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Ricardo Martínez Lacy (ed.), *Hermenéutica de la esclavitud: actas del XXXVII coloquio del GIREA. Institut des Sciences et Techniques de l'Antiquité. Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2018. Pp. 203. ISBN 9782848676364. €35,00 (pb).*

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[Publisher's Preview](#)

[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

The GIREA (Groupe International de Recherche sur l'Esclavage dans l'Antiquité) is one of the leading international research groups dedicated to the study of ancient slavery and, more broadly, to the analysis of forms of dependence in the ancient world.¹ The results of its conferences have been published for almost four decades, and the present volume (concerning the XXXVII Colloquium, held in Mexico City, in 2014) continues comes this publishing effort, now taking as subject the hermeneutics of

slavery.

The thirteen contributions, in Spanish, French and Italian, cover not only slavery in the ancient world, but also in the modern world. There is no general introduction and not all of the essays specify what is meant by a hermeneutics of slavery, but a tentative approach is noticeable, with different nuances, in several of them.

Closest to the theme of the volume is the first, written by Domingo Plácido, on the historical transformations and the semantic interpretation of the term δουλεία. The author briefly analyzes how this term was employed by Greek authors, from Homer to the 4th century BC. He demonstrates that δουλεία and the terms related to it did not apply only to slavery proper, but have been applied to other forms of subordination as well as being a metaphor for describing relations between Greeks themselves and between Greeks and barbarians. The second contribution, by Antonio Gonzales, focuses on slavery in Stoic thought in relation to the political transformations that have characterized the passage from the city-state to the Hellenistic kingdoms, and then to the Roman Empire. According to the author, the Stoics continuously adapted the idea of slavery to address the changes from city-state to empire, from local orders to a cosmopolitan one, so that slavery (including here also the position of freedmen in the Roman world) remained an incontestable fact necessary to justify socio-juridical differences between individuals. The one essay to address the issue of studying slavery comparatively is the contribution of Rosalba Arcuri, who discusses the possibilities and limits of a comparative hermeneutics of ancient and modern slave systems, while examining the historiography of ancient slavery mostly since Moses Finley, but not leaving aside the reflections of Marx and Weber.

Two contributions consider the connections between ancient and modern slavery by means of the reception of classical tradition by European culture. Aurelia Vargas Valencia studies the reception of Roman law in the *Información en Derecho*, by Vasco de Quiroga, in sixteenth-century Mexico, demonstrating how Quiroga used the Roman law tradition to criticize Indian slavery, thus postulating its illegitimacy. Paolo Desideri analyzes the representation of Spartacus by the Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni in a tragedy called *Spartaco*, which was never published but whose documentary vestiges reveal an image of the slave rebellion as a legitimate one, since slavery was, for

Manzoni, against Christian principles.

Two contributions discuss the view of ancient slavery in more contemporary political discussions. Silvana Rabinovich draws attention to slavery in the Bible—taking the example of the Exodus—but relating it to the debate on the Palestinian question as outlined by Edward Said, while Antela, Cortadella, Sierra, and Vidal, after careful research on the work of Arnaldo Momigliano, conclude that he was more concerned to criticize Soviet historiographic dogmatism in the study of ancient slavery than to consider the importance of slavery in ancient economy and society.

The remaining essays are simply case-studies. Four concern slavery in the ancient world. Alejandro Díaz Rodríguez analyzes the passage of Plato's *Laws* (VI, 776b-778a) in which the philosopher deals with the way slaves were used in Magnesia. The author points out that, according to Plato, slaves in Magnesia were confined to their economic activities as rural workers and remained under the strict control of their masters, so that the possibilities of a slave revolt were minimal. The example of slavery in Magnesia becomes, for the philosopher, a counterpoint to that practiced in Sparta, where the Messenians succeed in revolting against the state, disrupting the social and economic order. Maríateresa Galaz discusses the references to slaves in the work of the Attic orator Isaeus, focusing on servile strategies of survival. Her analysis highlights how slaves, despite being politically excluded from the city, tried to become part of the citizenry by illicit means. Héctor Alonso Veja Rodríguez studies in depth the Libyan revolt against Carthage during the rebellion of the mercenaries in 241 BC. For the author, the Libyans seized this opportunity to try to change their status of subjection to the Carthaginians. This revolt should thus be placed in the context of the war between Carthage and Rome, and also of the civil and internal struggles endured by Carthage in the 3rd century BC. Ricardo Martínez Lacy, the volume editor, considers the meaning of the slave wars in Sicily and Italy, but, obviously, in only two pages it is not possible to make a significant contribution to such a complex subject.[2](#)

Two essays are more modern case studies. Taking into account the records of juridical disputes in Mexico City between 1590 and 1624, Gibrán Bautista Y Lugo examines the relations between masters and slaves, and how the latter showed a legal initiative, obtaining benefits for themselves in disputes with their masters. Finally, focusing on

the Iberian world, Rudy Chaulet studies what he calls pre-abolitionist proposals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, namely discourses against slavery, specifically the work of Francisco de Jaca and Épiphané de Moirans, propagated before the eighteenth century when the abolitionist movement in Europe became more intense.

In sum, this volume follows the pattern of the other GIREA proceedings by bringing together studies of diverse extent and varying depths of analysis. All the contributions are interesting *per se*, but the volume as a whole lacks an explicit and clear unity as to what should be an “hermeneutics of slavery” as a method that could promote advances in the study of ancient and modern slavery. Without this, the concept runs the risk of being just a new label for not so new approaches.

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Notes:

1. More information about this group can be found in [GIREA](#). See also Marguerite Garrido-Hory and Christine Pérez, *Esclavage et dépendance dans l'Antiquité: index des colloques du G.I.R.E.A., 1970-1990* (Napoli, 1993).

2. Lacy published a full study of popular revolts in Hellenistic Greece, in which he mentions the slave rebellions in Sicily and Italy, and this perhaps could explain his brevity here. See Ricardo Martínez Lacy, *Rebeliones populares en la Grécia helenística* (México, 1995).