## A Distant Diaspora: Thinking Comparatively about
## Origins, Migrations and Roman Slavery

By Jane Webster*

It is estimated that more than 100 million people were enslaved in the millennium during which the Roman Empire rose and fell (Scheidel 2007: 26), yet the archaeology of Classical slavery is still in its infancy, with many Roman archaeologists still believing that slaves remain 'invisible' to archaeological view (see Webster 2005 for an overview). In the last few years however, a small group of scholars have begun to explore the potentials of a *comparative* archaeology of Classical slavery: one drawing explicitly on the work carried out by archaeologists of early modern slavery in North America and the Caribbean (see for example Morris 1998; Webster 2005; Dal Lago and Katsari 2008a and 2008b; Webster 2008). Much of this work has of course been written by and for Romanists. There is as yet little sign of a dialogue opening up between archaeologists of ancient and modern slavery, and we seem to remain largely ignorant of developments in each other's 'worlds.'

The aim of this article is to make a small step towards an improved dialogue, by highlighting points of similarity and difference concerning the nature – and study – of forced migrations in the Classical and Atlantic worlds. I begin by exploring shared central research questions: where did an individual's journey into slavery begin? Can we recognise dominant routes, overall volumes, and demographic trends in the long history of slave importation? In addressing issues of identity and ethnicity, how do we navigate between ethnic self-identification and imposed (Eurocentric) ethnic labels? Can we see new identities forming among the enslaved, and how is ethnogenesis given material expression? As will quickly become clear, Roman archaeologists face severe problems when attempting to address any of these questions, simply because the data at our disposal are very limited. For that very reason, it is important that we pay close attention to the work of archaeologists of slavery in the Americas, and open our

eyes to the methodologies employed there.  With this in mind, the article ends with a brief case study in which Fennell's (2007) work on ethnogenic bricolage in the Atlantic world is employed in analysing Roman slave graffiti.

**Demographic Starting Points**

*The Americas and the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database (TSTD)*

Archaeologists of early modern slavery have access to quantitative, demographic data of a quality simply unimaginable to Roman archaeologists. Readers of this Newsletter will be familiar with the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, originally published in CD-Rom format (Eltis *et al.* 1999) and now freely available online (http://www.slavevoyages.org).  This invaluable resource contains information on over 35,000 slaving voyages; an estimated four-fifths of all those made. The TSTD has revealed clearly that different African peoples 'tended to flow in one dominant channel' across the Atlantic (Morgan 1997: 125), and among modern historians, the dataset is facilitating fine-grained studies of demographic trends in the trade in West African slaves.  In particular, the database is being used to confirm, or reveal, links between specific African groups and discrete New World regions.  As recent archaeological studies drawing on this dataset have shown (Fennell 2007, Norman 2009) by combining interrogation of the dataset with excavated data, it may be possible to reveal the macroethnic affiliations of individual slaves and potentially of entire slave communities (although fierce debates about this continue, most clearly exemplified in a long-running debate about continental and New World Igbo identities (Chambers 1997, 2001 and 2002; Northrup 2000; Kolapo 2004).

*The Roman World*

The ancient authors provide a good deal of information on the sources of, and trade in, Roman slaves.  These data differ markedly from those available for scholars of the Transatlantic trade, however.  We know that there were well-established centres of exchange, including Rome, Delos and Ephesos (for recent studies of possible venues for slave sales at Delos and in Italy see Coarelli 2005 and Fentress 2005).  But in place of customs records, shipping registers and the like, we have large numbers of brief and almost certainly exaggerated 'after the fact' notes on the influx of slaves at given points in time.  These figures generally relate to Roman military campaigns.  Thus Gracchus reputedly enslaved 80,000 Sardinians in his campaign of 177 BC,

Caesar is reported as enslaving one million prisoners in the course of the Gallic War, and Trajan is said to have enslaved 500,000 Dacians in AD 105/106 (Thomson 2003 usefully summarises textual sources on the Greek and Roman slave supply). Useful though they are, these references hardly amount to a comprehensive statistical database.

The situation faced by Classicists is admirably summed up by Walter Scheidel (2007: 2), in his recent discussion of the problems faced by ancient historians attempting to explore the Roman slave supply. He notes that in contrast to the Americas:

> ….. hardly any genuine statistics are available, and historians face two similarly unpalatable options. Thus, we may decide to eschew speculative quantification altogether and focus on what our sources readily provide – that is, qualitative impressions of the prevalence of slave-ownership and the provenance of slaves. ….. Conversely, we may choose to advance broad probabilistic estimates of the demand for slaves and the likely weight of different sources of supply. ….. Any meaningful discussion of the Roman slave supply must seek to combine both approaches for the fullest possible picture.

How many people lived in slavery in the Roman world? Scheidel's own most recent estimate is that some 7-10 percent of the imperial population (between 5-8 million people) were enslaved. He has calculated a hypothetical population of 1-3 to 1.9 million urban and 3.5 to 6.5 million rural slaves, against a population of 6.5 to 7.5 million urban and 49 to 52 million rural free persons (Scheidel 2007: 6 and Table 1). It is generally agreed that the later Republican period (*c*.300 BC –AD 14) marked the high point in the import of 'foreign' slaves into Italy and that imports slowed under the Empire. Even so, it has been estimated that the Empire-wide demand for slaves *per annum* stood at half a million (Harris 1980: 118). I will come back to *vernae* (the children of slaves, born into slavery) at a later point in this study.

Despite all these difficulties, it is possible – if only on a very broad scale – to pinpoint dominant channels in the Roman slave supply over time. It is clear that a series of major campaigns brought vast numbers of enslaved laborers on to the market at particular moments in time. Thus, the second Carthaginian War (219-202 BC) brought a huge influx of North African slaves into Italy over a very brief period, whilst 55-60,000 captives are reported for the fall of Carthage in 146 BC (Scheidel 2007, Table 2). Enslaved laborers thus tended to enter Italy either via long-established markets, or as a result of specific campaigns. Certainly, a Roman buyer

surveying captives in the slave market at Rome, Delos or Ephesos would be in little doubt as to the point of origin (*natio*) of any prospective purchase: Roman law obliged dealers to disclose the *natio* of a slave at the point of sale *(Dig.* 21.1.31). But it is clear that from the moment of sale, the ethnicity of these individuals was masked, either unintentionally or deliberately, by their owners. The fact that captives entering slavery were stripped even of their names is an important factor here, and there are numerous parallels to be drawn between slave naming in the Americas and the Roman world.

## Obscuring Ethnicities: Slave Naming Practices

### *The Americas*

Africans carried to the Americas on European ships were renamed by their eventual purchasers. These 'given' names derived from a wide variety of sources: they include place-names, day-names, biblical names and indeed classical names such as Cato, Flavia, Pompey and Caesar (Cody 1987). In the Caribbean, it was not uncommon for plantation slaves to have an additional or 'country' name, utilised exclusively within the slave community (Handler and Jacoby 1996), but it remains a topic of some debate as to the extent to which slaves played a part in naming offspring born into slavery, and the extent to which primary or 'country' names of African derivation may be seen as a meaningful guide to ethnic origin or affiliation.

Few certain instances of the birth names of African-born slaves survive in the Americas. The recently augmented TSTD dataset contains a unique record of 67,000 slave names, all recorded during the 'illegal era' (that is, after the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807), when the British Navy signed treaties with various countries to establish courts of mixed (or joint) commission to adjudicate suspected slave ships stopped by its naval cruisers. The names of the captives found on board these vessels, spelled with the help of African interpreters, were entered into the *Registers of Liberated Africans*, compiled in Sierra Leone and Havana between 1819 and 1845 (Nwokeji and Eltis 2002, 2003). In addition to recording personal names, these registers record individual characteristics such as age, height, gender and – in over 12,000 cases – places of origin. As Nwokeji and Eltis (2002: 192) put it:

> the new data provide a basis for identifying the region of origin of
> each recaptive, without traversing the minefield of European
> identifications of ethnicity that have plagued attempts to pin down
> the homelands of Africans in the Americas. In contrast to many

4

plantation records in the Americas, the ethnic or regional basis of many of the names is recognizable, and makes it possible to identify broad groupings of peoples and in some cases sub-groupings on which the slave trade probably drew.

Whilst these registers do not facilitate understanding of the movement and self-identification of enslaved laborers prior to 1807, they nevertheless provide data on ethnic origin of a kind entirely lacking for the Roman world.

### Slave Naming in the Roman World

As a *res* (thing), the Roman slave had no right to a name (*nomen*), but slaves did of course have personal names. Like their counterparts in the Americas, slaves in the Roman world were 'given' their personal name, either by their sellers or by their new owners following acquisition. Whim, fashion and a general preference for Greek names all informed the naming process, and as a result slave names are a poor indicator of actual provenance. According to Varro (*Ling* 8.9.21), slaves sold at the market at Ephesos could be arbitrarily renamed after the trader, or the region in which they were purchased, or the city where they were bought. But slave names were derived from a host of other sources too: historical and mythological characters, animals, plants, geographical terms, and so on. Greek names dominate the record not just because many slaves came from the Hellenistic East, but also because Greek names and other foreign-sounding 'barbaric' names were overwhelmingly reserved for slaves, and parents of free-born children tended to avoid them.

In his survey of more than 28,000 attestations of the names of slaves and ex-slaves in the city of Rome, Solin (1996) documents some 500 'barbarian' names, many of which are possibly, but not certainly, indicative of the *natio* of the bearer. For example, 12 names, including Anina, Ibu and Monica, are listed as 'African' by Solin (1996: 611). But at the same time, this study also reveals that around two-thirds of all attested metropolitan slaves bore Greek names, and most others Latin ones.

Certainly, the 'auspicious' or otherwise cheerful names such as Felix, Primus/Prima and Eros which topped the popularity rankings (Table 1) were all customarily assigned without regard for ethnicity (Scheidel 2007: 15). Explicit ethnic attestations are uncommon, and those we do have tend to confirm Scheidel's point. Thus, the slave girl Fortunata ('Lucky') named on the first Roman deed of sale of a slave to have been found in Britain (a wooden writing tablet

discovered at No.1 Poultry, London in 1994: see Tomlin 2003) has a typical Latin slave name, but is stated in that document to have come from Jublains in north-western France (*natione Diablintem*).

In both the Americas and the Roman world, names are therefore of very limited use in addressing questions of slave origin. Can the bodies of slaves tell us more?

| Name | m | f | Total number of attestations |
|---|---|---|---|
| Felix/-ic(u) la | 461 | 69 | 530 |
| Hermes/-ia | 392 | 37 | 429 |
| Eros/-otis | 357 | 60 | 417 |
| Prima/-us | 184 | 213 | 397 |
| Hilarus/-a | 248 | 143 | 391 |
| Faustus/-a | 184 | 117 | 301 |
| Onesimus/-e | 185 | 57 | 242 |
| Antiochus/-is | 194 | 37 | 231 |
| Fortunatus/-a | 138 | 87 | 225 |
| Secunda/-us | 101 | 118 | 219 |

**Table 1.  The most common slave names in the city of Rome.
Based on Solin 1996: 680 and the revision of Solin's figures in Bodel 2003.**


**The Body of the Slave**

African-American bioarchaeology is a burgeoning field and will need no introduction to readers of this Newsletter, but the notion of a 'bioarchaeology of Roman slavery' can be quickly passed over, for the simple reason that archaeologists have yet to identify or excavate a Roman slave cemetery. We cannot even be sure which – if any – categories of Roman slave were buried in discrete cemeteries. As large numbers of inscriptions testify, the enslaved laborers (and freedmen) of wealthy urbanites shared in the family tomb. Significant numbers of slaves turned to each other for commemoration (Saller and Shaw 1984), sometimes establishing burial clubs (*collegia*) or guilds for that purpose, but little indeed is known regarding the burial of rural slaves, one of the least epigraphically visible strata in Roman society (Samson 1989).

*Slavery, Ethnicity and the Corporeal Exterior*

In the Americas, somatic distance rendered slaves (and all persons of African descent) readily identifiable.  In the Roman world, by contrast, there was no close correlation between somatic type and servile status.  As Thompson (2003: 104) puts it, 'the overwhelming majority of slaves in Roman society was always white.'  Difference could be marked on the body in many ways, however, and a small but significant group of texts and artefacts suggest that cicatrisation (scarification) was employed by African peoples known to Rome.  For example, cicatrisation marks are clearly present on the terracotta head of a Sudanese woman from the Fayum (Snowden 1970: 22-3 and Fig. 3), but not all blacks in the Roman world were slaves, and there can be no



**Figure. 1.  Black marble statuette from the baths at Aphrodisias, Turkey (late second-early third century CE).  The standing figure wears an *exomis*, a short tunic gathered at the waist and fastened over one shoulder.  In his left hand he holds a *balsamarium*, a flask holding perfumed oil. It is likely, but not certain, that the person depicted was enslaved (Musée du Louvre, © R.M.N./H. Lewandowski).**

certainty as to whether the individual depicted here was a slave or a free woman (see Fig. 1 for a similar problem).  There is an obvious contrast here with the situation in the Americas, where both scarification and tooth modification have been recognised as signature markers of 'salt water' slaves: individuals born in Africa rather than in the Americas (e.g., Handler 1994: 113-119, Gomez 1998).

Yet in some intriguing ways, the corporeal exterior of the slave was clearly a focal point for (involuntary) status marking in the Roman world.  At the point of sale, for example, the feet of foreign slaves were marked with chalk (Pliny *Nat. Hist.* 35.199) and numerous ancient authors refer to the practice of shaving or close-cropping the hair of enslaved laborers (including Petronius *Sat.* 102-6 and Apuleius *Met.* 9.12.

In the Atlantic world, marks of ownership, made with a branding iron, were inflicted on the bodies of captives shortly before they made the journey into slavery.  In the Roman world hot-iron branding was used to mark animals, not humans, but *stigmata* in the form of tattoo marks were etched on the bodies of both delinquent slaves and criminals (Jones 1987).  This practice, and the use of judicial torture (Bauman 2000: 116-200), remind us that the slave was, as Bauman puts it 'answerable with his body for any infraction.'  By the Hellenistic period delinquent slaves were tattooed on the face or forehead with the name of their offence; their faces etched with a narrative of their misdemeanours (Jones 1987: 148).  Unfortunately, tattoo marks only survive upon ancient bodies in the most exceptional circumstances, leaving little prospect for a Roman bioarchaeology of slave *stigmata*.

In colonial contexts of all kinds, the human body – including the body of the slave – was both a natural and a social symbol (Rothschild 2008) and the relationship between punishment and bodily marking briefly sketched out here may suggest that in the Roman world as in the Americas permanent bodily alteration was regarded as a marker of 'deviant' status, literally stigmatising criminals and delinquent slaves.

## An 'Internal Diaspora'?

Many – perhaps the majority – of those living in slavery in the Americas and the Roman world simply had the misfortune to be born the children of slave mothers.  They crossed neither ocean nor continent on a diasporic journey into slavery, and they had no first-hand knowledge of their parents' ancestral culture.  As I will suggest below, questions of ethnic identity – and its

material expression – become particularly complex when we consider such slaves, usually known as creoles in the Americas and as *vernae* in the Roman world.

### *The 'Internal Slave Supply' in the Roman World*

What proportion of Roman slaves were the children of slaves, born into slavery (*vernae*)? This remains a particularly fraught issue: one much-studied by ancient historians, yet largely ignored by archaeologists. It is generally agreed that late Republican expansionism marked the high point in the import of 'foreign' slaves into Italy, but the extent to which metropolitan and provincial slave labour requirements were met through 'natural reproduction' (or breeding) after this point is much-debated (see for example Scheidel 1997: 159-69 and, *contra* Harris, 1999). Scheidel has estimated the biological replacement rate as being as high as 80% in late Republican Italy (1997: 166).

One of the best-known Roman funerary monuments in Britain comes from Arbeia (South Shields), the easternmost fort on Hadrian's Wall (Fig. 2). This monument was commissioned by Barates of Palmyra in memory of his wife, Regina. The Syrian-born Barates is of course a fine example of the voluntary Roman migrant: but what of Regina?



**Figure 2. Tombstone of Regina, Great North Museum, Newcastle-upon-Tyne (RIB 1065).**

Despite being a former slave, she was of Catuvellaunian origin (*natio*); the Catuvellauni being a tribe of southern Britain. She reminds us that there were many routes to indigenous slavery in the Roman provinces.

First, of course, some Britons may have been enslaved at the time of the Roman conquest in AD 43, during the steady expansion of the province in the following decades, or as a result of insurrection. Second, as suggested above, it was common practice in Britain as elsewhere to expand the slave supply from internal (rather than external) sources. These sources included *vernae*, orphans, exposed infants and other foundlings, children sold as a result of poverty, self-sale for debt, and penal condemnation to slavery (see Birley 1979: 145-50). Foundling infants may have contributed significantly to the slave population in some provinces. The raising of foundlings as slaves is well documented in Roman Egypt, and Scheidel has suggested that enslavement of exposed babies may conceivably have been the leading domestic source of free-born slaves in the mature Empire (Scheidel 2007: 10). The practice of fosterage was certainly known in pre-Roman Britain, and the fosterage of foundlings after the conquest might well have produced subordinate sub-classes whose servitude would have continued under Roman rule.

We cannot know precisely how the British-born slave Regina became a slave, though it seems likely that she was slave-born. How should we conceptualise her experience, and that of other slaves in the Roman world whose route to slavery did not involve migration? How, if at all, can archaeologists isolate and study these individuals?

Ian Lilley has recently advanced the concept of 'internal diaspora,' positioning indigenous peoples, as well as settlers and their descendants, as diasporic (Lilley 2003 and 2006). Lilley has drawn on the work of the anthropologist James Clifford, who has argued that contemporary tribal peoples 'who have been dispossessed of their lands or who must leave reduced reserves to find work, may claim diasporic identities. Inasmuch as their distinctive sense of themselves is oriented toward a lost or alienated home defined as aboriginal (and thus 'outside' the surrounding nation-state), we can speak of a diasporic dimension of contemporary tribal life' (Clifford 1994: 309). Lilley has himself explored the notion of internal diaspora with reference to both contemporary Australasia and the Lapita dispersal in the Western Pacific, some 3,000 years ago.

There is much of value in this concept for archaeologists working in colonial contexts of all kinds.  At the very least, it foregrounds the critical attributes of a diaspora and presents the possibility that colonized native minorities, uprooted – literally or figuratively – by the colonial system, may be considered as diasporic.  Nevertheless, Lilley works in settings that preclude explicit discussion of indigenous *slavery*, and it is highly debateable whether his formulation of diaspora should be brought to bear upon the slave-born.  Orlando Patterson's well-known concept of natal alienation, or genealogical isolation (Patterson 1982: 5-6) – the universal condition of the slave across time and place – is surely more appropriate (see also Patterson 1982: 111).  Natal alienation was not simply a condition of 'foreign' slaves in the Roman world.  To paraphrase the ancient historian Moses Finley, all slaves – whether foreign-born or recruited from the local community – were reconceptualised as *outsiders* (Finley 1968: 303-13*)*.

Despite having being born in Britain, then, the ex-slave Regina was natally alienated.  No formally recognised ties bound her to her living or ancestral Catuvellaunian kin.  In that sense, she died in genealogical isolation, a long way from home. And yet, her *natio* was noted by her husband on her memorial: a reminder that – whatever the efforts slave traders and owners made to suppress and deny cultural memory and ethnic self-identification among slaves – these things remained vitally important to both slaves and ex-slaves themselves.

Very little work has been carried out – by either ancient historians or Roman archaeologists – on the implications either of indigenous slavery, or of an increasing percentage over time of locally recruited slaves.  Put another way: would the material signature of these categories of non-migrant slave be the same as that of 'foreign' slaves?  What changes might we expect to see over time, with rising numbers of individuals being born into slavery, with no direct experience of the homelands of their forebears?  Turning to the archaeology of slavery in the Americas, we find a body of archaeological work engaging with precisely with these questions.

## The Material World of the Slave

### *Africanisms, Creolization and 'Ethnogenic Bricolage' in the Americas*

Historical archaeologists in the USA and Caribbean have long been interested in isolating the practices of 'salt water' slaves.  In part, this is simply because these first-generation slaves carried with them a cultural memory of their native cultures, and were more likely to retain clear

markers of African practices than were their creole descendants, who lacked direct knowledge of African traditions and practices. At the same time, however, it has also been appreciated that slave culture in the Americas was in no sense static, and that an understanding of long-term creolization processes cannot develop simply by focusing on 'salt water' slavery.

For some 30 years now, archaeologists in North America and the Caribbean have been recognising strategies by which captive Africans and their new world-born descendants maintained and adapted their traditions and customs in the Americas. Fennell's recent work on cosmology and ethnogensis has gone a step further, combining anthropological theory with archaeological data to reveal the emergence of new, 'blended' cosmological symbols, indicative of emergent group identities, among dispersed peoples of different origins in Haiti and Brazil (Fennell 2007). At the heart of Fennell's work is an analysis of the use of 'core' symbols within diasporic cultures. Fennell describes a core symbol as one used 'to express fundamental elements of a group's cosmology and sense of identity within the world. Core symbols can be communicated through spoken words and ritual performances and are often depicted in tangible, graphic form through renderings in material culture.' He distinguishes further between *emblematic* and *instrumental* versions of core symbols: the former summarizing the identity of a cultural group as a cohesive unit (the crucifix, the Star of David) and the latter comprising a simplified or abbreviated form of the avatar, used for individual rather than public or group purposes. Fennell argues that in Haiti, Cuba and Brazil, the Bakongo cosmogram and other instrumental symbols from a number of cultures (Bakongo, Yoruba, Fon) were combined in new ways, in a process Fennell defines as 'ethnogenic bricolage': creative interaction amongst individuals raised in different cultures, but coming together in new settings, often at the geographic crossroads of multiple diasporas (Fennell 2007: 9).

Can these ideas be applied to the Roman world? Rome itself – and cities and emporia throughout the Roman Empire – were certainly, to repeat Fennell's term above, the 'geographic crossroads of multiple diasporas.' It may of course be objected that slaves were only one of many deracinated or disaporic groups in the Roman world, and that as a result it would be difficult to identify emblematic and instrumental symbolism unique to slaves. Yet slaves were not, of course, the only migrants in the colonial Americas, and it is clearly possible to isolate emergent instrumental symbols amongst slave populations there. Perhaps the point here is that we should worry less about identifying practices 'unique' to slaves, and think more in terms of

identifying the *continuum* of material culture discourse shared by migrant groups of all kinds within the Roman 'melting pot.'

Having made this point, however, it remains the case that a significant number of artefacts in the Roman world – from tombstones to clay roofing tiles – bear common 'servile' names and *can* in fact be associated closely with slaves.  Uncertainties of course remain as to the exact status of these individuals, because in everyday address many Roman slaves and ex-slaves will have been onomastically indistinguishable from their free-born peers.  This uncertainty has resulted in the convention that inscriptions on monuments and artefacts are only attributed to slaves where status is *explicitly* attested (for example through use of the word *servus*, slave).  Where less certainty is demanded, the number of attestations rises very considerably.  Solin's survey of metropolitan Roman slave names (Solin 1996) registers more than 28,000 examples of some 5,500 names of slaves and ex-slaves from the earliest period down to the fifth century CE.  It is true that the criteria adopted for the inclusion of individual names in this onomasticon remain unspecified, and that this limits the level of 'certainty' that the person referred to in any given attestation is indeed a slave.  But certainty is an archaeological luxury at the best of times – and far more could, and should, be made of artefacts bearing common slave names than is usually the case.

As I have suggested elsewhere with reference to graffiti (Webster 2008) the occurrence of 'servile' names on a variety of artefacts – from clay tiles to parietal grafitti (Fig. 3), from curse tablets (*defixiones*) (Fig. 4) to pot sherds – at least presents opportunities for archaeologists to begin sustained study of the symbols and discursive strategies associated with a material culture that, in the majority of cases at least, is likely to have been created or modified by slaves.  Archaeologists of slavery in the Americas will appreciate at once that artefacts like these open a door to the material world and life experience of the unfree; yet to date, no work has focused on the symbols that – albeit rarely – accompany Roman graffiti bearing servile names (Fig. 3), or has asked whether these symbols can be traced to specific ethnic groups and belief systems within the Roman world.

This brings me back to Fennell's work on core symbolism and ethnogenic bricolage among diasporic communities.  There are strong grounds for suggesting that in the Roman world as in the Americas, one may posit a strong link between ritual, 'magic' and manifestations of core symbols.  It is not without interest that in offering advice on the management of slaves, the
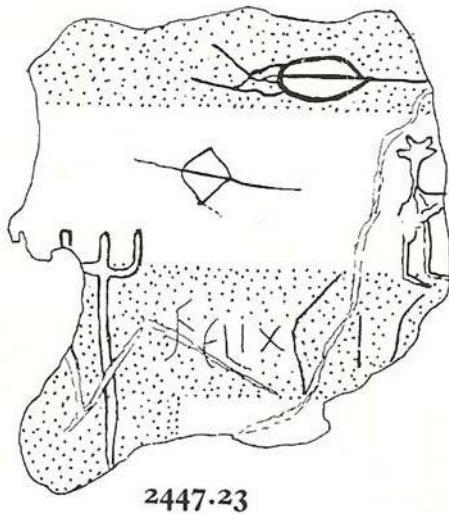
**Figure 3. Fragment of wall plaster with the name 'Felix' and associated imagery (including a trident), from East Malling, Kent (RIB 2447.23).**

Roman writer Columella hints at efforts to curb slave agency in relation to 'superstition' and magic. For example, Columella counselled that the master must be responsible for the performance of all rites in the household, and that on rural estates the *vilicus* (estate manager) should not carry out sacrifices without permission of the master (*De Re. Rustica* 1.8.5-6). Similarly, witches and seers should not be admitted to estates, lest slaves' minds be filled with superstitious ideas (*De Re. Rustica* 1.8.7).

Roman curse tablets (*defixiones*) offer some interesting possibilities here. Amongst the curse tablets deposited in tombs or graves on the Via Appia in Rome, for example, are a series bearing drawing of human figures portrayed in bonds and surrounded by serpents (Fig. 4). These tablets were certainly purchased by freedmen and slaves and their setting concerns competition amongst racers and charioteers at Rome (Gager 1997: 67-72). But the imagery reveals a complex cosmological bricolage, amalgamating horse-head spirits (*daimones*), Christian Gnosticism, and the worship of the Egyptian god Osiris. It is tempting to dismiss artefacts like these as 'ephemera,' reflecting behaviours at the very fringe of mainstream Roman belief and practice. Yet it is precisely these oddities which may yet prove invaluable in exploring the potential emergence of new, shared, belief systems at the crossroads inhabited by Rome's unfree.

14

**Figure 4. Late Roman *defixio*, Via Appia, Rome. From J. Gager *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford 1992).**
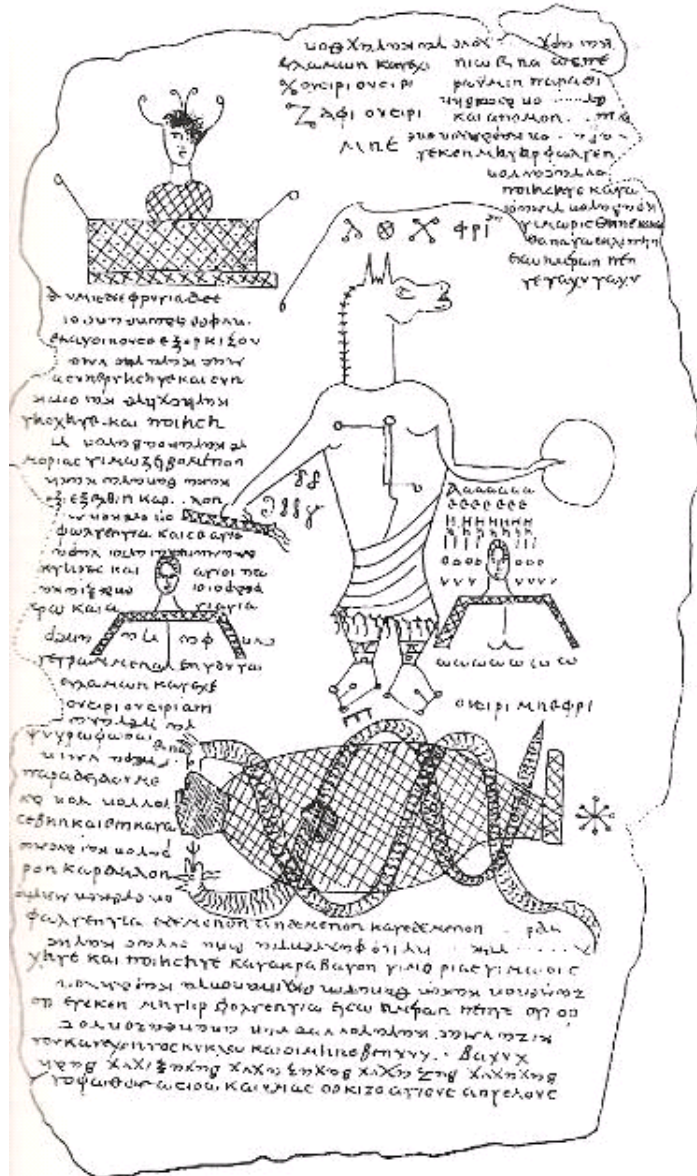
Fennell correlated the BaKongo cosmogram with a specifically Congo-Angolan (rather than generally 'African') diaspora by constructing an ethnographic analogy based on sixteenth to nineteenth century accounts of West Central African beliefs and practices. Identification of potential 'core' identity markers among Roman slaves cannot proceed by looking forwards from the Roman period in this way, but we can compare sideways, to the symbolic systems of peoples dominating the external slave supply at specific points in Roman history. Unfortunately, the study of ancient slavery is severely impeded by a lack of collaboration between ancient historians and archaeologists, and by the resultant failure to 'marry words and things' (Hall 2000: 16-17) that historical archaeologists of the modern world regard as essential to the

development of a nuanced archaeology of slave-owning societies.  As the above I hope suggests, one way forward here might be to focus upon objects that marry words and things in a literal way – artefacts inscribed with 'servile' names.

Finally, I should note that whilst space precluded discussion here of the material culture and symbolism of Roman freedmen, the material world of the ex-slave is particularly relevant to the programme of enquiry into naming and symbolism that I have proposed above.  In the Roman world, freedmen (manumitted former slaves) are far more epigraphically visible than slaves themselves, and their epigraphic commemoration has attracted considerable interest amongst ancient historians.  As Henrik Mouritsen has drmonstrated in a series of influential studies (see especially Mouritsen 2005) the vast majority of those commemorated epigraphically in Rome (that is, on tombstones and other stone monuments) were former slaves: individuals united by their experience of both slavery and manumission.  At the core of that experience, Mouritsen argues, lay a new sense of personal and family security, clearly reflected in the funerary monuments of freedmen and their descendants.  The act of monumentalisation was, in this sense, genealogical: the celebration of the secure family unit.

The fact that freedmen dominate the epigraphic record for Rome, Italy and some of the provinces is a reminder, in other words, of the keen interest, amongst the deracinated, in genealogy, security and roots.  Ultimately, it may prove to be amongst freedmen that any search for 'ethnogenic bricolage' in the Roman world will prove most fruitful.  Despite their disparate origins, ex-slaves were united by the fact of slavery, and in Rome at least, there is some evidence to suggest that freedmen worked actively to form communal bonds within the social circle in which they moved.  For example, few freedmen married freeborn wives, yet it seems inconceivable, given the material success of many freedmen, that they would have been unable to find freeborn spouses had they wished to do so.  Similarly, a surprising number of freedmen gave their freeborn children Greek names, despite their servile connotations.  What emerges here, Mouritsen argues (2005: 57), is the suggestion of a 'distinct freedman community,' and it may be here – amongst those with a clear psychological need for *genealogical* security – that new, shared *ethnic* identities might also have emerged.

**Note**

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j.l.webster@ncl.ac.uk. This article is based on my forthcoming chapter, entitled 'Routes to slavery in the Roman world: a comparative perspective on the archaeology of forced migration,' in Eckardt, H., ed., *Roman Diasporas – Archaeological Approaches to Mobility and Diversity in the Roman Empire* (forthcoming 2010). I am very grateful to Hella Eckardt for allowing me to reproduce the material here. I use the terms 'slave' and 'slavery' in this article to represent the status of bondage imposed on past persons by others who sought to subjugate them. Readers should be sensitive that such terms are not used here to indicate that this status represented the essential or singular character of those individuals. Figure 4 is presented with permission of Oxford University Press, and corresponds with Tablet 13 in Chapter 1, late Roman defixio from the via Appia, Rome, from "Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World" edited by John Gager (1992).

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