Slavery and Social Death in the Ancient Roman World

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Abstract

The institution of slavery has been entrenched in human society for centuries from early Babylonia in 600 BCE to the American South in 1800 CE. In 1982, historian Orlando Patterson proposed a new rather contentious definition of slavery from a sociological view (as compared to the previous legal ones), emphasizing the condition of those in slavery. This paper attempts to contextualize slave systems with Patterson's description of slaves as "socially dead" (i.e. unable to form meaningful social ties). While hundreds of slave systems have existed across the globe, they differ in the level of autonomy given to slaves and opportunities for social advancement. One particularly interesting system is that of Ancient Rome from 200 BCE to 200 CE–a time period marked by an influx of slaves from across the Mediterranean and debates over their position in Roman society. This paper examines the opportunities available to both *urbana* (urban) and *rustica* (rural) slaves in Rome to form meaningful social ties with one another with emphasis on the lives of female slaves to determine the extent to which these slaves may be called "socially dead".

1 Introduction

In 1982, Orlando Patterson published his landmark comparative study, Slavery and Social Death. His conceptualization of the experience of enslavement as a form of "social death" has been widely adopted by historians of slavery as a perspective that focuses on the social conditions of slaves rather than their common status as property. As such, Patterson defines slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natally (at birth) alienated and generally dishonored persons"[1].

This unorthodox sociological approach stands in stark contrast to the legal definition of slavery adopted by the Geneva Convention of 1926 and the Supplemental Convention of 1956 both of which heavily utilize the property status

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[1]Franklin, V.P. "Review of Slavery and Social Death." The University of Chicago Press Journals 68 (1983): 212–16.

of slaves. The 1926 Convention defines slavery as "the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised."[2] This definition poses several problems in terms of generalizability, most notably that fact that property rights were not acknowledged until the Roman Empire. The 1956 convention expands on the relatively narrow 1926 definition to include alternative forms of bondage such as debt bondage, serfdom, and spousal domination[3]; Patterson believes this legal definition was still far too narrow. Patterson's conception of "social death" involves three key components: permanence (bondage ends on the terms of the slave master), violence (through which slaves are constantly reminded of their lower status), and natal alienation (slaves are deprived of an identity with severing of ancestral ties)[4]. Given these components and the novelty of a sociological approach to understanding slavery, I seek to further discuss the concept of "social death", specifically whether it was total or partial. How are the social lives of male slaves different from those of female slaves? How are "social death" experiences for male slaves different from those of female slaves?

Before discussing social death, I will first introduce the issue of Roman slavery. In this paper, I specifically consider slavery in the time period 200 BC to 200 AD. Chattel slavery has been an essential part of the Roman world for centuries, with the earliest known reference to the institution of slavery in the Twelve Tables in 451 BC. Prior to this, nexum (debt bondage) was a dominant form of forced labor in Rome. Here I will introduce the distinction between the "intrusive" mode and "extrusive" mode of social death to contextualize the facets of Roman slavery. With intrusive social death, the slave is considered an outsider from the beginning while with the extrusive type, the slave has fallen from a higher status in society[5]. Roman slavery in the period being considered show signs of both intrusive and extrusive social death. For example, chattel slavery in the rustica (agricultural estate) and urbana (city) settings is intrusive as foreigners most commonly become chattels after conquest, while penal slavery and debt bondage are extrusive as they were "citizen on citizen" bondage. In 326 BC, the Roman Senate passed Lex Poetelia Papiria which abolished nexum, citing reservations against the notion of citizen enslaving citizen. This is significant as now the primary flavor of Roman slavery is intrusive where social death is much more pronounced. Following a series of stunning Roman victories in the Punic Wars and Macedonian Wars between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, Rome was quickly established as a superpower in the ancient world with a massive influx of slaves from conquered territories and slave piracy fueling the growing empire. These slaves automatically fell under the intrusive conception of social death as they were foreigners. Indeed, the view that many elite Ro-

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[2] Geneva Convention. "Geneva Accords on Slavery," September 25, 1926, 1–4.

[3] Economic and Social Council. "Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery," September 7, 1956, 1–4.

[4] V.P. Franklin, "Review of Slavery and Social Death," The University of Chicago Press Journals 68 (1983): pp. 212-216.

[5] Franklin, V.P. "Review of Slavery and Social Death." The University of Chicago Press Journals 68 (1983): 212–16

mans held that slaves were social outsiders led to significant conflicts such as the Sicilian Slave Revolts and the Spartacus Revolt, both of which had important effects on the Roman social hierarchy as masters came to fear rebellion from their slaves. I will further elaborate on this point later in the paper. While the exact number of slaves in the Roman empire cannot be known due to the lack of surviving census records outside Roman Egypt, it is estimated that at the empire's peak (under Trajan in AD 117) there were anywhere from 750,000 to 1,500,000 agricultural slaves[6].

2   Sourcing

Here I find the need to elaborate on the sources used on this paper. I utilize a mix of primary and secondary source analysis, and I must acknowledge an important caveat concerning the primary sources. Most primary sources referenced in this paper were written by slave owners rather than by slaves themselves (with the exception of funerary commemorations). Thus, since the authors and audience of many of these primary sources are elite Romans (e.g. the farm manuals of Cato the Elder, Varro, and Columella) with vast land holdings who are not involved in day-to-day processes of their estates, we cannot say how generalizable this information information is to the all Roman farmers who owned slaves as many tilled the land themselves and owned just a handful of slaves. The exception to this are the funerary commemorations, inscriptions, and epitaphs which represent the actual voices of the enslaved and formerly enslaved. Yet, even here I must point out that the master's patronage has often had a significant impact on inscription text and columbarium records (e.g. Statilii columbarium). With these caveats in mind, I will now move to discuss the concept of social death in two settings: the familia urbana and familia rustica.

3   The Roman *Familia*

In Ancient Rome, the concept of *familia* (family) was the most basic social unit and did not just include members of the modern nuclear family but also the nuclear family's slaves, freedmen, and close acquaintances. As such, the *familia* of wealthy Romans is divided into two separate spheres based on location. The *familia urbana* includes all members of the *familia* who live in the city. Slaves in this setting often had higher chances of manumission and social mobility compared to their rural counterparts due to proximity to the master. Common roles for slaves in the *urbana* included extremely prestigious positions like financial agents and administrators (especially in the *familia Caesaris* - imperial household) as well as domestic positions like playmate and caretaker for children. The *familia rustica* includes all members of the *familia* who work on agricultural estates. The labor demands in this setting are typically considered very arduous

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[6]Walter Scheidel, "The Roman Slave Supply," in The Cambridge World History of Slavery (Cambridge University Press, n.d.), pp. 24-36.

with little possibility of manumission. In fact, as Gaius Petronius writes in the Satyricon, wealthy former slave Trimalchio was moved from the *familia urbana* to the *familia rustica* in his youth as punishment when his master found out the young slave was having an affair with his wife[7]. Such descriptions evoke powerful images of how arduous *rustica* life must have been for slaves compared to the *urbana*. There are several social ties worth discussing in both settings, and I will first start with the *familia rustica*.

4 The *Familia Rustica*

4.1 Overview

In the agricultural sphere, Cicero and other elite Romans viewed slave labor as socially invisible: any work done by slaves on the villa was done for the master[8]. On many estates, slaves were grouped together with oxen, carts, and tools as a means of production no more human than an animal or inanimate object (defined as *instrumentum*)[9], seemingly implying that social death was in fact total and deprived slaves of any sense of identity or union. This, however, is challenged by the meaningful informal unions that developed between male and female slaves in the *rustica* setting. Before discussing these unions, it is essential that we first lay out the roles afforded to male and female slaves on the farm. Both male and female slaves could work relatively similar tasks on the farm. While women were exempt from hard labor like ploughing which was typically reserved for men, they spent more time gleaning the fields and threshing the harvests[10]. The agronomists also make unspecific remarks of women tending to sheep, goats, and cattle, implying that animal husbandry was also a common task for women in the *rustica* setting. Women also served as sexual partners to important male slaves like the *vilicus* (slave overseer) and the range herdsman as told by Varro[11].

4.2 *Vilicus*

The *vilicus* is a unique role in the *familia rustica* which warrants further discussion. As Cato the Elder writes in *De Agricultura*, the *vilicus* must dole out punishments, distribute food and clothing, and ensure slaves are working productively. Cato also writes that the *vilicus* should be "first out of bed, last to

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[7]Petronius Arbiter, and P. G. Walsh. 1999. The Satyricon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[8]John Bodel, "Slave Labour and Roman Society," in The Cambridge World History of Slavery (Cambridge University Press, n.d.), pp. 14-16.

[9]John Bodel, "Slave Labour and Roman Society," in The Cambridge World History of Slavery (Cambridge University Press, n.d.), pp. 14-16.

[10]Walter Scheidel, "The Roman Slave Supply," in The Cambridge World History of Slavery (Cambridge University Press, n.d.), pp. 24-36.

[11]Varro, Marcus Terentius. Varro on Farming : M. Terenti Varronis Rerum Rusticarum Libri Tres. London :G. Bell and Sons, ltd., 1912.

go to bed"[12], indicating the important and difficult roles the overseers played on the agricultural estates. Here I will note that the position of *vilicus* is only a necessity for very wealthy Romans who own multiple homes and exercise absentee ownership of their property. As a property manager in the master's absence, the master must place much trust in the *vilicus* relative to other slaves on the estate. The role of *vilicus* as overseer and "father of slaves" also bolstered the creation of bonds between enslaved people with the distribution of ramient and food, creating an interdependent community and a case for partial social death.

It is important to first discuss *contubernium*–an informal common law marriage between two slaves–before analyzing social ties. While slave marriages did not have any legal protections, they were an important social structure that formed often with the consent of the master, indicating that looking at the nuances of the *rustica* setting yields a strong argument for partial social death. For example, the status of *vilicus* comes with the privilege of a union with a *vilica* (regarded as the mother of all slaves) that is recognized by the master, giving it stability which no other slave relationship has. There are many reasons why a master would want to sanction such social unions between his slaves, but I believe the most important to be incentivization for the slaves to work harder, demonstrate loyalty to the master, and potentially earn the recognitions associated with the status of *vilicus*. Even here we must note that the *vilicus-vilica* union and any children they may have had were under a constant threat of disruption by the master, who at any point could transfer children to the *familia urbana* or demote the *vilicus* in which case he could lose his *vilica*.

4.3   Range Herdsmen

Range herdsmen, who worked the outer edges of a villa, were also often given wives by the master[13]. Here too we see this relationship between slaves has the stability no other slave relationship has. Much like the vilicus-vilica relationship, there are several reasons for why a master might sanction a herdsman-herdswomen frontier relationship, and I believe the most important was to anchor the herdsman to the land. The wives to the range herdsmen were described as more burly and capable than women working the inner estate, implying that on the frontier, women assisted their husbands in cumbersome tasks like tending herds, carrying firewood, and cooking[14]. They also served to anchor the herdsmen to the land by creating a valuable social structure (potentially including children) worth returning to and providing for. Since herdsmen lived largely outside the direct control of both the master and vilicus, the institution created by a union recognized by the master would ensure that the herdsmen would not run away. Additionally, given the lack of oversight for herdsman, there was

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[12]Cato, Marcus Porcius, 234 B.C.-149 B.C. Cato on Farming: De Agricultura. Blackawton, Devon, Great Britain :Prospect Books, 1998.

[13]Varro, Marcus Terentius. Varro on Farming : M. Terenti Varronis Rerum Rusticarum Libri Tres. London :G. Bell and Sons, ltd., 1912.

[14]Varro, Marcus Terentius. Varro on Farming : M. Terenti Varronis Rerum Rusticarum Libri Tres. London :G. Bell and Sons, ltd., 1912.

a tendency for them to resort to beastiality, which provided no benefit to the master unlike traditional sex which provided him with a slave child.

4.4 Female Slaves in the *Familia Rustica*

The agronomists Varro and Columella seem to be encouraging the formation of social ties with the *vilicus-vilica* and frontier relationships; however, it is important to note that these relationships exist only with the master's sanction and exist solely to serve the master's interests of productivity and loyalty. For the vast majority of agricultural slaves, the agronomists offer no suggestions for legitimate social ties. Columella, however, encourages the formation of illegitimate unions (unsanctioned by the master) for the purpose of childbearing. Columella suggests masters to exempt a woman from hard physical labor if she bears three children and to manumit her if she bears at least four children[15]. This arrangement heavily favors the master as the woman's children would become slaves of the master, but it does open up a possible path to freedom for female slaves–one of the rare few ways an agricultural slave could be freed. I must, however, acknowledge here that this path to freedom was only documented by Columella, so it is unclear whether this practice was commonplace. Even if a woman bears a child, the institution of slave family was nonexistent as the children became the master's property and the husband was rarely in the picture after a child's birth, indicating that most slave unions were temporary and simply a means to an end. Another important caveat to this method of manumission is the short 25 year life expectancy of slave women, meaning that bearing four children in such a short time period is a monumental and often unachievable task. Additionally, in this arrangement, there is no mention of the father earning his freedom or even that all the children a female slave produces should come from a single father. This raises questions about the meaningful social ties a female slave could make with a male slave, who would essentially have produced 4 children destined for slavery and potentially lose his love interest in the process (as she would be manumitted by this time). While in the *familiae* of Columella, slave women had a path to freedom, male slaves had no such definite pathway.

Varro also encourages the formation of social ties, but shows little sympathy for the women involved, unlike Columella who offers a chance of manumission. Varro encourages his slaves to be inspired by Venus (the goddess of love and sex) and produce children who would automatically become Varro's property. Such a squalid condition for both the woman and child is described by Varro himself: "for it often happens . . . that a pregnant woman, when her time has come, steps aside a little way from her work, bears her children there, and brings it back so soon that you would say she had not borne it, but found it."[16], indicating how little sympathy slave women received from Varro and how poorly children

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[15]Columella Lucius Junius Moderatus, De Re Rustica (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, 2006).

[16]Varro, Marcus Terentius. Varro on Farming : M. Terenti Varronis Rerum Rusticarum Libri Tres. London :G. Bell and Sons, ltd., 1912.

might be raised. It is important to note that in his description, Varro makes no reference to the father of a child, implying that social ties might be broken immediately after a child's conception. Why then, in Varro's case, would slaves be inclined to produce children if the children would become slaves and there is no guarantee of freedom for the parents? I believe the answer lies with the desperation of slaves at the time to experience the natural human inclination for socialization; they would accept entering into child-bearing relationships for no reward for the satisfaction of socialization to create a familial unit.

Here I will introduce an important correlation I have noticed: the more labor a position requires from the slave, the more social life that slave has (a more partial social death experience). As discussed earlier, the *vilicus* is a demanding role which requires a slave to oversee the workings of an estate in the master's absence. The *vilicus* also has recognized social ties to the *vilica* which no other slave has. Similarly, the role of the herdsman is physically demanding as he is expected to tend to ranges by himself and sometimes in mountainous terrain. The herdsman is awarded a herdswoman, and this familial structure is something most slaves do not have. I will continue to discuss the relationship between labor and social life later in the paper with the *urbana* setting which introduces interesting nuances to this argument.

4.5 Opportunities for Social Growth

The works of the agronomists show us the fragility of social ties in the rustica setting and the preoccupation of the masters with material gain (e.g. four slave children for the price of one slave woman). Pliny the Younger, a magistrate and lawyer in Ancient Rome, writes in his letter "To Paternus" that he gave the slaves on his estate full power to make valid wills (i.e. slaves could distribute or bequeath property however they liked, something which Roman Law forbade)[17]. For Pliny to go to such an extent to allow slaves to control their inheritance implies that Pliny does recognize the social ties his current slaves may have with different generations. There is, however, one important caveat to this interpretation: any bequeathed property must stay within his familia. In other words, one of Pliny's slaves cannot pass money (peculium) to another master's slaves. By doing this, Pliny has established himself firmly as the head of the household and still maintains control over the social ties formed between slaves.

I speculate several reasons as to why Pliny affords his slaves this opportunity in the first place, and I believe the answer lies with the changing nature of master-slave relations at the time. As discussed earlier, the Spartacus Revolt and Sicilian Slave Revolts led many masters to fear a coordinated uprising by their slaves. There were two possible responses to this development: incentivization or brutality (tantamount to the carrot and the stick). Masters like Pliny and Seneca the Younger chose to appease their slaves by appearing to compromise for the benefit of their slaves. Other masters favored extreme brutality to squash any united spirit their slaves may have had. As Pliny writes in

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[17]Rex Winsbury, "'To Paternus,'" in Pliny the Younger a Life in Roman Letters (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

"To Acilius", Larcius Macedo (of Praetorian rank) was considered a very cruel master despite his own father being a freedman, and he meets his tragic death as his slaves rise up and beat him to death[18], providing insight into why masters grew wary of the power of their slaves.

Here, I believe it worthwhile to further discuss Pliny's implication that "new money" does not place one on the same moral standing as an elite Roman citizen without aspects of slavery in their lineage (equivalent to the contemporary term "old money"). In the *Satyricon*, the wealthy Trimalchio is still seen as inferior (despite his freed status) because of elite resentment to wealthy freedmen. Trimalchio lavish displays of wealth are trying to mask his servile origins and show to society he is worthy of "old money" recognition. For example, the narrator Encolpius finds a painting of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, leading Trimalchio into Rome as a freedman, indicating how Trimalchio feels the need to legitimize his status through divine interventions. Although Trimalchio is a fictional character, his desire to hide his lineage is indicative of an elite citizen stereotype of wealthy freedmen: no matter how wealthy one got, any time in slavery made them worthy of contempt. This stereotype is also documented by Pliny the Younger. Pliny is critical of Larcius Macedo's methods as discussed earlier due to the latter's status as the son of a freedman[19]. No amount of wealth could hide Macedo's lineage, and it is implied that Macedo is extremely cruel to his slaves to mask his servile origins much like Trimalchio. I believe that slave-owning freedmen in particular employ excessive brutality against their workforce to reinforce the rhetoric of the sanctity of a Roman citizen's body; such masters can reinforce their status by damaging their slaves' bodies with no bodily repercussions of their own. These stereotypes, originating from the Roman elite, are very powerful in understanding the social death of slaves: even if a slave were to earn his or her freedom, they would never truly be able to assimilate into Roman society at large. Such implications also reject the view of slavery as a liminal institution and support Patterson's conception of a perpetual institution.

4.6   Closing Remarks on the *Rustica*

The final but most distributing example I will present to support the difficulty of life in the *familia rustica* and the fragility of social ties is the case of Passia, a six year old slave girl. In 139 CE in the mining area of Alburnus Maior in Thrace, a young foundling named Passia (she was only called Passia at the time of sale but she really did not have a permanent name) was sold to Maximus, son of Bato. The language used in the contract of sale is strictly formulaic, implying that she was viewed strictly as property with no emotions. If Passia was lucky, she would be fed and clothed by Maximus and possibly even enter an informal *contubernium* to add slaves to her master's property. Most probable

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[18]Rex Winsbury, "'To Acilius,'" in Pliny the Younger a Life in Roman Letters (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[19]Rex Winsbury, "'To Paternus,'" in Pliny the Younger a Life in Roman Letters (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

in the *rustica* setting, however, was Passia being overworked to the brink of death. The appalling story of Passia offers several insights into the intrusive nature of social death. Passia and others like her have been stripped of all identity evident with the lack of a permanent name. Constant name and *familia* changes root out any possibility of familial social ties from forming, pointing to a near complete social death experience for children. Slave children were coveted by masters as they could begin work at a young age as Varro writes that the *vilicus* should be a rural slave exposed to hard labor since early childhood[20]. A young girl like Passia is especially desired by the master to encourage her to produce as many children as possible who would inherently become slaves to the master[21]. More broadly, as Roman foreign conquest declined so did the foreign slave supply which prompted masters to increasingly rely on natural reproduction to maintain their workforce[22].

5 The *Familia Urbana*

5.1 Overview

Now, I will transition to discussing the social death experience for male and female slaves in the *familia urbana*. As discussed previously, the *familia urbana* includes all members of the *familia* who live in the city, and compared to the work in the *rustica* setting, tasks assigned to slaves in the *urbana* were less physically demanding. Male slaves typically could hold positions of greater prestige and influence such as financial agents and administrators (especially in the *familia Caesaris* - imperial household). Records from the Statilii Columbarium, which is probably representative of most elite households, show a wide range of tasks completed by *urbana* slaves including teacher, gardener, and financial agent. It is reasonable to assume that even within the *urbana*, not all slaves were subject to the same social lives which depended on their occupied strata. Such prestige and proximity to the master often gave these male slaves a higher chance of manumission either by the desire of the master or by purchasing their freedom. Urban female slaves were also better off than their rural counterparts as many served as playmates to their master's children and were afforded relative luxuries due to proximity with the master. However, there are several important caveats that must be discussed detracting from the utopian view of *urbana* life. Due to proximity with the master, there existed heightened dangers of sexual exploitation of slaves by masters in the *urbana*. Prostitution was also a common undertaking for female slaves but more predominantly for poor free women who could demeaningly serve as courteseans (prostitutes for

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[20] Varro, Marcus Terentius. Varro on Farming : M. Terenti Varronis Rerum Rusticarum Libri Tres. London :G. Bell and Sons, ltd., 1912.

[21] Hanne Sigismund-Nielsen, "Slave and Lower-Class Roman Children," Oxford Handbooks Online, November 2013, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199781546.013.014.

[22] Walter Scheidel, "The Roman Slave Supply," in The Cambridge World History of Slavery (Cambridge University Press, n.d.), pp. 24-36.

the wealthy)[23].

5.2   The *Vernae*

A particularly interesting feature of the *familia urbana* is the care masters showed for the *vernae* (slave children born in a master's house and thus becoming the property of the master). While familial separation and degradation was common in the *rustica* setting as masters like Columella and Varro sent children like Passia to work at a young age, master's in the *urbana* setting treated slave children more fondly. The *vernae* were generally treated better than other slaves in house and sometimes even took the place of a master's biological child if he were unable to have one. To find evidence of this, we will now turn to funerary commemorations and epitaphs. The commemorations of *vernae* often start with "My Dearest One"[24], indicating the *vernae*'s elevated status and recognition in the *familia* relative to other slaves. Such a relationship poses interesting implications for the discussion of social death as slave children are forming meaningful relationships with their master, suggesting that children in the *urbana* may have a much more partial social death experience than children in the *rustica* who might be enslaved and put to work shortly after birth.

This begs the question, why did masters hold slave children in the *urbana* in such high regard compared to their rural counterparts? Masters employed two methods for controlling and motivating slave labor: incentivization and brutality ("carrot and the stick"). Brutality was much more common in the *rustica* while evidently with the *vernae*, incentivization was preferred in the *urbana* most likely due to the personal significance of the roles in this setting. Masters might prefer incentivization to groom children to be loyal financial agents and administrators and motivate the parents (who might themselves hold important roles) of the *vernae* to view the master in a positive lens.

The *vernae* were no doubt favored by the master and higher in the social hierarchy than even freedmen. Here, I will introduce the term *delicia* which generally describes any slave favored by the master. In the *Satyricon*, Trimalchio is described as the favorite son of his former master (equivalent to the *vernae* of the household), and such favor allowed him to grow fabulously wealthy as a treasurer[25]. A similar sentiment is echoed in Pliny the Younger's letter "To Paulinus" in which Pliny describes his favorite freedman and *delicia* Zosimus. Pliny describes Zosimus as honest, devoted to duties, and demonstrating skill in playing comedy and reading history. Such tasks indicate that Zosimus was a complete luxury good which Pliny might have used as a material display of his wealth. Pliny is genuinely concerned for Zosimus' health (he most likely has tuberculosis), underscoring the improved life and social ties *delicia* and *vernae*

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[23]Sarah B. Pomeroy, in Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), pp. 45-54.

[24]Hanne Sigismund-Nielsen, "Slave and Lower-Class Roman Children," Oxford Handbooks Online, November 2013, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199781546.013.014.

[25]Petronius Arbiter, and P. G. Walsh. 1999. The Satyricon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

had in the *urbana* compared to their counterparts in the *rustica*[26]. Clearly, slave children in the *urbana* setting experienced a form of partial social death; however, I must add here that the higher level positions (agents and administrators) were often reserved for male slaves, so while the lives of female slaves may have been better than if on an estate, they had little opportunities for social mobility.

5.3 Laws Concerning Slavery in Ancient Rome

Slavery in the Roman world was certainly more complicated than the slave-free dichotomy presented by many texts. Slaves in the *Familia Caesaris* find themselves in between the slave and free extremes of the spectrum. While personal slaves of slaves are referred to as *vicarii* outside of the *Familia Caesaris*, the term is reserved for slaves acting as deputies to administrative officers within the *Familia*. If we entertain the modern conceptions of slavery holding the most degrading position in society, then what would that mean for the *vicarii* who were slaves of slaves? Indeed, the existence of such groups in between (or outside of) the slave-free dichotomy has interesting implications for social death. The *vicarii* and their owner create a micro slave community with the owner holding greater prestige and status despite still having an owner himself. It is unclear whether estate masters had direct control over the *vicarii* of a slave, but the bonds formed in the micro slave community were no doubt meaningful as some *vicarii* were even part of a slave's funerary commemoration[27]. The fact that in the *urbana* setting, slaves may own their own slaves illustrates the opportunities for growth and for the formation of social ties while enslaved.

Here, I will discuss the legal situation of slaves in both the *familia rustica* and *familia urbana* with laws passed by the Roman state. No matter which sphere they worked in, slaves could not testify as witnesses in court nor inform on their masters in most cases, reinforcing their designation as "non-peoples". Female slaves, however, could in some cases appeal prostitution in court, and if victorious, the owner lost his claim over her (although this law is relatively complicated, I have presented the basic idea). Even after manumission, certain slaves were never allowed to be citizens under the law and remained socially dead; this group included slaves who had been put in bonds by their master as punishment, branded, or put into gladiator school[28]. These slave groups further reject the notion of slavery as a liminal institution as swaths of the slave population (beyond just the *rustica* slaves) have little chance of escaping slavery and advancing in society as a citizen. Legal limitations on manumissions were established under Augustus at the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire, at a time when the number of manumissions was so large that they

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[26]Rex Winsbury, "'To Paulinus,'" in Pliny the Younger a Life in Roman Letters (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[27]Symbols of Gender and Status Hierarchies in the Roman Household Women and Slaves in Greco Roman Culture Saller, R. P., Joshel, S. R., Murnaghan, S. Routledge.1998: 85–91

[28]Keith Bradley and Paul Cartledge, The Cambridge World History of Slavery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

were perceived as a threat to the Roman social order. The *Lex Fufia Caninia* (passed 2 BC) restricted the number of slaves who could be freed by will (while this number varied by estate size, in no case could a master legally manumit all his slaves), further challenging the notion of slavery as a liminal institution in favor of a perpetual one. The *Lex Aelia Sentia* (passed 4 AD) placed further limitations on manumission by establishing that masters had to be at least 20 years old and a slave at least 30 (which is after females' prime child bearing years) to be legally manumitted[29]. In the Roman legal system, little regard was given to the well-being of slaves in both the *urbana* and *rustica* as they were seen largely as threats to the Roman social fabric. While many slaves were kept in near perpetual slavery, the social ties they formed were not recognized by the law.

I believe the Roman legal system also propagated the social death experience for women through the institution of marriage. Marriages of slaves (and even freedmen) to members of the senatorial class were illegal, providing little hope for significant social mobility through marriage. In 52 AD, the Roman Senate passed a law which established that free women who married male slaves without his master's consent would be reduced to slave status. Even if the master consents to his marriage, she would be reduced to freedwoman status. In both situations, the husband's master gets ownership of any children produced in the relationship, underscoring the extent of social death for women, free or slave, marrying into slavery[30]. Additionally, free men had little incentive to marry female slaves within any household as females had little influence in the *familia* and did not hold administrative positions. As such, the slave population had little to no social ties with free populations, could only form informal endogamous relationships, and thus remained socially dead.

5.4   Closing Remarks on the *Urbana*

Examining both the familia rustica and familia urbana, there is evidence that slaves, contrary to popular belief, did not actually undergo total or even partial social death. I will further elaborate on this potentially controversial claim after the following discussion on celebrations in the familia, specifically focusing on the Compitalia and Saturnalia. Analyzing the roles slaves played in these celebrations is critical to understand their social death experiences.

6   Household Festivals and Social Death

6.1   The Compitalia

The importance of slaves to the Roman family was expressed during the Compitalia, celebrated each year in December or January. At the main crossroads of

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[29]Joshel, Sandra R. Slavery in the Roman World. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

[30]Keith Bradley and Paul Cartledge, The Cambridge World History of Slavery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

each urban neighborhood in Rome, families decorated shrines of the household gods Lares Augusti with a ball for every slave and a puppet for every freeborn member of the *familia*[31]. The Compitalia is particularly interesting to study for the recognition slaves received during the festivities. While they were still represented as visibly distinct compared to freeborns, slaves were deemed important enough by the master to be included in the *familia*'s rites. A similar parallel can be drawn in the *rustica* setting where slaves had their wine rations increased during the festival[32]. The participation of slaves in religious rites not only highlights their importance to the family but also underscores how slaves as a social unit are distinct from tools and animals who are not involved in this ceremony.

6.2   The Saturnalia

The Saturnalia, normally celebrated in December, served a crucial tool to diffuse tensions between master and slave while reinforcing normative values in slaves, especially the young. The festival was characterized by a role reversal between slaves and masters, which aligned with the desires of Seneca the Younger to treat slaves more humanely out of fear of revolt. The dinner feast was a central component of the festival. Slaves dined first, were entertained by children of the house, and reclined with the master. After the feast, slaves enjoyed excessive drinking, gambling, and literary discussions. It is interesting to note that the presence of wives and daughters at the feast was not customary, but party favors of female clothing indicate women participated in Saturnalia festivities in at least a limited capacity. The practice of limited female participation can be considered training to Roman slaves who would be expected to perform similar exclusion during dinners as citizens in the future. While on the surface the Saturnalia may look like a temporary toppling of the social hierarchy in the *familia*, quite the opposite was actually true. Women and children participated in limited capacities and reports from urban households indicate that slaves were still responsible for their daily tasks during the festival. Former slave Epictetus writes about the artificiality of the holiday as slaves are forced to celebrate and their apparent privileges during the festivities remind slaves of all they are regularly denied. I observe that an individual's level of participation in the Saturnalia is correlated with their status in the household. Freeborn men, for example, participated fully in revels, feasts, and the gift exchange while freeborn women and children participated to a lesser extent. Male slaves were almost equivalent to freeborn men during the festivities while female and child slaves were excluded from most revels[33].

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[31]Symbols of Gender and Status Hierarchies in the Roman Household Women and Slaves in Greco Roman Culture Saller, R. P., Joshel, S. R., Murnaghan, S. Routledge.1998: 85–91

[32]Keith Bradley and Paul Cartledge, The Cambridge World History of Slavery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[33]Dolansky, Fanny. Ritual, Gender, and Status in the Roman Family. Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

7 Discussion

The participation of slaves in religious rites is evident beyond literary sources with physical commemorations and paintings. In a House of Pompeii commemoration[34], slaves can be seen participating alongside the family in religious rites which are arguably the most important times for the *familia*. The presence of slaves in such a setting has several interesting implications. First, a master or related wealthy patron had to commission the painting, meaning the inclusion of slaves is purposeful. Second, the ritual is not complete unless the entire family (including slaves) is present, reinforcing past accounts from the Compitalia. Finally, even if slaves were forced to participate in these rituals, they might have found personal meaning in such coercion as they were recognized as part of the family, not just the property of the master. If slaves found meaning (e.g. a sense of belonging, purpose, etc.) in practices that would constitute social death, they may not be undergoing a total social death experience.

Here I will take the time to explicitly answer the questions presented in the onset of the paper. Contrary to popular belief and the works of Orlando Patterson, I believe that social ties between slaves were significant enough to constitute a partial social death experience in both the *urbana* and *rustica* settings. Accepting the totality of social death is a problematic stance given the documented social lives in both settings; it would be an injustice to place all slaves under the blanket statement of total social death. In the *rustica*, the *vilicus-vilica* relationship helped create a slave community and the frontier relationships were largely independent of estate affairs. Additionally, social units were constantly created with the temporary marital unions of slaves to produce children. While in all these cases the master holds the authority to sever ties, the meaning slaves derived from engaging with these social units inherently detracts from a total social death experience. In the *familia urbana*, the argument for partial social death is much clearer. Male slaves could wield enormous influence in households acting as administrators and financial agents, allowing many to own *vicarii* (slaves of the slaves). The *vernae*, despite having slave lineage, were often raised by the master like a biological child while preserving the social unit that produced the *vernae*. Clearly in the *urbana*, the slave-free dichotomy is blurred as the social units formed were long lasting. In both the *urbana* and *rustica* settings, slaves derived meaning and value from the social units they formed, and their social death experience was a partial one.

As for the question, how did the social death experience for male slaves differ from that of female slaves? I believe women and daughters in slavery had a much more severe social death experience than their male counterparts. Women were regularly excluded from festivities and religious rites like the Saturnalia while being constantly objectified by their masters. Passia, for example, was never given a permanent name and was sold several times before her child bearing years. Harsh Augustinian marriage reform prevented female slaves from advancing in society, and the few masters like Columella who did offer a path

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[34]Edmondson, Jonathan. Slavery and the Roman Family. The Cambridge World History of Slavery, 2005

for female slave manumission created unrealistic conditions like having to bear four children. Additionally, very few female slaves if any were allowed to hold influential positions in the *familia* like administrators and financial agents which limited their prospects of social advancement and manumission.

8   Conclusion

Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery in 1982 was truly groundbreaking with a novel sociological view of slavery rather than a legal one. Patterson is correct in refuting the slave-free dichotomy in the ancient world as Roman society especially was less stratified than made out to be. Understanding the Roman model of slavery can provide information to better understand slavery in the ancient world from a political, economic, and social viewpoint. The ideas raised in this paper questioning the totality of social death and exploring the varied lives of males and females in slavery can be applied to future directions of inquiry in understanding the lives of slave throughout history.

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