

# Slavery in Ancient Greece

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**Abstract:** The prevalence of slavery in early societies can be attributed to the need for free labor in the fields and residences of the affluent. Greece harbors a plethora of globally renowned ancient settlements. The expansion and prosperity of the city's economy can be attributed to the rise in production and demand for these commodities. The gradual decline of the institution of slavery occurred during the Hellenistic and Byzantine periods, following the classical period. The provision of unpaid labor by enslaved individuals in Greece indeed contributed to the advancement and expansion of the urban center. The generation of substantial wealth through slavery facilitated the aforementioned development, which gradually declined as a result of the advocacy for equitable human rights irrespective of financial status. The aim of this paper is to examine the emergence and eventual decline of slavery in ancient Greece with the major focus being directed towards the utilization of slaves by the Greek populace and the progression of the slavery institution throughout various historical eras.

**Keywords:** Slavery; Greece; Slaves; Periods; Slave trade

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Slavery was common in most early societies because wealthy people needed free labor for their farms and households. Greece is one of the most popular ancient cities. These commodities saw the city's economy grow by increasing the production and sale of goods. However, the institution of slavery slowly decreased as the periods changed from classical to Hellenistic and Byzantine periods. Indeed, the free labor provided by slaves in Greece helped the city develop and grow because of the immense wealth created by slavery, which slowly faded after people started advocating for equal human rights regardless of social class. This paper discusses how slavery started in Greece and how it faded, highlighting how the Greek people used slaves and how the institution of slavery changed through different periods.

Greece is one of the most popular ancient cities. Slavery was one of the many reasons that led to the growth and development of the city. The Greek people have been using slaves for more than 2500 years. This is because slavery began in 750 BC (Harrison, 2019). Spartan and Athens were the two city-states that topped the slave trade in Greece. Slavery in Greece was in different periods, such as; the classical, Hellenistic, and Byzantine periods before being abolished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after they gained independence from the ottoman empire (Wrenhaven, 2012).

Historians believe that slavery in Greece started following the wars experienced during the ancient times in the Homer era. From 750 to 550 BC, the Greek and Carthaginian colonists brought the West the habit of using slaves and the methods of acquiring slaves in their respective hometowns, which gradually spread (Williams, 2020). During this time, the Greek state that defeated another state took the defeated warriors as their slaves. Some would sell the slaves, while others kept them to provide free labor (Harrison, 2019). Greek civilization was one of the reasons that fueled slavery in Greece. Slavery was common in Greece because of some of the ideas of scholars such as Aristotle. According to some of his philosophies, some individuals were "slaves by nature," and because of this, there was no problem having slaves. In addition, the Greek people believed that some people were inferior, and having them as slaves followed their destiny (Harrison, 2019). This is another reason why the slaves were treated harshly and inhumanely by their masters. The Greeks held that the slaves had no rights and were subject to harsh treatment. However, some masters were very good and treated their slaves with respect.

Slavery changed in Greece during different periods. During the classical period, slavery was becoming popular, and the increase in demand led to the blooming of the business. During this period, slaves were very important; owning

slaves was also marked as wealth (Forsdyke, 2021). The slaves were mainly used for hard labor during this period. After this followed the Hellenistic period, and although slavery was still important, it was slowly declining because people had found other means of making a living which affected slavery (Lewis, 2019). The Byzantine period saw the official decline of slavery with the advocacy to end the institution because it was against human rights. The Ottoman period was the last which marked the abolishment of slavery. This was after Greece attained its independence from the Ottoman empire (Klein, 2020).

The slaves of Sparta, namely the black slaves, belonged to the state slaves. They worked on farms and for the army. The Greeks divided slaves into three types: public slaves, temple slaves, and private slaves. Sources of war and accidental looting were important sources of slaves, but young men were usually redeemed when captured (Rich & Shipley, 2020). The sources of slaves are family slaves, debt slaves, selling themselves as slaves, and so on. Slaves were sold to different people and for different purposes in ancient Greece. People acquired slaves to work on construction sites, in mines, in agriculture, and domestic work. Slaves were owned by households, individuals, and the state. Sparta was well-known for agriculture. Because of this, most of the slaves that wealthy people bought from Sparta worked on farms (Porter, 2019). Some of the wealthy Greeks acquired slaves to show their wealth. They used the slaves as personal attendants and domestic servants. However, many slaves were used to doing labor work. Athens is one of the cities that recorded many slaves because it was the most prominent city-state in ancient Greece (Wrenhaven, 2012). Slaves in Athens were used for both skilled labor and household work. Many slaves under the state worked in the minefields under very harsh conditions (Porter, 2019). As the slave trade in Greece declined in the Hellenistic and Byzantine periods, most slaves were used for domestic labor.

Slavery in Greece can be divided into different groups/stages; the start and expansion, its decline during the Hellenistic period, limited use of the commodity during the Byzantine period, and the collapse of slavery in modern times (Forsdyke, 2021). Slavery in Greece started due to warfare, which was very common in ancient Greece. This is after the ones who emerged to be victorious took the losers as prisoners of war and enslaved them. The slave trade started to expand following the increased demand from wealthy people. The Hellenistic period marked the decline of slavery in Greece because people started viewing having slaves as an expense/luxury and not a necessity (Lewis, 2019). This is because, during this period, there were more opportunities for free labor. The decreased use of slavery was also witnessed during the Byzantine period because people only used slaves for domestic purposes. The decrease in slavery in the two periods finally saw the institution's collapse during the Ottoman period. It was during this period that slavery was officially abolished in Greece in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Ottomans. Although slavery was abolished, people still used forced labor on non-Muslims. Slavery was never practiced in Greece after they attained their independence from the Ottomans. Slavery is an illegal thing in Greece.

The concept of thresholds of increasing complexity argues that societies experience significant changes that mark new levels of complexity and organization when they become more complex or expand. Slavery is one of the thresholds evident in Greece (Harrison, 2019). Slavery was a crucial part of the economic and social system of many early societies, such as Greece. Many early societies became more productive because of slavery which helped them acquire immense wealth. Although slavery was a common thing rapidly growing in early Greece, things later changed as the societies changed (Klein, 2020). Slavery started being problematic in ancient Greece because of the emerging moral and ethical frameworks. Such frameworks advocated for the right of every human and strongly opposed slavery because it violated human rights. As these ideas slowly grew in the people of ancient Greece, they facilitated the abolishment of slavery (Williams, 2020). Slavery fits within the concept of thresholds of increasing complexity because although it was a crucial part of the development of ancient Greece, it slowly started becoming a problem as society became complex, leading to its abolishment.

## **Conclusion**

Slavery played an important part in ancient Greece because the immense wealth from the slave trade was used for the development and growth of the city. In addition, slavery helped the people understand the right of people because, after more than 2000 years of slavery, some of the complexity of the society led to the abolishment of the practice citing that slavery did not respect human rights. Although slavery was becoming less popular and practiced throughout the different periods' independence from the Ottoman Empire was the main reason for the abolishment of slavery in Greece. Through slavery, students and people get a better understanding of ancient Greece, which includes how the slaves were acquired, the work they did, and how the institution slowly declined till it was abolished.

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