

## REVIEW

### SLAVERY, FREEDOM AND THE HISTORIANS

Mélina Tamiolaki, *Liberté et esclavage chez les historiens grecs classiques*. Préface de Kurt Raaflaub. Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2010. Pp. 503. Paper, €28. ISBN 978-2-84050-688-1.

**L***iberté et esclavage chez les historiens grecs classiques* by Mélina Tamiolaki, stemming from her doctoral thesis at Paris–Sorbonne University (2007), is an excellent and rightly acclaimed study, a book that was indeed needed in the fields of both ancient historiography and history of ideas, but may also have some bearing on the history of the social *imaginaire* of the classical period. The sheer comprehensiveness of this book marks an important watershed in classical scholarship as it covers all three great historians of classical Greece who, as far as fundamental historical questions are concerned, since the beginning of the nineteenth century have often been studied separately, and only in recent decades have come to be analysed in a ‘binary’ manner (Herodotus and Thucydides, etc.).

Actually, it is Xenophon who occupies the centre of Tamiolaki’s intellectual project incarnated in this book. Instead of focusing on his *Hellenika*, as it might seem natural when studying him alongside Herodotus and Thucydides, the author undertook a comprehensive study of Xenophon’s oeuvre, analysing all his works potentially pertinent to her subject. This very decision has determined the book’s ultimate value. As it should be expected given the scope of this book, all this comes at a price, but in my opinion the price was worth paying. In what follows, after briefly summarising the book, let me focus on one debatable aspect of this extremely rich study. As will be clear to any of Tamiolaki’s readers, my critical remarks below are by no means intended as belittling its importance.

The book falls into three part of unequal length. The first (‘Freedom and slavery between cities and peoples’, pp. 31–201) focuses on external relations between political entities, analysing Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon one after another. This part, although in principle following for each author a well-established questionnaire of scholarly problems, is particularly rich, discussing among other things such issues as the notions of resistance and submission as well as that of the liberty of Greece in Herodotus and Thu-

cydides, or freedom and *autonomia* in Thucydides and Xenophon.<sup>1</sup> Part Two ('Liberty and slavery within cities and peoples', pp. 205–80), again divided in three chapters devoted to each historian under scrutiny, revolves around the set of questions fundamental to the very idea of this book (see more below) and touches upon many a classical question of previous scholarship as it analyses and confronts, for each historian, the ideas of collective and individual freedom.<sup>2</sup> The third part ('Liberty and slavery outside the city', pp. 283–394), devoted to Xenophon alone, proves particularly innovative and rewarding for the reader. The notions of liberty and slavery converge in Xenophon's ideal of 'voluntary submission' to a charismatic leader (or leaders of various kinds: in an empire, an army, or an *oikos*, etc.) recognisable in the *Education of Cyrus*, in the *Anabasis*, and in the *Oeconomicus* as well, all brilliantly analysed by the author, who emphasises the ambiguities and 'problematisations' of this ideal in Xenophon's thought. This part, and the entire book, is crowned by the chapter devoted to Socrates, Xenophon's (unambiguously) ideal leader and the wise champion of inner liberty. Tamiolaki aptly observes a strong link between, on the one hand, Xenophon's notions of political liberty and slavery and, on the other hand, his philosophical ideal. Briefly put, the consummate Socratic freedom was conceived in view of the realisation of the impossibility of a true political liberty. In this manner, Xenophon's Socratic ideal appears as the climax of a certain process to which all three classical historians testify, namely of the transition from the ideal of political liberty conceived in terms of an *ἀρχή*, or 'domination', to the ideal of *ἀρχή* conceived as an element of individual freedom.

Tamiolaki's argument is completed by two appendices on some particularly difficult passages in Thucydides and Xenophon regarding helots, and

<sup>1</sup> For all these issues, one should of course assume a fair dose of the historians' involvement with their contemporary political debates, but I have the impression that the author slightly underestimates Herodotus' and Thucydides' intended impartiality in their presentation of such notions as those of the liberty of the Greeks or of the *autonomia* of individual Greek polities. In this respect, Tamiolaki's remarks regarding Xenophon (e.g. with his meaningful failure to mention the foundation of the Second Athenian Sea-League) are much more convincing.

<sup>2</sup> Let me comment here on just one case of Tamiolaki's important detailed analyses in this part of the book. In her ingenious treatment of Pericles's *epitaphios logos* in Thucydides (pp. 248–55), Tamiolaki confronts Thucydides' notion of democratic liberty with the well-known passage in Aristotle's *Politics* (1317a40–b14), where the idea of 'ruling and being ruled in turn' as one element of democratic liberty famously comes to the fore. Although in general terms persuasive, this analysis omits, as far as I can see, one important point of Thucydides' own characterisation, namely a certain specialisation of political roles between the élites and the 'commoners' within the Athenian democracy (2.40.2, in a very ambiguous passage, though), which might have bearing on our perception of Thucydides' ideas of democratic liberty.

by a highly useful systematic table that gathers, for all three historians, the terminology of freedom and slavery, in four sections, for *eleutheria*, *autonomia*, *hegemonia*, and *douleia*.

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Tamiolaki understandably begins her book with a reference to a famous remark of Moses Finley: ‘One aspect of Greek history is the advance, hand in hand, of freedom *and* slavery’.<sup>3</sup> True, many political and moral thinkers have long felt uncomfortable facing the disquieting contrast between one of the greatest achievements of the Greek thought, democracy (or, more generally, the Greek *polis* with its broadly egalitarian ideology), and the general acceptance of slavery among the Greeks. Nonetheless, it was Finley who saw the two phenomena not only as interrelated, but also as forming together an important mechanism of Greek history. In *The Black Hunter (Le chasseur noir: formes de pensée et formes de société dans le monde grec* (new ed. 1991), Pierre Vidal-Naquet was even more specific as he observed that the political category of citizenship, one of the major contributions of the Greeks to the history of humankind, had been made possible by the existence of the category of ‘absolute stranger’, or of the radical ‘anti-citizen’ as he calls him, the slave. Beginning with Homer, it was a fundamental matrix of the intellectual, spiritual, and social experience of the Greeks.

Whereas the interdependence of the two categories and two social statuses is an obvious fact in present-day scholarship, both as far as social realities and social ‘ideologies’ are concerned, important questions remain. In our present context, I believe they can be summarised, perhaps somewhat coarsely, in the following manner: was slavery just a social (juridical, etc.) given, a reality to be taken for granted or, sometimes and in very particular circumstances, confronted when dealing with the idea (and the socio-political reality) of freedom? Or was it an important intellectual (moral, political, etc.) problem for, although often mystified or suppressed by, those reflecting on freedom? Thus far, the former stance seems to have dominated the field as it is well evidenced by two lines of modern scholarship evolving separately from each other. Historians of ancient Greek slavery rarely venture into the realm of the reflection on freedom, whereas the students of ancient ideas of (political, intellectual etc.) freedom rarely touch upon the sensitive issue of slavery. Tamiolaki’s book is a penetrating and very original attempt at bridging this gap that amounts to one of the ‘great divides’ in classical scholarship. Incidentally, as this divide seems at least partly due to the

<sup>3</sup> Appearing for the first time in his seminal paper ‘Was Greek Civilization Based on Slave Labour?’, in *Historia* 8 (1959) 145–64 at 164.

heritage of the ideological clashes of the Cold-War era between liberal and Marxist, and at times more specifically Soviet-bloc scholarship, the reader may be mildly struck by the fact that the book lacks an introductory chapter on the history of scholarship on its subject matter(s), an intriguing theme in itself. Instead, Tamiolaki attacks right away the very heart of the problem, asking more specific questions (p. 19 and *passim*): what was the relationship between, on the one hand, the liberty and slavery of an individual and, on the other, collective liberty and slavery? If there was a development in the Greek perceptions of liberty, was this evolution influenced by the realities of slavery or rather by considerations of a purely political nature?

Tamiolaki's choice of subject matter is very rewarding. The three great historians of the classical era cover a long historical period in a (broadly speaking) continuous narrative and all three are comparable (or, perhaps better, compatible), as representing the line of development of a single intellectual tradition of early Greek historiography (Xenophon being of course more complex than that, on which see briefly above). Furthermore, as they all worked in a close intertextual link with their respective predecessor(s), what they provide for us today is not only a continuous historical narrative, but even more importantly a continuous debate on some crucial issues of classical Greek history, including those of liberty and slavery, or, better perhaps, political and individual dependence. In a word, both in objective and in subjective terms, one obtains here a nicely coherent and very rich set of data to be analysed, a set for which a certain intellectual development may safely be posited and subsequently checked against the background of the historical developments of the classical period. Thus, two more specific problems can be tackled in the three authors under scrutiny (p. 21). First, does the concept of freedom influence the manner our historians deal with slavery? Next, is their reflection on the matter homogeneous, or could one perhaps detect here an evolution when reading one author after another?

When asking her initial questions regarding the three historians, Tamiolaki seems already set in her decision to draw ultimate consequences from Finley's aforementioned statement—there must have been strong and intellectually fruitful links between the ideas of liberty and that of slavery in Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon. The book will be devoted to uncovering what exactly these links might have been. True, this approach saves us from an important pitfall of earlier scholarship on Herodotus and Thucydides (and to some extent on Xenophon as well). As Kostas Vlassopoulos observes in his review of Tamiolaki's work, '[i]nstead of arbitrarily distinguishing between "real" slaves and slavery and its "metaphorical" uses in politics and ethics, this book rightly invites us to explore freedom and slavery as interdependent aspects of wider Greek discourses over the exercise of power between communities, within

communities, over subordinates or over bodies and desires'.<sup>4</sup> However, from this perspective, it comes as a surprise that, as Tamiolaki herself shows very well, slavery as such features rather inconspicuously in both Herodotus and Thucydides, whereas for Xenophon it only comes to the fore in his historical narrative in rather exceptional circumstances (pp. 264–80).<sup>5</sup> All this may partly be due to the specific thematic focus of our historians and to the particular historical circumstances they dealt with, but in general one may have the impression that, throughout this important book, a more specific distinction between the notions of, say, slavery, dependence, submission, etc. might be in order.<sup>6</sup>

In a strikingly anti-climactic final conclusion to her book (pp. 403–4), Tamiolaki herself seems to downplay the relevance of her original set of questions, which ultimately stemmed from Finley's adage quoted above. At least she does this—and rightly so—for Herodotus and Thucydides. Her true discovery, and the exceptional value of the book, consists in establishing the originality and strong unity of Xenophon's thought with reference to the ideas of freedom and slavery (see above).<sup>7</sup>

In sum, this is a magisterial study, full of important insights and fresh readings of all three historians, if slightly less persuasive for some general historical questions it promises to answer. As far as Tamiolaki's sweeping and deepened analysis of Xenophon's thought is concerned, I dare say this book is a must-read for any student of this author and of classical Greek historiography at large. One can only hope for a future English translation to make Tamiolaki's elegant French argument widely accessible to the English-speaking world as well. The sooner the better.

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<sup>4</sup> *CR* 62 (2012) 557.

<sup>5</sup> Such as the participation of slaves in the battle of Arginusae, the privileges of slaves involved in the restoration of democracy in Athens, Cynadon's conspiracy in Sparta, etc.

<sup>6</sup> To give just one example, this would be particularly helpful in the author's treatment of the story of Gyges in Herodotus (pp. 84–5).

<sup>7</sup> As far as Xenophon is concerned, the reader would perhaps expect to find here a more detailed analysis of the historical and, even more importantly, broader cultural background of his unusual intellectual enterprise, although this would admittedly go beyond the intended scope of Tamiolaki's book. Nevertheless, in this manner the reader would perhaps be better prepared to grasp the roots of Xenophon's originality—going beyond the individual intellectual disposition of this writer and beyond the sheer evolution, as postulated by Tamiolaki, of Greek thought regarding the issues of liberty and slavery between the fifth and the fourth century BCE.