

Caveat emptor: towards a study of Roman slave-traders

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If there is an ill-used class of men in the world it is certainly the slave-traders: for if there is no harm in the institution of slavery ... then there is no earthly reason why a man may not as innocently be a slave-trader as any other kind of trader.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London 1853) 9

Ancient evidence for the place of slave-traders in Roman society is notoriously thin, and the topic itself has seemed unattractive. Slave-traders have never been popular, in antiquity or the new world, in their own day or in the research of students of Greco-Roman slavery. And yet their work was essential for sustaining the great slave societies that have so fascinated students of the subject. The reasons for their unpopularity are therefore worth examining, especially in the light of sentiments such as that expressed by Harriet Beecher Stowe in the epigraph. For if the argument that the slave-trader's occupation was no more harmful than any other trader's could be made for the American South, then it can certainly be made for Late Republican and Imperial Rome, where the trade in human merchandise was so commonplace, and its agents so essential, that a leading jurist could write dispassionately about 'the ordinary, daily traffic in slaves' and a philosopher could claim that 'the merchant benefits cities, the doctor the sick, the slave-trader slaves for sale'.¹

The origins of the large-scale trade are identified by Strabo. In remarking the expansion of the trade at Delos, which Rome had made a free port in 166 B.C., the geographer explains how, following the destruction of Corinth and Carthage in 146 B.C., the Roman appetite for slaves, piqued by new riches, prompted Cilician pirates to supplement their regular livelihood by trafficking in human merchandise.² Roman demand, in other words, fueled the supply, and the supply, in turn, found a ready market in Delos, where the merchandise changed hands, according to Strabo, at the proverbial rate of tens of thousands of slaves a day, whence arose the saying 'trader, sail in, unload, everything has already been sold'.³ Men whose normal

- 1 Papinian, 23 *Quaest.* (*Dig.* 41.2.44.pr.): propter adsiduam et cottidianam comparationem servorum. Sen., *Ben.* 4.13.3, mercator urbibus prodest, medicus aegris, mango venalibus. Note also, e.g., Philostr., *V. Apoll.* 8.7.12.
- 2 Strabo 14.5.2, ἡ δὲ τῶν ἀνδραπόδων ἐξαγωγή προὔκαλεῖτο μάλιστα εἰς τὰς κακουργίας ἐπικερδεστάτη γινόμενη· καὶ γὰρ ἡλίσκοντο ῥαδίως, καὶ τὸ ἐμπόριον οὐ παντελῶς ἄπωθεν ἦν μέγα καὶ πολυχρήματον, ἡ Δῆλος, δυναμένη μυριάδας ἀνδραπόδων αὐθημερὸν καὶ δέξασθαι καὶ ἀποπέμψαι, ὥστε καὶ παροιμίαν γενέσθαι διὰ τοῦτο "ἔμπορε, κατάπλευσον, ἐξελοῦ, πάντα πέπραται." αἴτιον δ' ὅτι πλούσιοι γινόμενοι Ῥωμαῖοι μετὰ τὴν Καρχηδόνας καὶ Κορίνθου κατασκαφὴν οἰκετείας ἐχρῶντο πολλαῖς· ὁρῶντες δὲ τὴν εὐπέτειαν οἱ λησταὶ ταύτην ἐξήνθησαν ἀθρόως, αὐτοὶ καὶ ληζόμενοι καὶ σωματεμποροῦντες ... ἅμα δὲ καὶ οἱ λησταὶ προσποιούμενοι σωματεμπορεῖν ἄλλοι τὴν κακουργίαν εἶχον. 'The exportation of slaves led them most of all to villainy, since it had become extremely profitable; for not only were they easily captured, but the market, which was large and rich in property, was not very far away — Delos, which could both receive and send away tens of thousands of slaves on the same day, whence rose the proverb, 'trader, sail in, unload, everything has already been sold'. The cause of this was the fact that the Romans, having become rich after the destruction of Carthage and Corinth, used many slaves; and the pirates, seeing the easy profit therein, bloomed forth in great numbers, themselves not only going in quest of booty but also trafficking in slaves. ... And at the same time the pirates, pretending to be slave dealers, carried on their evil business unchecked' (Loeb transl., adapted). Strabo's account suggests much more than a 'coincidence' of the increase in Cilician piracy in the latter half of the 2nd c. and the growth of the slave-market on Delos (so P. De Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman world* [Cambridge 1999] 64): the relationship he describes was one of cause and effect.
- 3 Strabo's figure is not to be taken literally but indicates the perceived volume of the trade, which was substantial: see N. Rauh, *The sacred bonds of commerce* (Amsterdam 1993) 43-52. F. Coarelli's contro-