

SLAVES AND HOUSEHOLDS IN THE NEAR EAST

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This year's Oriental Institute Seminar centered on the topic of slavery in the ancient and pre-modern Near East. The event was held in Breasted Hall on March 5 and 6, 2010, and involved the participation of twelve scholars. The goal of the seminar was to explore new approaches to the study of slavery by considering the dynamics of slavery in the context of households. Slavery is of course a rather broad topic in history and anthropology, and consequently the purpose of this collaboration was to design and compare some specific approaches to slavery by examining a series of micro-historical contexts. It was noted throughout that the statuses, conditions, experiences, and realities of slaves differ widely according to historical contingencies and social contexts. Thus, the purpose of the collaboration was not to develop an essential definition of "Near Eastern" or "Oriental" slavery that can be extended to any Near Eastern context or data set, but rather to evaluate methodologies and compare key thematic and historical questions. Almost no comparison of ancient and pre-modern sources has been undertaken before this project, but the emphasis of the project on slaves in context allowed for some fascinating comparisons.

After introductions by Gil Stein and by me, the first session of the conference included four papers focusing on third-millennium states of Mesopotamia. Robert Englund spoke about "corporate" or institutional slaves, or groups of chattel slaves who were counted on rosters and lists in the same manner as animals or inanimate household items. Englund noted the difficulties of accessing linguistic and ethnographic information about institutional slaves. The following three papers focused on slaves of private households. Hans Neumann addressed some long-standing debates about the nature of private economy of early Mesopotamia, offering an important survey of the evidence for private slaves during this era. He made note of the types of labor activities conducted by private slaves and argued that private slavery did not constitute a significant part of the labor force in the economy of early Mesopotamia. In my own paper, I tracked the lives of private slaves in the third millennium and attempted to demonstrate the range of social possibilities and circumstances associated with private enslavement. I argued that many possible courses could result from enslavement to a private household, ranging from perpetual conflict to eventual freedom and status gain. Shifting the discussion to the second-millennium Old Babylonian period, Andrea Seri discussed the social life of female domestic slaves during this time and offered a new look at the close relationships and interactions between female slaves and their owners.

The Friday afternoon panel of the seminar included three stimulating papers on the medieval and pre-modern Middle East. Matthew Gordon's paper tracked two groups of slave elites in Abbasid-era sources, singers and soldiers, in order to compare patterns of social mobility. He demonstrated that, while both groups entered society as slaves and remained slaves, individuals belonging to these categories moved across social boundaries impenetrable to other members of society and played key roles in the highest households of the state, even forming their own households. Kathryn Babayan introduced fascinating sources called *majmu'as* from Safavid-era Isfahan in Iran. *Majmu'as* are anthologies or collections of written entries and owned by elites and can be thought of as "archives of daily life." Among the entries included in these anthologies are formulas of manumission, and Babayan discussed how these declarations of freedom implicate the body parts of the slaves in the manumission process. The last speaker of the day, Ehud Toledano, discussed households of the seventeenth- to eighteenth-century Ottoman empire. He showed how enslavement was one means by which outsiders could be included in Ottoman society, avoiding

social marginalization, and overviewed the types of bonds among members of Ottoman households, tracing transformations over the two centuries in question.

After the reception and dinner in Chinatown on Friday night, the symposium resumed Saturday morning with Jonathan Tenney's paper on families of institutional slaves from second-millennium Mesopotamia. Tenney introduced another important approach to the discussion, focusing on population dynamics of institutional slaves in fourteenth-century Nippur. Next, F. Rachel Magdalene discussed several interesting unpublished Neo-Babylonian documents that seem to mention four generations of Judeans living in Babylonia. Magdalene attempted to reconstruct a social-historical picture of exilic life of Judeans using these documents, showing that certain persons with Judean names owned slaves in Babylonia and were perhaps fairly well integrated into Babylonian society. Finally, Kristin Kleber finished the session with a useful discussion of temple personnel from Neo-Babylonian times called *širkus*. Kleber engaged debates about whether people who bore the designation *širku* should be considered slaves and argued that the role and position of these individuals are best understood by reconstructing the social dynamics among *širkus* and the people who surrounded them. In the final section of the event, Martha Roth and Indrani Chatterjee offered comments and engaging responses to the papers.

Overall, the event was a success both intellectually and logistically, and for this I am grateful to many people at the Oriental Institute. I thank Gil Stein for creating this post-doctoral program and for steering the project toward success with interest and enthusiasm, and I am grateful for the participants, some of whom traveled long distances to share their expertise. Chris Woods dedicated mentorship and much of his time to the project and also served as a chair for one of the panels; I also thank Matt Stolper and Fred Donner for serving as chairs. I am also very grateful to Mariana Perlinac and Meghan Winston for their logistical expertise and interest in the seminar series, and Tom Urban and Leslie Schramer for their work on the publication materials and for acting as a constant resource for the post-doctoral program. The publication of the papers should be available in the winter of 2011, just in time for the next seminar.

During my year in Chicago, I was able to make headway on a number of personal projects. With the help of the archives at the Oriental Institute and other fine resources at the university, I made considerable progress revising my dissertation for publication, and I prepared two articles for publication. I benefitted the most from the community of scholars to whom I had access, and from the academic and personal bonds that developed even during this short time.
