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Review: 'The Material Life of Roman Slaves'

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BOOK REVIEW

The Material Life of Roman Slaves

By Sandra R. Joshel and Lauren Hackworth Petersen. Pp. xv + 286, figs. 170, color pls. 16. Cambridge University Press, New York 2014. \$99. ISBN 978-0-521-19164-7 (cloth).

Reviewed by [Dorian Borbonus](#)

The *Material Life of Roman Slaves* complements and enriches a growing body of scholarship on the physical conditions and material remains of Roman slavery, but it also represents a logical continuation of the research agenda of both authors. It is clearly informed by Joshel's book about occupational titles in funerary inscriptions (*Work, Identity, and Legal Status at Rome: A Study of the Occupational Inscriptions* [Norman, Okla. 1992]) and Petersen's study on the visual culture of freedmen and its perception (*The Freedman in Roman Art and Art History* [New York 2006]). Their collaboration on the present book represents a model of scholarly teamwork that bridges disciplinary divides and reconciles discrete classes of evidence. The result is not simply a new study of Roman slaves in their ancient physical setting but a compelling proposal for reading strategies that overcome historical silence. The attempt to address the deficiencies of the available evidence pushes the main argument into controversial territory, but even so this book will undoubtedly become an obligatory point of reference for any future work on Roman slaves and other historically mute populations.

The book deviates from earlier treatments that trace material remains of identifiable slaves, and instead assumes their presence and focuses on the material world that constitutes a "context of servitude" (8). The analysis draws a fundamental distinction between "master strategies" (9) that seek to inscribe dominance on the space to control dependents and "slave tactics" (13) that operate within the dominant system and seek to take advantage of temporary "openings in the regime" (14). This method is rehearsed in four case studies, each of which lays out the current research before proceeding to reinterpret the material record in terms of master strategies and slave tactics. The first case study analyzes Roman houses and focuses on the choreography of slaves at banquets. The authors take small and short doorways, precarious steps, and the invisibility of slaves in the "masterly gaze" (84) to represent the symbolic marginalization of slaves and explore hypothetical opportunities that the built environment offered to interrupt or undermine this choreography. The method focuses exclusively on masters and slaves, and even though "slave managers" (82) are occasionally mentioned, this caveat is never really resolved. Aside from the dinner setting (and the morning *salutatio*, which is frequently mentioned but not analyzed spatially), the authors also consider houses temporally, especially absences of the owners that created temporary opportunities for slaves.

The following case studies follow the same pattern. The lived experience of urban streets is illustrated through two Pompeian neighborhoods. In this case, master strategies seek to control slave movement, whereas slave tactics exploit the local topography of fountains, bars, and hideouts, and, generally, the most "inactive" spaces (measured in terms of ruts and graffiti) in order to exploit the "porous" (98) surveillance. The next case study analyzes workshop spaces, especially bakeries and fulleries. The master strategy to set an effective work regime depended on supervision and timing, both of which could be undermined through slave tactics. The detailed analysis of the House of the Baker in Pompeii is contrasted with more complex operations at Ostia, but the chapter also offers an illuminating discussion of the "animalization" of slaves through their association with donkeys (142). The last case study takes up villa estates, where slaves have been silenced by an exclusive focus on elite *otium*. Instead of joining the search for elusive slave quarters,

the authors analyze slave movement and labor in four Italian villas, concentrating on lockable doors, potential pathways, sightlines, and painted zebra stripes that they identify as “visual traffic signs” (179). The conclusion briefly takes up funerary contexts and emphasizes the need to connect slave identities to their original setting and the power of interdisciplinary collaboration to achieve that goal.

The greatest strength of the book is the formulation and successful application of a new interpretive strategy that nobody with an interest in the intersection of ancient material culture and social history will be able to ignore. This new way of seeing does not grasp all slaves or even all contexts (as the authors acknowledge [18–22]), but it does complement the relatively sparse material culture of “real” slaves with a much fuller exploration of the physical environment that determined slave experiences. The approach inevitably produces a narrative that navigates the boundaries of knowledge and may produce grounds for disagreement. An example of a controversial notion is the implication that master strategies always aimed at total control throughout all contexts under discussion, an idea that Joshel anticipated in an earlier publication (“Geographies of Slave Containment and Movement,” in M. George, ed., *Roman Slavery and Roman Material Culture* [Toronto 2013] 99–128). In his comments on this chapter (*BMCR* 2014.12.25), Dumont criticizes this notion as anachronistic, at least for slaves that worked in the *villa urbana*. It may not be possible to determine precisely how complete masterly control was, but my sense is that Joshel and Petersen’s overall approach is quite sensible, because it stays as close to the evidence as possible. The authors do take inspiration from modern contexts, but they take care to use examples from (mostly legal, satirical, and moralistic) texts whenever they hypothesize about the potential use of space.

A consideration that could have strengthened the discussion of the house is a more sustained concentration on household *collegia*, which are acknowledged (235 n. 113) but never discussed in terms of their potential relationship to slave tactics. Domestic *collegia* must have been tolerated by slave owners, at least to a certain extent, which would seem to undermine the claim that owners feared “the solidarity of the familia” (208). It must also be understood that this book does not provide a diachronic overview but focuses on the first century C.E. In part, the narrow chronological focus results from privileging evidence from Campania, which also produces a mismatch with respect to the literary and epigraphic testimony that predominantly applies to the city of Rome (a problem that the authors acknowledge [94, 118–19]). The narrative is well written and the chapters are structured clearly, but sometimes the discussion of strategies and tactics is repetitive: for example, the neighborhoods around the Baker’s House (147–50) do not seem to differ much from other Pompeian streets. The volume is richly illustrated with the authors’ own photographs and newly produced plans, some of which lack north arrows (e.g., fig. 161 and several color plates), which reduces their transparency.

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