

On the block: *catastae*, *chalcidica* and *cryptae* in Early Imperial Italy

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If it is relatively easy to reconstruct the legal status, economic function and social rôles of slaves in antiquity, the material aspects of their lives are far less accessible. F. H. Thompson's recent exploration of the archaeology of slavery came up with very little, calling into question even the slave-quarters in the villa of Settefinestre.¹ Here I wish to examine the material evidence for the places in which slaves were sold, the *venalicia* for which evidence in the sources is ephemeral at best, while material evidence is apparently entirely lacking. Given the huge numbers of slaves who must have changed hands in the last years of the Republic and Early Empire, our inability to find any trace of the markets in which they were sold is surprising.² Why would slaves, whose numbers and peculiar characteristics as a potentially dangerous merchandise set them apart from any other item for sale, warrant less architectural management than the produce sold at a *macellum*? When sales were occasional, fora or shops might do; but the hundreds of slaves from a single cargo, to say nothing of the tens of thousands that may have passed through Delos each day, would require washing, guarding, and a place in which they could be auctioned in an organized fashion. As the fresco of Trimalchio's vestibule shows,³ a painted *venaliciium* could be easily recognized by contemporaries: why should it be so difficult for archaeologists to find its physical traces? Although the foregoing reflections are inspired by Coarelli's work on the Market of the Italians at Delos,⁴ I will begin from a different kind of object, the auction blocks themselves. If it is possible to identify those, finding places of sale should become easier.

Catastae

Writers on slavery are agreed that slaves were auctioned from wooden platforms known as *catastae*.⁵ The word is used figuratively for the state of slavery, thus '*emptus de catasta*,'⁶ with a pejorative overtone.⁷ The word could apply to any wooden stand, and in later Latin comes to be associated with the prisoner's dock, or even a scaffold.⁸ Its temporary nature is evident. We may imagine *catastae* for slave-auctions as a feature of the periodic market. More precious

1 F. Hugh Thompson, *The archaeology of Greek and Roman slavery* (London 2003) (reviewed by K. Bradley in *JRA* 16 [2003] 571-76). See also L. Schumacher, *Sklaverei in der Antike* (Munich 2001); T. E. Wiedemann, *Slavery in Greece and Rome* (Oxford 1987); Y. Garlan, *L'esclavage dans le monde grec, Recueil de textes grecs et latins* (Paris 1984); R. Ortu, "Nota in tema di organizzazione e attività *venaliciarii*," *Diritto e Storia* 2 (2003): www.dirittoestoria.it/tradizione2/Ortu-Venaliciarii. For the Settefinestre slave-quarters, see Carandini, *Settefinestre I* (Bari 1985). On the material traces of slavery in Roman Britain and their relation to those of American slavery, see now J. Webster, "Archaeologies of slavery and servitude: bringing 'New World' perspectives to Roman Britain," in H. R. Hurst and S. Owen (edd.), *Ancient colonizations: analogy, similarity and difference* (forthcoming) and in this issue p. 161 ff.

2 The best treatment of the slave-trade remains W. V. Harris, "Towards a study of the Roman slave trade," in J. H. D'Arms and E. C. Kopff (edd.), *The seaborne commerce of ancient Rome* (MAAR 36, 1980) 117-40; he estimates (118) the empire-wide demand for slaves *per annum* at half a million.

3 Petron., *Sat.* 29.3.

4 F. Coarelli, above p. 196 ff. and "L' 'Agora des Italiens' a Delo: il mercato degli schiavi?," *OpuscFin* 2 (1982) 188-224; see also M. Cocco, "Sulla funzione dell' 'Agora degli Italiani' di Delo," *PP* 25 (1970) 446-57; *contra*, P. Bruneau, "L' Agora des Italiens servait-elle de marché aux esclaves?" *BCH* 99 (1975) 267-311. Coarelli's suggested universal characteristics (enclosure, double circulation, water supply) fit well with what I have observed at early modern markets at Marrakesh and Salé.

5 *RE* 3 1785-86: see Schumacher (supra n.1) 56.

6 Suet., *De Gram.* 13.1.

7 We also find *de lapide emptus* (Cic., *Pis.* 15), suggesting a stone platform.

8 *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 5.6.