



Slavery in the Graeco-Roman World

Everyday Life in Athens
and Rome (HPAH4020)

Chattel Slavery

- Natively alienated (alienable = transferable)
- no recognised family.
- Relationships may exist, but not recognised in law.
- children may be sold out of the household, couples divided, partners used sexually by others.





Herculaneum fresco depicting a Roman banquet – *Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli* (inv. 9024).

- Little to no respect in wider society
 - although sometimes social and legal prohibitions against extreme cruelty
- Slaves may be perceived of as having no honour or shame
- In some philosophical and legal discourse, spoken of as tools or even as sub-humans/animal (e.g. Aristotle *Politics*).

Legal Status

Roman context

- Under the *potestas* of the *paterfamilias*.
- No right to bring a court case.
- Testimony only admissible under torture.
- Technically cannot own property (but may have a *peculium*).



Numbers

- No definitive statistics – modern scholarly estimates vary from 10-20%.
 - Likely higher numbers in Athens and Roman Italy, less in other regions.

“Soon afterwards one of his own slaves murdered the city-prefect, Pedanius Secundus... **Ancient custom** required that the **whole slave-establishment** which had dwelt under the same roof should be dragged to **execution**, when a sudden gathering of the populace, which was for saving **so many innocent lives**, brought matters to actual insurrection... Still, the party which voted for their execution prevailed.” – **Tac. Ann. 14.42** (400 slaves executed – AD 61, during the reign of Nero)



Means of acquiring slaves?

- Warfare
- Piracy and kidnapping
- House-born slaves
- Foundlings
- Trade/Importation (secondary step in process of enslavement)



Origins



- Varied origins in wider Mediterranean (and beyond).
- Requirement, when selling slaves, to declare their *nātiō* – ***Digest*** (Ulpian) – 21.1.31.21.
 - Joke about Roman matron Caelia – ***Martial Ep. 7.30***.

“...there is another market-town called **Opone**... and in it the greatest quantity of cinnamon is produced... and slaves of the better sort, which are brought to Egypt in increasing numbers; and a great quantity of tortoise-shell, better than that found elsewhere. – ***Periplus Maris Erythraei 13***.

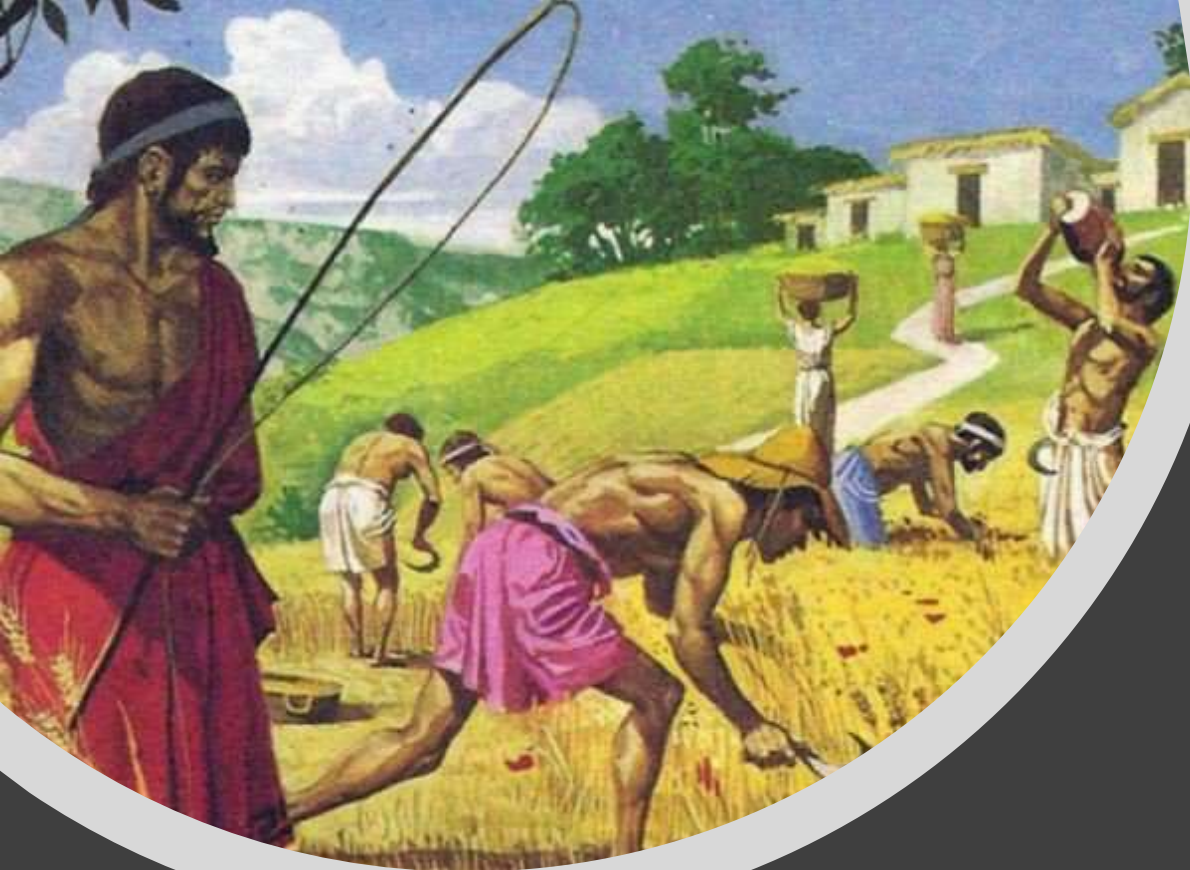
Forms of Exploitation (1)

Mines and quarries

- Why do you think slave labour in mines or quarries might have been quite common?

“The men engaged in these mining operations produce unbelievably large revenues for their masters, but as a result of their underground excavations day and night they become physical wrecks, and because of their extremely bad conditions, their mortality rate is high.” - **Diodorus Siculus 5.38.1.**





Forms of Exploitation (2)

Agricultural labourers:

- “Middle Class” farmers (e.g. hoplite class in Athens) with occasional slave.
- *Latifundia* = large estates – conglomerations of land.



Are all forms of agriculture well-suited to slavery?



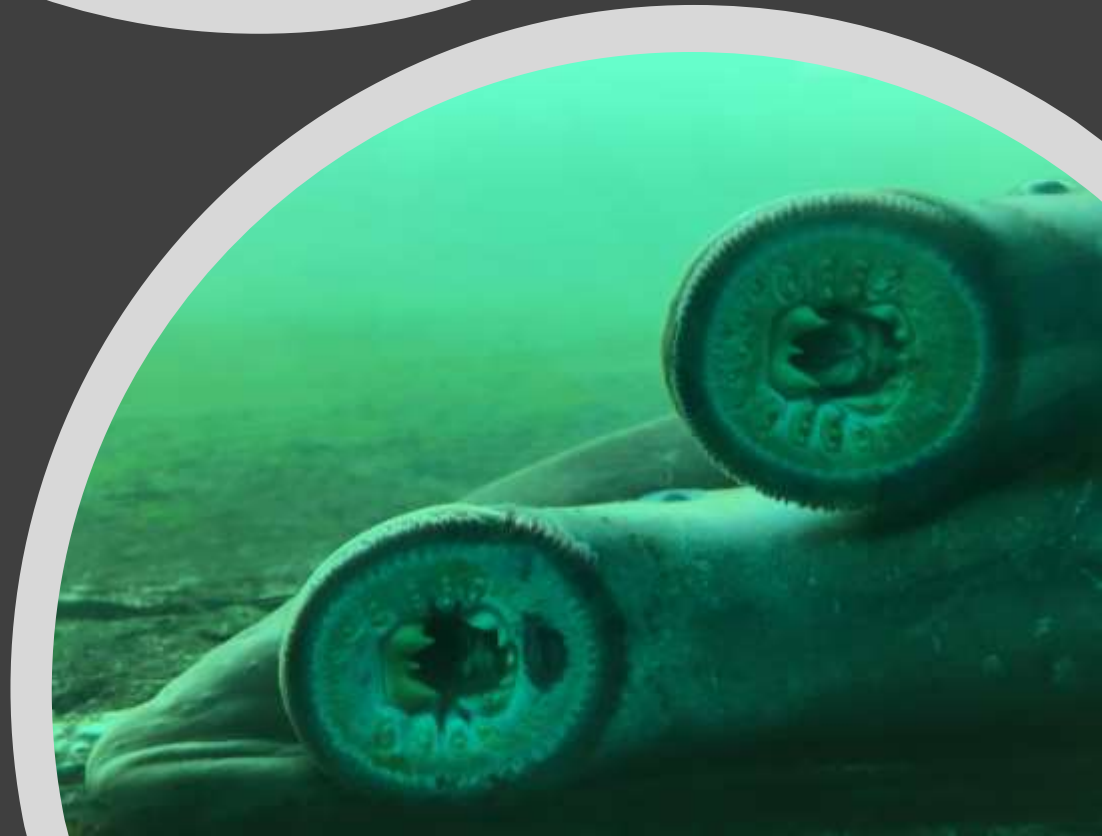
Forms of Exploitation (3, 4 and 5)

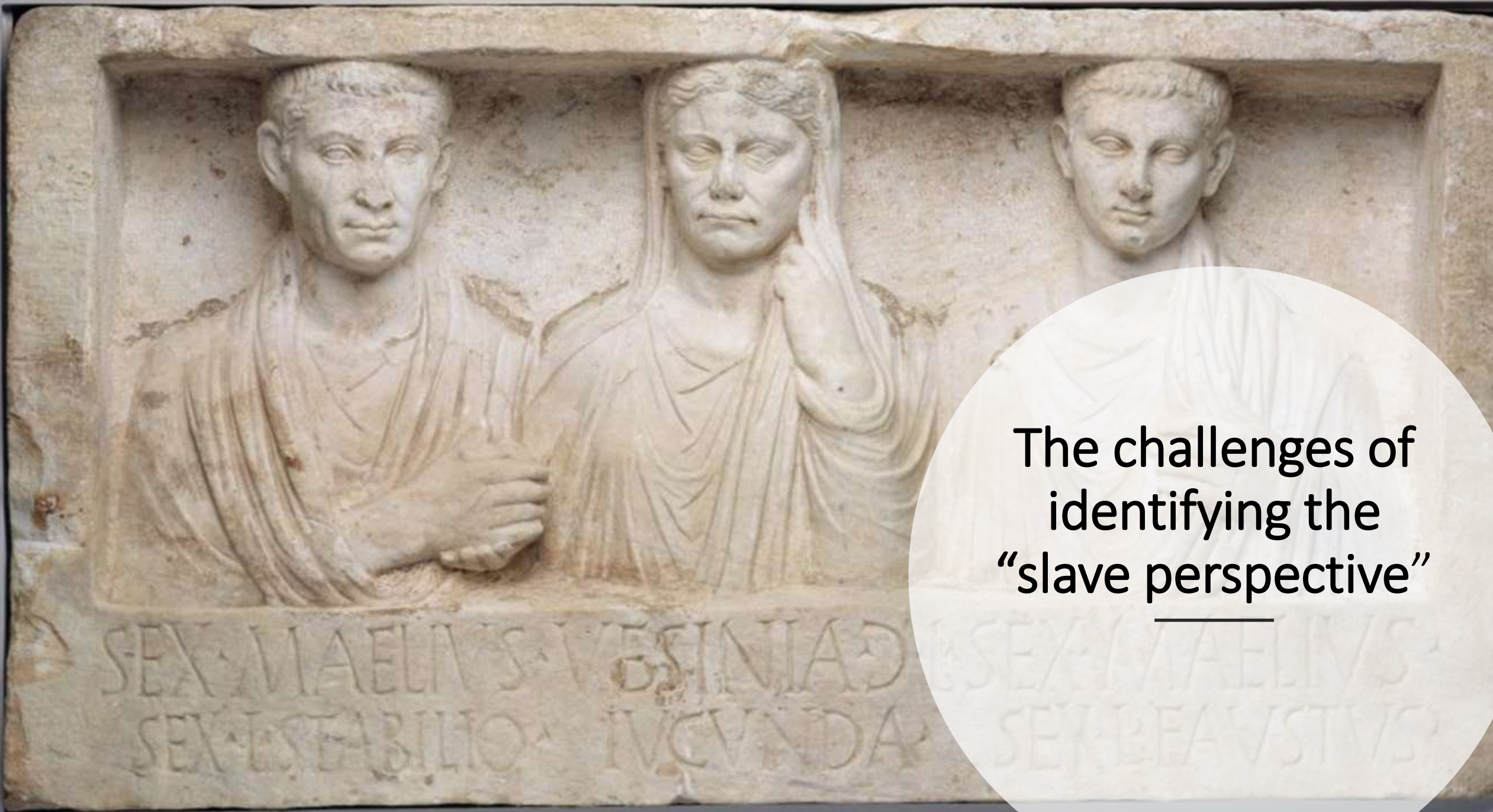
- **Civic slaves:** _____
 - Aids to officials; civic maintenance, etc.
- **Household slaves:**
 - (wet)nurses, tutors, cooks, attendants etc.
- **Skilled slaves and artisans:**
 - Business managers, “clerks”, scribes, accountants, stonemason, etc.

Cruelty and Abuse

- Physical and sexual abuse an ever-present threat
 - e.g. masters impregnating their slaves – Martial *Ep.* 1.84.

“This same year [15 BC] Vedius Pollio died... he had become very famous for his wealth and for his cruelty... he kept in **reservoirs huge lampreys** that had been **trained to eat men**, and he was **accustomed to throw to them such of his slaves as he desired to put to death**. Once, when he was entertaining Augustus, his cup-bearer broke a crystal goblet, and without regard for his guest, Pollio ordered the fellow to be thrown to the lampreys. – **Cassius Dio 54.23.**





The challenges of
identifying the
“slave perspective”

SEX·MAELIVS·VESINIAD
SEX·T·SEBILIO·IVCVNDA

Lack of surviving voices

- Little direct testimony from slaves survive.
 - No equivalent to letters or diaries from ante-bellum southern US.
- Speeches or motivations attributed to slaves largely deriving from elite authors.
 - Slaves as stock characters in Roman comedies; characterisations given by authors about leaders for slave rebellions, etc.

Charlottesville Oct 11 1858

Dear Husband I write you a letter to let you know of my distress my master has sold all my household goods and myself and other child is for sale. I want you to let hear from you very soon before if you can I dont know when I dont want you to come Christmas I want you to tell Dr Hambleton if either will buy me they can attend to it when I can go after words I dont want a trade to be made they asked me if I had got any person to buy me I said them no they told me to the court house to they ever put me up a man buy the name of Brady boy or other and is gone I dont know where they say he lives in Scotland my things is in several places some is in Hannan and if I should be sold I dont know what will be of them I dont expect to meet with the luck to get that way Tell if am quite heart sick nothing more I am and ever will be your kind wife Maria Perkins
To Richard Perkins

A letter written by Maria Perkins to her husband while she was a slave (1858)

Funerary Monument of Sextus Maelius Stabilio, Vesinia Iucunda, and Sextus Maelius Faustus. The men were the freed ex-slaves of Sextus Maelius, and the woman had been freed by her *matrona* Vesinia (after whom she took her own *nomen*).



- Inscriptions connected to ex-slaves (*liberti*), such as funerary epitaphs.
- These largely celebrate acquisition of freedom.
 - Although allusions to periods prior to slavery might be made.



Works of *Liberti*

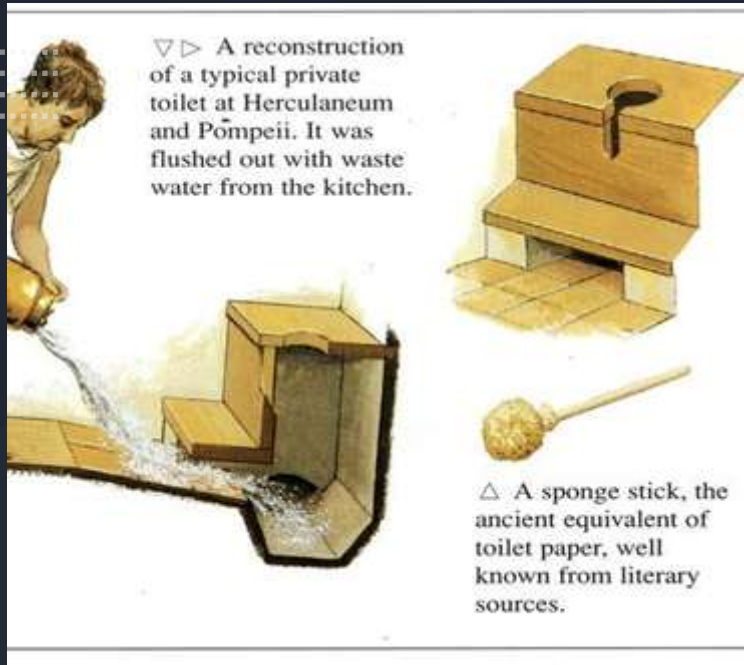
- Some authors had spent part of their lives as slaves, but obtained their freedom:
 - Plautus – comedy writer (late 3rd to early 2nd century BC).
 - Epictetus – Stoic philosopher (latter 1st to early 2nd century AD).
- Epictetus uses slave examples, and Plautus has slave characters.
 - Nevertheless, neither take on the task of writing about the “slave experience”.



Personal agency

- Examples of resistance commented upon (approvingly) by Seneca the Younger.
 - A Stoic philosopher, member of the Neronian court and highly wealthy individual.

“Lately a gladiator... conveyed in a cart along with the other prisoners; nodding as if he were heavy with sleep, he let his head fall over so far that it was caught in the spokes; then he kept his body in position long enough to break his neck by the revolution of the wheel... he made his escape by means of the very wagon which was carrying him to his punishment...” – **Seneca *Letters* 70.20.**



“For example, there was recently in a training-school for wild-beast gladiators a German, who was making ready for the morning exhibition; he withdrew in order to relieve himself, – the only thing which he was allowed to do in secret and without the presence of a guard. While so engaged, he seized the stick of wood, tipped with a sponge, which was devoted to the vilest uses, and stuffed it, just as it was, down his throat; thus he blocked up his windpipe, and choked the breath from his body. That was truly to insult death!” – **Seneca *Letters* 70.20.**

Epigraphy – Examples of Resistance



A 4th century AD iron slave collar, connected to Rome (Zoninus collar):

“I have fled, take me to my master Zoninus and you will receive a solidus.”

Here I, Lemiso, lie. Nothing save death ended my toil. (*CIL* 6.6049 = *ILLRP* 932, Rome)

What can archaeology and material culture tell us about individual slave experiences and personal agency?



servus callidus or “tricky slave” - Bronze statuette, early 3rd century CE. From the Piazza Madonna dei Monti.

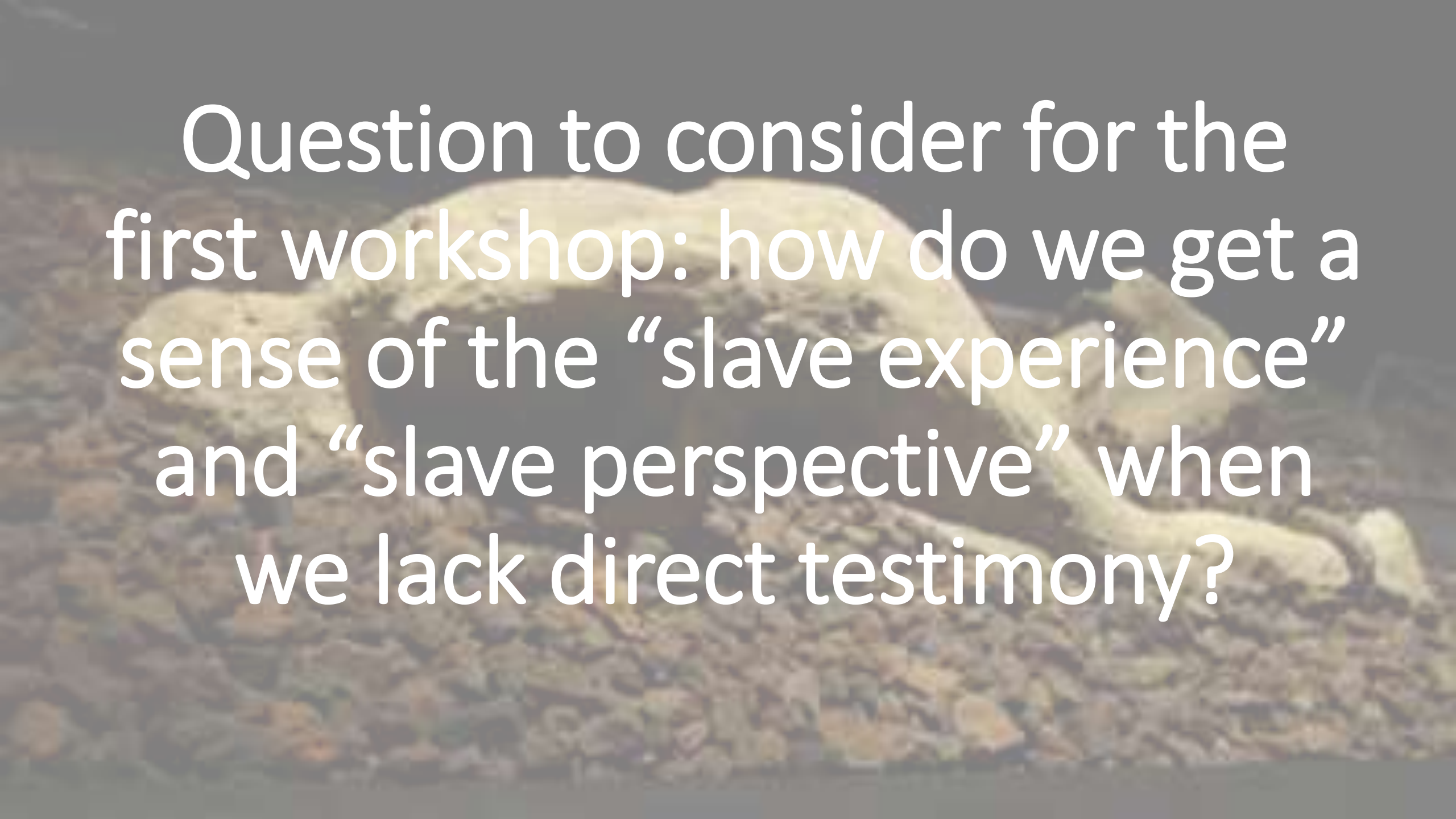
Sicilian red-figured calyx-krater, ca. 350 BC–340 BC



Iron slave-chain from Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey; National Museum of Wales



- Lack of resources.
- Usually difficult to ascertain social or legal status from material culture alone.
- Material culture might represent aspects of subjugation or stock tropes about slaves.



Question to consider for the first workshop: how do we get a sense of the “slave experience” and “slave perspective” when we lack direct testimony?