

THE HISTORY OF SLAVERY

A TECHNOLOGY OF POWER - FROM
SHURUPPAK TO THE PRESENT

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BOOKSETTER

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Term	Working distinction in this book
Captive	A person seized in war, raid, piracy, kidnapping, or punishment; captivity may lead to enslavement, ransom, exchange, execution, adoption, or release.
Chattel slave	A person treated as alienable property who can be bought, sold, inherited, pledged, punished, and controlled by an owner.
Household slave	An enslaved person located in domestic service, child care, sex, management, craft work, or household display; intimacy does not imply consent.
Debt laborer or debt bondsman	A person whose labor is claimed for repayment; distinct from chattel slavery when term, value, and redemption are real, but slavery-like when debt is endless or inherited.
Dependent or client	A subordinate person attached to a household, patron, lineage, or lord; dependency becomes slavery when control over body, labor, movement, sale, or children becomes severe.
Serf	A person bound to land, lord, dues, labor obligations, and local jurisdiction rather than usually sold as movable chattel; often hereditary and coercive, with a different legal structure from plantation slavery.
Concubine	A woman held in a recognized sexual and domestic status below marriage in many legal systems; legal protection in some contexts did not erase coercive sexual access under ownership or dependency.
Military slave or slave-origin soldier	A person recruited through purchase, capture, levy, or forced removal for military service; possible ascent to power did not erase coercive recruitment.
Penal laborer	A person compelled to work as punishment by the state; the category becomes slavery-like when labor is leased, racialized, indefinite, brutal, or commercially exploited.
Corvee laborer	A subject required to perform public labor for a state or lord; coercive but distinct from ownership when temporary and tied to public obligation.
Trafficked person	A modern legal category involving recruitment, transport, harboring, or receipt through coercion, deception, abuse of vulnerability, or force for exploitation; usually illegal rather than openly owned.

Term	Working distinction in this book
Forced laborer	A person compelled to work under menace of penalty without free consent; a modern category that may overlap with trafficking, debt bondage, prison labor abuse, or state coercion.

Part I: Ancient Inventions of Unfreedom

Chapter 1: Alienability Enters the Record

The tablet is small enough to hold in two hands.

It is clay, roughly square, marked by signs that belong to an early world of writing. Its surface does not announce itself as the beginning of anything. It does not say: here begins slavery. It does not explain how the man named or classified in the text came to be transferable. It does not describe his face, age, language, fear, skill, family, or destination. The document does what administrative documents so often do. It reduces a human rupture to an orderly form.

Around 2600 BCE, at Shuruppak in southern Mesopotamia, a contract recorded the transfer traditionally described as the sale of a male slave and a house. The ancient city, later remembered in Sumerian literature as a place of deep antiquity, is known archaeologically as Fara. The tablet, now catalogued in the Louvre's Near Eastern collections as AO 3765, belongs to the Early Dynastic world, a landscape of city-states, temples, palaces, scribes, fields, canals, herds, households, and contracts. In museum language, the object may be described as a tablet, a contract, a sale, a donation, an administrative record. In historical language, it is one of the earliest secure documentary windows onto slavery: a male slave and a house treated as transferable objects within a recognized transaction.

The house matters. It is not background scenery. The pairing of a dwelling and a person in one record tells us something about the power of documentation. A house can be measured, bounded, transferred, witnessed, and remembered as belonging to someone. So, in this document, can a man. The tablet does not mean a house and a person were thought identical in every respect. Ancient law and custom could distinguish persons, dependents, kin, children, wives, servants, debtors, captives, and slaves in many ways. But the contract places human status inside a world of alienability. To be alienable is to be transferable, to be made available for movement from one controlling hand to another. In the history of slavery, alienability is one of the sharpest lines. A person may be poor, obligated, low-status, hungry, taxed, conscripted, or dependent without being saleable. Slavery appears most clearly where a human being can be treated as an object of durable claim.

The Shuruppak tablet does not stand alone. It sits at the edge of a much larger administrative revolution. Several centuries earlier, in the late fourth millennium BCE, cities and institutions in southern Mesopotamia had begun to develop accounting systems that changed what power could remember. Clay tokens, sealed envelopes, numerical tablets, cylinder seals, and proto-cuneiform signs helped administrators record quantities of grain, animals, labor, land, textiles, beer, and people. Writing did not begin as poetry. It began, in large part, as management. The first tablets were not philosophical reflections on the human condition. They were tools for keeping track of obligations, deliveries, rations, and property.

That fact is morally important. Slavery becomes easier to sustain when domination can be counted. A raid can seize captives without writing. A household can dominate dependents without archives. But records make claims portable across time. They allow an institution to say who owes labor, who receives rations, who belongs to which household, which transaction has witnesses, what land is attached to what obligation, and which person can be transferred. A memory held only by violence dies with the violent. A memory pressed into clay can outlive everyone present.

The earliest evidence asks for sequence. Some late fourth-millennium proto-cuneiform signs have been interpreted as referring to male or female slaves, captives, dependents, or people from outside the settled urban world. A sign may combine personhood, gender, labor, and foreignness. It may point toward categories that later become clearer in Sumerian and Akkadian texts. Proto-cuneiform, however, is specialized administrative notation, partly understood and often stripped of grammar, context, and speech. It records a world of institutions before it explains that world in sentences. A mark that suggests a dependent worker has a different evidentiary weight from a sale

contract. A list of women receiving rations asks what status the list is recording: free workers paid in rations, temple dependents, corvée laborers, captives, debt dependents, enslaved people, household women and children, prisoners, or several groups at once.

This discipline is the foundation of the whole history. Slavery is too serious a category for loose labeling. The historian has to ask what a specific text allows: whether a person named beside animals or land is owned, taxed, distributed, adopted, transferred in marriage, assigned to service, or held under another claim; whether a term translated as “slave” carries that force in the document at hand; whether a foreign origin marks enslavement or a different vulnerability. Evidence is strongest where several operations appear together: alienability, forced labor, inherited status, punishment, movement control, legal exclusion, and recordable transfer.

Origins attract simplification because a first thing gives a story the comfort of a starting line. Slavery has a more dangerous history than that. Before markets in persons, there were captives. Before sale contracts, households absorbed outsiders. Before law codes defined slave status, debts made children, wives, and debtors available to creditors. Before empires deported populations, villages were raided by neighbors. Slavery gathered itself out of several older human disasters whenever people built durable bridges from vulnerability to command.

War was one door. In many early societies, defeat created a brutal set of possibilities: death, ransom, adoption, sacrifice, exchange, tribute, forced labor, or enslavement. A captive stood outside ordinary protection. The defeated person might be killed as an enemy, returned for payment, incorporated as a dependent, or claimed as property. War capture did not automatically produce slavery, but it repeatedly supplied the raw material from which slave systems grew. The logic was direct: the enemy’s body became a spoil of victory. Once that body could be kept alive for labor, sex, display, reproduction, or exchange, domination became more useful than execution.

Debt was another door. Agricultural societies lived with scarcity, bad harvests, disease, and obligation. Grain advanced in one season could become a claim on labor in the next. A household might pledge a field, a child, a wife, a servant, or its own future work. Debt dependency could be temporary, and many ancient legal systems tried to distinguish debt servitude from full slavery. Some rulers proclaimed debt remissions to restore social order. Yet the line between obligation and enslavement could collapse under pressure. A person pledged for debt might be redeemable in theory but trapped in practice. A child transferred for survival might never return. A woman placed in another household might become laborer, sexual object, and mother of children whose status depended on the rules of that household.