Slavery in Ancient Athens

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What was a slave?

• A slave had similar status to a modern car – it is property that serves a function, which can be bought and sold, and which can be used or abused as the owner sees fit.

• Aristotle defined a slave as an “living tool”.

• Slaves could be given as gifts, sold, hired out and willed-off. In this sense they had no autonomy.
However...

- Slaves could not be killed by their masters. A master who killed a slave could face prosecution. Sadly, the punishment for killing a slave was usually a fine – a penalty that nowadays would not fit the crime.

- A prosecution in Athens could only be brought by private citizens. If a man beat a slave to death, who was likely to sue him?
And...

- Some refuge was offered mistreated slaves, who could hide in the shrine of the Furies or in the Temple of Theseus. While there, they could ask to be sold to someone else.
Punishments...

• Like in later Rome, slaves who tried to flee were branded, and flogging/beating was an accepted punishment for disobedience.
• Only the master was allowed to administer these punishments – nobody could beat or punish another man’s slaves.
Marital bliss...

- Slaves had no right to own property, and could only marry with the permission of their master.
- Any offspring became enslaved property of the owner.
Public life...

- Salves could neither vote nor stand for public office.
- They were allowed to worship in temples.
- They were not allowed to enter the law courts, not even to give evidence.
- Any evidence given by a slave had to be extracted by torture before it was read in court.
- This was to prevent slaves defending their masters out of duty, intimidation or friendship.
Could be worse...

- Skilled slaves – bakers, smiths, potters, etc. – were often given workshops by their masters. This allowed them a degree of freedom, although much of their earnings were paid to their owner.
What did they do...

- Most slaves in Athens were women, bought to carry out domestic duties – cooking, cleaning, etc..
- Many male slaves were used to work in workshops or agriculture.
Teachers...

- Wealthier households would buy a *paidagogos*.
- This was a sort of private tutor who would teach the children of the house.
- The *paidagogos* would also walk the children to school (carrying their equipment) and ensure they were safe outside the house.
Misery…

• The worst kind of slavery was in the mines in the hills around Athens.
• Conditions were brutal, hours were long, and slaves were known to die of exhaustion.
• There was also the risk posed by the dangers of working underground.
• Slaves seldom fought in the army (why would Athenians want to arm their slaves?) but their navy was powered by slave rowers.
Whence?

• Most slaves were imported by slave-traders and bought and sold in the agora.

• Taxes on slave imports were a lucrative source of government money.

• Imported slaves came from countries around the Black Sea and from parts of Asia Minor.

• Many had fought for opposing armies, been captured by slave traders and then sold on.
How many?

• Historians suggest that about 150,000 slaves were at work in Attica at any single time.
• The state itself owned a large number of slaves to carry out public service tasks.
• These slaves were called demosioi.
• Some helped state officials as scribes, archivists, and lower-level government positions.
• Others worked as labourers, ensuring the functioning of the polis.
Working for the polis...

• Several boards of public officials made use of slaves.
• A slave was employed as public executioner – he would also inflict torture when evidence for court cases was required from other slaves.
• The Boule employed eight slaves as clerical assistants.
Working for the polis...

• The streets of Athens were built and maintained by state-employed slaves.
• Coins were minted by slaves.
The polis police...

- A force of three-hundred Scythian archers were employed as a police force.
- They did not investigate crimes – they just kept order at public gatherings. Think of them as heavily-armed bouncers.
Oh, the riches, the riches...

• As remuneration for their services, publicly-employed slaves received a small allowance, as well as their clothing.
Freedom!

• Unlike in Rome, slaves were not often freed in Athens.
• However, a slave who managed to save enough money could buy his own freedom.
• Like in Rome, though, an Athenian slave-owner could make a public pronouncement and free his slave without a charge.