἰκέτην...

<sup>35</sup> Arist. *Polit.* 1.2.1 (1253b): Οἰκονομίας δὲ μέρη ἐξ ὧν πάλιν οἰκία συνέστηκεν: οἰκία δὲ τέλειος ἐκ δούλων καὶ ἐλευθέρων.

<sup>36</sup> Arist. *Polit.* 1.1.5 (1252b): Ὁ γὰρ βουὸς ἀντ' οἰκέτου τοῖς πένησιν ἔστιν.

<sup>37</sup> Arist. *Polit.* 6.5.13 (1323a): Τοῖς γὰρ ἀπόροις ἀνάγκη χρῆσθαι καὶ γυναιξὶ καὶ παισὶν ὥσπερ ἀκολούθοις διὰ τὴν ἀδουλίαν.

<sup>38</sup> R. B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865*, Baton Rouge, 1989, pp. 190-194; R. W. Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract. The Rise and Fall of American Slavery*, New York / London, 1989, pp. 81-82; D. Schneider, J. C. Schneider, *Slavery in America*, New York, 2007, p. 53. Cf. R. W. Fogel, *op. cit.*, p. 82: “The ordinary laborer, North or South, was too poor to purchase a single adult slave, let alone the land and other capital employed on the average farm of the cotton belt.”

## WILD FIGURES

Let us briefly examine some of the more excessive claims about the Athenian slave population encountered in the scholarly literature. Often the problem is simply an undue credulity on the part of the historians who place trust in the figures found in ancient texts. In spite of everything that can be said against them, Athenaeus and especially Hyperides were often treated as reliable and trustworthy. It became a rare occurrence nowadays, but it was more frequent in the past. Glotz and Cohen, in their venerable history of Classical Greece accepted them readily; to them, the figures do seem high, however “*Il faut pourtant retenir cette indication qu’un chiffre très élevé ne soulevait pas l’incrédulité chez les anciens*”.<sup>39</sup> Concerning the slave population of 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens, they took what Timaeus says about the population of Acragas as accurate (which almost certainly is nothing of the sort), and interpreted it in such a way to mean that there were as many slaves as free. This “method” led to the conclusion that free and slave population in Athens must have been equal, roughly 210,000 each.<sup>40</sup>

The impact of Glotz was strong and long lasting, especially in French scholarship but also beyond it. In his monograph on everyday life in classical Athens, Robert Flacelière states “*Ainsi l’on constate que, sur une population totale d’un demi-million de personnes vivant en Attique [?!], les deux cinquièmes seulement étaient libres*.”<sup>41</sup> According to his assessment, there were ca. 200,000 freeborn persons and *at least* 300,000 slaves. Pierre Salmon’s paper was an attempt to establish basic outlines of the Classical Greek demography.<sup>42</sup> In the case of Athens, he mostly draw upon Glotz, though with some modifications. According to him, there were 42,000 adult male citizens in 432 BC, 138,000 members of their families and 70,000 *metics*. As to slaves, they must have been equal in numbers to the free population: “*On peut donc évaluer les esclaves à environ 210 000*.”<sup>43</sup> We are again left with an unlikely high total of ca. 420,000 residents of Attica in 432 BC, and a suspiciously high population density of 160 inhabitants per square km.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> G. Glotz, R. Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 226-228.

<sup>41</sup> R. Flacelière, *La vie quotidienne en Grèce au siècle de Périclès*, Paris, 1959, p. 73.

<sup>42</sup> P. Salmon ‘La population de la Grèce antique’, *Bulletin de l’Association Guillaume Budé* 18, 1959, pp. 448-476.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 462. To support this conclusion, Salmon references the 1879 edition of *Histoire de l’esclavage dans l’antiquité* by Henri Wallon (originally published in 1847) where a similar claim is made.

<sup>44</sup> This “assessment” is made even more unlikely by Salmon’s tendency to otherwise accept very low estimates for the rest of Greece (only two million residents in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC), which leads to conclusions that over one fifth of the population of Classical Greece lived in Attica, and that urban areas of Athens and Piraeus had at least 250,000 denizens. The paper

Reacting to moderate estimates of slave numbers reached by Gomme,<sup>45</sup> Nicholas G. L. Hammond and G. Thompson rose in defense of Athenaeus figures.<sup>46</sup> The defense was vigorous but faulty and Gomme was able to dismantle it without difficulty.<sup>47</sup> Of late, however, confidence in Athenaeus seems to be resurging. One recent example is a book by J. Andreau and R. Descat,<sup>48</sup> another an article by Hans van Wees.<sup>49</sup> These authors actually take Athenaeus' figures at face value, with only the slightest of caveats. Hyperides' 150,000 slaves seem to have even more currency, simply because it is lower and thus a more "realistic" figure, often in combination with the (unwarranted) assumption that it represents the entire slave population.

Many historians, even some claiming to be writing on ancient demography, made attempts to "calculate" total numbers of slaves by establishing some sort of ratio to known or presumed free population figures. Such "methods" would start by "calculating" the number of adult male citizens and *metics* using information available in Greek literature (mostly military figures such as those provided by Thucydides), extrapolate

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contains other questionable claims, again mostly derived from Glotz and Cohen, for example that citizen population was almost stagnant between 480 and 430 BC, growing only from ca. 40,000 to 42,000, cf. *Ibid.* 463.

<sup>45</sup> A. W. Gomme, *op. cit.*

<sup>46</sup> N. G. L. Hammond, 'The Slave Population of Attica c. 350 BC', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 160-162, 1935, pp. 1-2; G. Thompson, *Oresteia of Aeschylus* I, Cambridge, 1938, p. 70, n. 1; II, pp. 357-359. Hammond chose to ignore Gomme's reply. In his important synthesis of the ancient Greek history, the claim has been made that "*the total number of slaves in Attica was probably of the order of 200,000 men, women and children.*" (N. G. L. Hammond, *A History of Greece to 322 B.C.*, Oxford, 1959, p. 329). And in the following paragraph we read that "*the total population of Attica in 431 may be estimated approximately at 400,000 souls...*" (*Ibid.*). The notes provided offer no hint as to the origin of these numbers, but it is fairly obvious that they are extrapolated from the figure given by Hyperides.

<sup>47</sup> A. W. Gomme, 'The Slave Population of Athens', *JHS* 66, 1946, pp. 127-129.

<sup>48</sup> J. Andreau, R. Descat, *The Slave in Greece and Rome*, Madison, 2011, pp. 41-46. The interpretation chosen here is that οἰκέται represent the rest of the population, apart from adult male citizens and *metics*. From there authors conclude that "*one can reasonably infer a total of 200,000 to 250,000 slaves, that is to say about half or slightly more of the population.*" Once more we would have to assume that late 4th century BC Attica had close to half a million inhabitants.

<sup>49</sup> H. van Wees 'Demetrius and Draco: Athens' Property Classes and Population in and Before 317 BC', *JHS*, 131, 2011, p. 107: "*The total of 31,000 adult men implies that among the oiketai were about 77,000 free women and children, and 323,000 slaves of both sexes and all ages, so that for every free person in Attica there were three slaves – according to Demetrius' census, at least.*" Like Andreau and Descat, Van Wees understood the word οἰκέται in the sense of all household members, not merely slaves, but even if he is correct (and that is doubtful, for the analysis and critique of this assertion, see M. H. Jameson, 'Agriculture and Slavery in Classical Athens', *The Classical Journal*, 73, 2, 1978, pp. 123-124, 137; L. Foxhall, *Olive Cultivation in Ancient Greece: Seeking the Ancient Economy*, Oxford, 2007, p. 74; K. Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275-425*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 513-518; D. M. Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 295-305; ), this is beside the point, Attica simply could not have anything close to the population implied.

numbers of women and children from there (usually by multiplying adult male figures by three or four) and then finish by multiplying totals by anything from 0.3 or 0.5 to one, two or even three to get to the number of slaves. The figures obtained in this way could satisfy any presumptions about the slave population, but are for the most part demographically and economically highly unlikely, and sometimes completely impossible. Most importantly, they are based on the faulty method or rather lack thereof. Even if the estimate of free population reached in this way is correct (by no means a foregone conclusion), the number of slaves obtained is dependent on the author's presumptions about the proportion of slaves in the total population. A contrived addition to an already problematic equation.

Sometimes the argument for exceptionally numerous slave population is framed as a matter of definition or proper terminology. If Athens is a slave or slaveholding society, does not such definition demand a high percentage of slaves in the general population? But just how high this ought to be is, of course, completely arbitrary and depends on the opinion of the particular historian. Some will say that slaves must be the majority of the total population,<sup>50</sup> others would opt for 30 or 40%,<sup>51</sup> others still will be satisfied with 15% or less.<sup>52</sup> However, we should never forget that "slave society" is nothing more than a convenient label and it is not helpful to treat an abstract definition as an objective trait of any actual historical community, even more so if the concept of "slave society" is so open to interpretations. Also, this argument often runs the risk of becoming circular: Athens is a slave society, therefore the slaves must comprise at least one third (a quarter, a half – whatever is the actual opinion) of the population. Once this is established, slaves as one third of the population can be used as solid, independently obtained piece of information for any purpose, including to prove that Athens is a slave society.<sup>53</sup>

Another frequent cause for concern is the over-reliance on historical analogies, particularly with the situation in the antebellum American south. Immediately before the American Civil war, slaves made up exactly one third of the total population of the southern states.<sup>54</sup> This is often

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<sup>50</sup> C. G. Starr, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>51</sup> J. Andreau, R. Descat, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-52.

<sup>52</sup> T. E. Rihll, 'Classical Athens', in: K. Bradley, P. Cartledge (eds.), *The Cambridge World History of Slavery I: The Ancient Mediterranean World*, Cambridge, 2011, pp. 49-50. In n. 4 on p. 50 Rihll invokes Orlando Patterson as a support for the 15% claim. This is ironical, because on the very page that is referenced, Patterson assumes that slaves were one third of the population of ancient Greece, cf. O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge MA / London, 1982, p. 353: "Indeed, slaves were usually no more than a third of the total population (as in the U.S. South and ancient Greece) and in some cases may have been no more than 15 to 20 percent (as in many of the Islamic states)."

<sup>53</sup> J. Andreau, R. Descat, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52 is an example of this tendency.

<sup>54</sup> Though in some states of the Deep South slaves were over or close to half of the total population. In all, there were some four million slaves in the southern USA in 1860, compared

taken to mean that one third, ca. 30-33%, is the “proper” or “normal” percentage of slaves for a slaveholding society, and that, therefore, the same must apply to ancient Athens (or Rome). Such claim is sometimes made openly, though usually without deeper discussion, but it is more often a silent feature of many works on ancient slavery – indeed, it became something of a dogma. Walter Scheidel offered sharp criticism of similar practice in the historiography of ancient Rome, the criticism that points out that this too often leads to a circular argument: the number is gained through analogies with the New World slavery, but then taken as a confirmation of the “proper” one-third ratio, as if this was obtained independently.<sup>55</sup> *“The widespread notion that slaves accounted for approximately one-third of the population of classical Athens and Roman Italy is devoid of any evidentiary foundation and owes much to the corresponding share of slaves in the population of the Old South in the 1860 census.”*<sup>56</sup>

More often than not, figures of dubious value are masked by vague expressions and rhetorical ploys. For example, in a recent introductory book on ancient slavery by Peter Hunt, it is stated: *“Some historians estimate that the slave population of Athens could have been as high as 150,000, roughly a third of the population; even low estimates have slaves making up 20 percent of the population.”*<sup>57</sup> Who are these historians, we are not told. Of course, there are even lower scholarly estimates, that reduce the percentage to 15, 10 or below, but the author fails to mention those, or chooses not to. Once again, we have an unsubstantiated and untenable statement, setting the population of ancient Attica to ca. 450,000. As late as 2014, Acton, in his book on manufacturing in Classical Athens, claimed: *“By classical times, slaves and their families accounted for over a third of Athens’ population, possibly over half: scholars generally estimate there were between 80,000 and 120,000 in the fifth century and possibly over 200,000 by the end of the fourth.”*<sup>58</sup> Refer-

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to ca. eight million free; only 260,000 of the latter were free Afro-Americans and Creoles, see H. S. Klein, *African Slavery in the Latin America and the Caribbean*, New York / Oxford, 1986, p. 297 and Bergad 2007: 96-97, 117-118. In some parts of the Deep South the slave were in fact a majority or close to the majority of the total population. Other modern slave societies, such as Brazil or the Caribbean, show roughly corresponding figures. At the beginning of the 19th century, Brazil had a total population of 3,2 million, of whom nearly a million were slaves; the numbers in the middle of the century were 7,2 and 2,5 million respectively. Cuban figures from the same period (ca. 1850) were 400,000 slaves from the total population of 1,2 million. See H. S. Klein, F. V. Luna, *Slavery in Brazil*, Cambridge, 2010: 72-73; L. M. Bethell, *Brazil: Essays on History and Politics*, London 2018, pp. 113-116.

<sup>55</sup> W. Scheidel, ‘The Slave Population of Roman Italy. Speculation and Constraints’, *Topoi (Lyon)* 9-1, 1999, pp. 134-135.

<sup>56</sup> W. Scheidel, ‘The Comparative Economics of Slavery in the Greco-Roman World’, in: E. Dal Lago, C. Katsari (eds.), *Slave Systems: Ancient and Modern*, Cambridge, 2008, p. 106.

<sup>57</sup> P. Hunt, *Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery*, Malden, 2018, p. 60.

<sup>58</sup> P. Acton, *Poiesis: Manufacturing in Classical Athens*, Oxford, 2014, pp. 281-282.



ences given in the footnote provide some support for the former claim but nothing whatsoever for the latter.<sup>59</sup>

If excessive and unsupported figures are so easily accepted even in the specialized literature on Greek slavery, society or economy, small wonder, then, that same numbers are included in many general books on Classical Greece, academic or popular, though the situation in that regard seems to be improving in the last few decades. However, on the whole, the modern scholarly literature is still saturated by unsubstantiated and exaggerated claims about the size of the Athenian slave population. As time went on, many of these figures, weak as they are, were taken for granted and repeated again and again. This situation is partly paralleled by the historiography of ancient Rome: until not so long ago wild claims about the size of slave population ran unchecked in much of the scholarship. Due to the efforts of Walter Scheidel and other historians we are now on much firmer ground and in possession of more reliable and better established numbers. During the early Empire, slaves constituted about 10% of the total population (roughly six million slaves in total before the Antonine plague), while Italy and Sicily possessed above average numbers, probably ca. 15-20%.<sup>60</sup> In spite of some resistance,<sup>61</sup> this was a beneficial development that enriched our understanding of Roman imperial society and economy. “*Downsizing the Roman slave population does nothing to mitigate slavery’s significance; rather, it clarifies slavery’s role in transforming an ancient economy.*”<sup>62</sup> But similar advance has yet to happen in the field of ancient Greek slavery.

## REASONABLE GUESSTIMATES

Few of the authors quoted in the preceding section made serious attempts to ascertain the actual numbers. We’ll now examine some of those who were mere diligent and at least partially successful. It is only proper to start with Karl Julius Beloch, the author of the first modern study on Greco-Roman demographics. In *Die Bevölkerung der grie-*

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* n. 99. Of four references two make no suggestions on numbers of Athenian slaves – Finley’s study on land ownership and credit in Athens, and G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *op. cit.*, given without a page number. The other two are A. W. Gomme, *The Population of Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC*, Oxford, 1933 (where the 80-120,000 assessment is found) and M. H. Hansen, *Demography and Democracy: the Number of Athenian Citizens in the Fourth Century B.C.*, Herning, 1986.

<sup>60</sup> W. Scheidel ‘Quantifying the Sources of Slaves in the Early Roman Empire’, *JRS* 87, 1997, pp.157-169; id., ‘The Slave Population of Roman Italy. Speculation and Constraints’, *Topoi (Lyon)* 9-1, 1999, pp. 129-144.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. W. W. Harris, ‘Demography, Geography and the Sources of Roman Slaves’, *JRS* 89, 1999, pp. 62-75; J. Andreau, R. Descat, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-52.

<sup>62</sup> K. Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

*chisch-römischen Welt* significant space is devoted to the population of Classical Greece, including a chapter on numbers of slaves in Athens and elsewhere (“Die Sklavenzahl”).<sup>63</sup> His estimate is close to the upper end of the scale, with up to 100,000 slaves in the whole of Attica, at the peak of Athenian power.<sup>64</sup> Similar conclusion was reached by Alfred Zimmern in his work on 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Athenian society and economy, where the number of adult male slaves is calculated at ca. 80,000, which is “well over three-quarters of the whole number”, thus ca. 100,000 in total.<sup>65</sup>

To the best of my knowledge, the only book entirely devoted to the size of the slave population in Athens is a short 1925 monograph by Rachel L. Sargent, the published text of her 1923 dissertation. After discarding direct testimonies by ancient authors and providing an extensive overview of modern attitudes, she set off to establish the size of the various groups of slaves, usually through the known data on free population and some assumption about ratio between the free and the slaves. Her conclusions are that there were between 70 and 100,000 slaves in the Periclean epoch, with a decline in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC (60 to 70,000 at most).<sup>66</sup>

Arnold W. Gomme is the author of the most important study of the Athenian population written in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He, too, encountered difficulties in determining the size of the slave population and was skeptical about the quality of the end result. His method was twofold: he presumed that Thucydides’ 20,000 fleeing slaves represent a significant portion of all slaves engaged in economic activities – a half or nearly so (thus, 40-50,000 in total); he further assumed that the number of male domestic servants is equal to the total number of citizens and *metics* of hoplite and cavalry class (35,000); finally, he expected the number of female servants to have been equal or slightly larger than that of the male ones (35-40,000). Combining all these figures, he reached the total of 100-115,000 slaves.<sup>67</sup> Needless to say, the total appears rather high and rests on several difficult to prove hypotheses.

William L. Westermann in his much criticized<sup>68</sup> (but also much used) book on Greco-Roman slavery claimed that “*All the evidence which*

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<sup>63</sup> J. Beloch, *Die Bevölkerung der griechisch römischen Welt*, Leipzig, 1886, pp. 84-99.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 95: “Attika würde danach im ganzen eine Sklavenbevölkerung von etwa 100,000 gehabt haben...”

<sup>65</sup> A. Zimmern, *op. cit.*, p. 381, n. 1. (originally published in 1911).

<sup>66</sup> R. L. Sargent, *Size of the Slave Population at Athens during the Fifth and Fourth Centuries before Christ*, Urbana, 1925.

<sup>67</sup> A. W. Gomme, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21. He firmly discarded Hyperides’ and Athenaeus’ figures, *ibid.*, pp. 21-24. Cf. *Ibid.* p. 34: “the number of slaves was at no time larger than 100-120,000.”

<sup>68</sup> Harsh, bordering on rude, criticisms of the book were delivered by A. H. M. Jones, *EHR* 71, 279, 1956, pp. 272-275., G. E. M. de Ste Croix, *CR*, 7-1, 1957, pp. 54-59 and R. E. Smith, *JHS*, 77-2, 1957, pp. 338-339. Reviews by M. L. W. Laistner, *AHR*, 61-3, 1956, pp. 613-614,

is really significant points toward the conclusion that in Attica the slaves did not compromise more than a third of the total population, possibly not more than a fourth. It must be granted that the statement is no more than a reasonable suggestion. A guess that the slaves in Attica in the earlier period of the Peloponnesian war numbered from sixty thousand to eighty thousand, including both sexes and all ages, would be within the bounds of reason.”<sup>69</sup> As far as guesses go, this is by no means a bad one (it is roughly in the range of many modern assessments), but one will search in vain for data or analysis to back it up – the preceding text merely discusses various examples of slave ownership in the Classical literature.<sup>70</sup> Contemporary estimate by Siegfried Lauffer was higher, between 80 and 100,000.<sup>71</sup>

Of serious attempts at assessment that by Arnold H. M. Jones produced by far the lowest figures. Jones utilized numbers supplied by reliable sources, namely Thucydides, and compared them with his calculations of Athenian food production, import and consumption in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. The conclusion: the slave population of Athens was probably not larger than 30,000 in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, and only about 20,000 in the 4<sup>th</sup>.<sup>72</sup> While thorough and often insightful, his analysis is flawed for several reasons. Firstly, he understood the 20,000 fleeing slaves of Thucydides as a precise figure and assumed that it is the absolute majority of all the slaves in Attica. Secondly, his calculations of food production and consumption seriously underestimate the magnitude of the Athenian grain import, leaving only about 130,000 *medimni* of wheat for slave consumption, which would provide yearly sustenance for about 20,000 people. For the same reason, his total of the Athenian population for the second half of 4<sup>th</sup> century BC (144,000) is on the low side as well.<sup>73</sup>

Victor Ehrenberg calculated that there were between 80 and 110 thousand slaves at the peak period of ca. 432 BC, from the total popula-

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C. B. Welles, *AJPh*, 77-3, 1956, pp. 316-318, and K. Polanyi, *The Journal of Economic History*, 17-1, 1957, pp. 120-123 were more academic and polite in tone, but also contained serious disagreement, though this was hidden behind much rhetorical praise.

<sup>69</sup> W. L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, Philadelphia, 1955, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> Westermann's percentages and numbers would imply the total Athenian population of around 240,000 in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. On the preceding page we read that “there were not more than twenty thousand slaves in Attica” in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. There is no way to square the statements on p. 8 and 9, the twenty thousand one must be a remnant of an earlier draft that the editor failed to note and remove (Westermann was already deceased by the time of publishing).

<sup>71</sup> S. Lauffer, *op. cit.*, p. 909 (145).

<sup>72</sup> It is therefore ironic that A. H. M. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 273 criticized Westermann as “highly conservative in his estimates of the slave population and of the part they played in the economic life of the age” and that “the general tendency of the book is to minimize the importance of slavery in the ancient world.”

<sup>73</sup> A. H. M. Jones, *Athenian Democracy*, Oxford, 1957, pp. 16-19, 76-79.

tion of up to 300 thousand. By the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC the numbers dropped to 60-100,000 and 170-255,000 respectively.<sup>74</sup>

Works of Mogens Herman Hansen published in the 1980s have revolutionized studies of the ancient Greek population and especially that of Classical Athens. He influenced many historians and set parameters for much of the later demographic research, his estimates of the Classical Greek population are some of the most influential and firmly established to this date. However, he showed little interest in slave demographics, and was skeptical about the possibility of establishing anything resembling the accurate figure. “*The Athenians themselves did not know the number of slaves in Attica and we shall never come to know the number either, no matter how many and how valuable sources we may still recover.*”<sup>75</sup> This, however, did not prevent him from making an attempt of his own. Regrettably, he falls back on that old idea of slaves being more numerous than the free, because this is allegedly the impression one gets from ancient writers, but then decided that this cannot have been so, on the account of the constant fluctuations in the size of the slave population.<sup>76</sup> Finally, and without explanation, he settled for the formula of  $S(\text{laves}) = \frac{1}{2}X$ , where X is the number of the free population, citizen or otherwise. Since he already established X as in the range of 133 to 186,000, the number of slaves in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC must have been from 66 to 93,000. There was no attempt to determine the 5<sup>th</sup> century numbers.<sup>77</sup>

In his brief introduction to the ancient Greek slavery, N. R. E. Fisher was more careful than most historians, admitting that available estimates vary considerably, from as low as ca. 20,000 to as high as 120,000 (we saw that there are much higher claims, but Fisher decided not to take them seriously), adding that “*all [these estimates] have their supporters, and decision between these limits is not easy.*”<sup>78</sup> Discarding 20,000 as far too low, he took ca. 50,000 to be the correct starting range, thus “one may suggest that slaves made up anything between c. 15% to c. 35% of the total population, depending on which of the estimates one accepts.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> V. Ehrenberg, *The Greek State*, New York, 1960, p. 32. The upper range of these figures was accepted and used by P. J. Rhodes ‘The Athenian Revolution’, in: *CAH* V2, Cambridge, 1992, p. 83 (5th century BC) and *id.*, ‘The Polis and the Alternatives’, in: *CAH* VI2, 1994, pp. 566-567 (4th).

<sup>75</sup> M. H. Hansen, *Three Studies in Athenian Demography*, Copenhagen, 1988, p. 11.

<sup>76</sup> There are much more solid objections to be made than that. For example, the application of  $S > X$  principle would propel the 4th century BC Athenian population into 300-400,000 range (at the very least, the question is, of course, just how bigger the S is?). This will not stand for many reasons, and would also make 4th century population equal to or larger than that in 5th century. Hansen must have been well aware of these problems.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 11-13. The upper figure seems a bit too high for the 4th century BC. Hansen’s results were accepted and used by E. M. A. Bissa, *Governmental Intervention in Foreign Trade in Archaic and Classical Greece*, Leiden / Boston, 2009, pp. 172-173.

<sup>78</sup> N. R. E. Fisher, *Slavery in Classical Greece*, Bristol, 1993, p. 35.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

In his monograph on the Athenian grain supply, Alfonso Moreno combined numbers offered by Meyer, Sargent, Hansen and others (perhaps not the soundest method) to approximate the total population of Athens and the slaves. He too decided for 2:1 ration between the free and the slaves. The numbers thus obtained are 97,000 slaves in 431 BC and ca. 65,000 in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>80</sup>

Ben Akrigg, in the most recent and up to date work on the Athenian demographics, provided a lengthy discussion of various aspects of the slave population. He analyzed many of the claims made about the total number of Athenian slaves, but avoided giving his own. Still, his comments make clear that he considers 80-100,000 to be “high” and 50-70,000 “moderate range”, while Jones’ opinion of 20-30,000 is described as the “minimal view”. Numbers well over 100,000 are discarded as unlikely high.<sup>81</sup>

## A GAME WITHOUT WINNERS: CONCLUDING REMARKS

We are now in a good position to sympathize with those historians who decide to give up the matter altogether or proclaim it irrelevant.<sup>82</sup> One cannot but note that after a century and half of hard work by many scholars, we are not much closer to truth, apart from weeding out ludicrously high suggestions. The numbers issue is fraught with difficulties and even the results obtained by the most rigorous analysis are debatable. “Clio has been especially cruel to classical historians, giving them just enough information to confirm that slavery was important in many ancient states but not enough to go beyond informed guesses.”<sup>83</sup> Methods (though in some cases “method” is hardly the proper word) utilized to obtain the figures discussed vary, but all have their faults and none is above serious criticism. Rather than with one precise figure, we are left with a likely but very wide range of possibilities. Still, it can be reasonably

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<sup>80</sup> A. Moreno, *Feeding the Democracy. The Athenian Grain Supply in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC*, Oxford, 2007, pp. 28-31. Cf. *Ibid.* 30 “This methodology of proportionality and of differentiation between individual sectors of ownership (public, household, agriculture, mining, and other industry) is not only sound, but also yields conservative results, useful in achieving minimum estimates of population and consumption”. Both “sound method” and “conservative results” are debatable. His estimates are actually far on the upper end of the scale: for the 5th century he gives a total population of 337,000 and calls it “a conservative total population estimate” (*Ibid.* 31).

<sup>81</sup> B. Akrigg, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-99.

<sup>82</sup> Among those is, of course, Finley; also Y. Garlan, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-60, J. K. Davies, ‘Society and Economy’, in: *CAH* V2, 1992, pp. 297-298 and T. E. Rihll, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>83</sup> O. Patterson ‘Slavery, Gender, and Work in the Pre-Modern World and Early Greece: a Cross-Cultural Analysis’, in: E. Dal Lago, C. Katsari (eds.), *Slave Systems: Ancient and Modern*, Cambridge, 2008, p. 32.

claimed that the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Athenian slave population could hardly have been larger than ca. 100,000 slaves and likely below that, though almost certainly not below 50,000. If we take these figures as an upper and lower barrier, then slaves made up roughly 15 to 30 percent of the total population. Given our knowledge of the Athenian population and economy in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, slave numbers are likely lower than in the preceding century. And there was probably much fluctuation from one decade to the next, because slave supply, mortality and manumission rates were never constant.

Historiography of ancient slavery should have by now reached a mature stage where chasing exceedingly high slave figures is no longer practiced. Any future assertion about the number of slaves in 5<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century Athens needs to be accompanied by a suitable, thorough and well documented discussion or else it ought not be taken seriously. After all, the burden of proof lies with the author of the claim, not with the reader. But, more to the point, perhaps this number game is obsolete in itself. Save in the unlikely event of discovery of new and extremely well-informed sources (and what would these be?), the discussion can hardly outgrow the present stalemate.

It would be very useful to have precise figures of the ancient Athenian slave population, but we simply do not possess them and cannot obtain them. There is no point in despairing about what we are unable to achieve, rather we should focus on realistic goals that will actually further our knowledge. The study of ancient slavery is currently in an exciting new phase of its development, significant new ideas and approaches are being tested out, while many old notions (including those of Finley) are being challenged. These trends are little affected by the lack of hard statistical data and will undoubtedly proceed without it.

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ЈЕДНА ИГРА БРОЈЕВА:  
ВЕЛИЧИНА РОБОВСКЕ ПОПУЛАЦИЈЕ У КЛАСИЧНОЈ АТИНИ

Резиме

Модерне расправе о античком грчком ропству су претежно фокусиране на пример који пружа класична Атина. Разлог је, поред изузетног места које овај град има у грчкој историји, пре свега обиље расположивих историјских извора. Међутим, то обиље је често само привидно; наше знање има велика ограничења и постоје сфере о којима смо врло слабо обавештени. Историчари су ретко били у прилици да оду даље од генералног става да је античко грчко ропство било значајна и доста распрострањена институција, бар у напреднијим центрима попут Атине. Једна од највећих тешкоћа при процени друштвеног и економског значаја ропства је непостојање прецизних нумеричких информација, које би се могле статистички обрађивати, нарочито када је реч о атинској демографији. У овом раду се анализирају места у античким изворима која су коришћена у решавању овог питања, методологија која је у том поступку примењивана, као и закључци утицајнијих историчара о њему.

Кључан проблем при ослањању на античке писце јесте чињеница да ни сами Атињани нису знали колико робова живи у њиховом граду и на њиховој земљи. Робови нису бележени и пописивани, пошто сами нису били од фискалног или војног значаја; нису бележени ни ослобођени ни одбегли робови. Бројке које налазимо у античким изворима су махом произвољне, разумна нагађања у најбољем случају, много чешће претеривања која не можемо ускладити са оним што знамо о атинском становништву. Покушаји посредног утврђивања броја робова, ослањањем на утиске који се о томе стичу при читању атичке комедије или беседништва, или преко (претпостављене) корелације са слободном популацијом, нису били много успешнији. После век и по марљивог рада бројних историчара, највише што можемо рећи јесте да смо утврдили разуман распон: на врхунцу атинске државе робова није било више од око 100.000, заправо вероватно мање, али не испод 50.000 – дакле, између 15 и 30% становништва класичне Атине. Чак и доња граница представља релативно висок удео робова у општој популацији за једно античко друштво. Треба, међутим, имати у виду да тај удео свакако није био сталан и непроменљив, већ је осцилирао из деценије у деценију, у зависности од прилива нових робова, и морталитета и ослобађања постојећих.

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