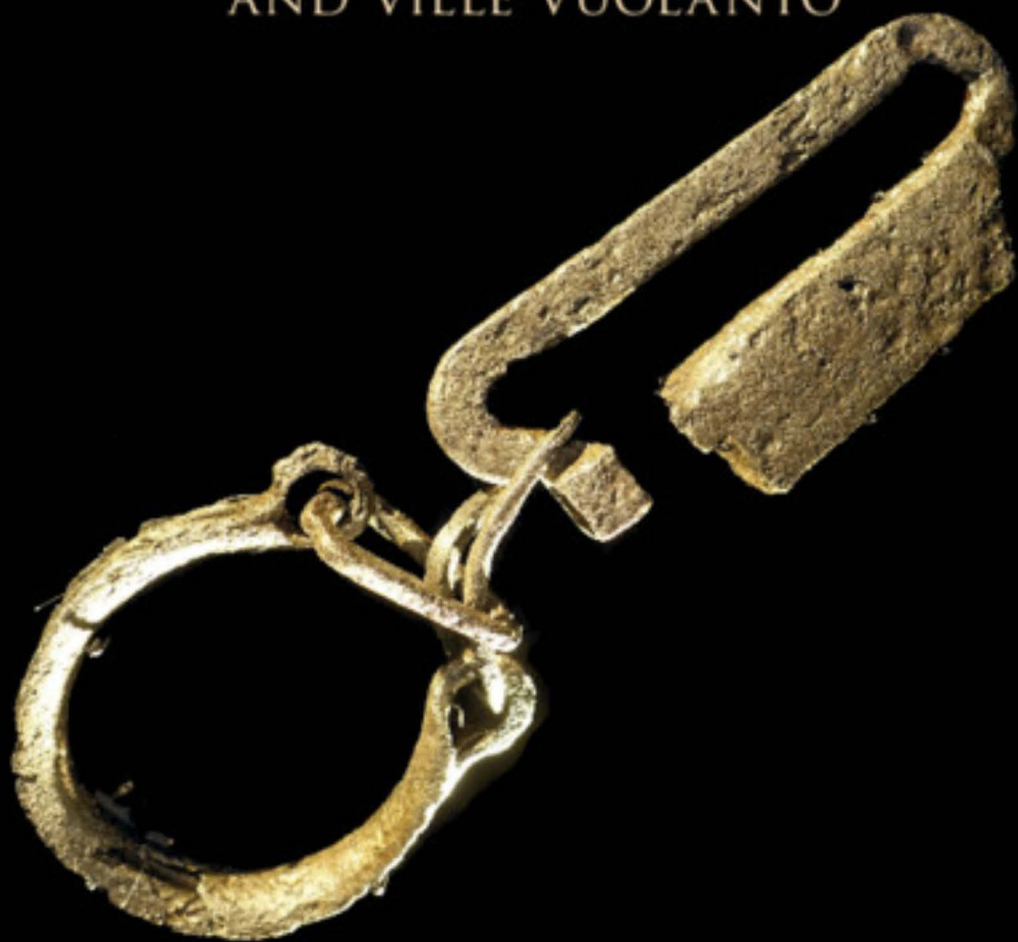


SLAVERY IN THE LATE  
ANTIQUAE WORLD,  
150 – 700 CE

EDITED BY  
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## (II) Legal Freedom: Christ as Liberator from Satanic Debt Bondage in Greek Homilies and Hymns of Late Antiquity

Arkadiy Avdokhin

At some point in the fifth century CE, a series of honorific statues were erected in Stratonikeia, a major city in Caria, Asia Minor. The statues were set up to commemorate the benefactions that one Maximos did for the local community, primarily for the sake of the dispossessed (ἀκτέανοι). While the majority of the inscribed praises that accompanied the statues heaped conventionally generic praise on Maximos for his euergetism, one of the inscriptions gave a rather precise reason for the high esteem that the benefactor enjoyed in the city. When the poor (τῶν πενήτων) of Stratonikeia were hard-pressed to pay the tax of *chrysargyron*, Maximos stepped in three times and paid the tax on their behalf from his own resources.<sup>1</sup>

The social dynamics reflected in these inscriptions seem emblematic of late antique economic and power relationships between the destitute and their benefactors, as well as the Christian ideology of patronage, earthly and divine, that I discuss below.<sup>2</sup> The *chrysargyron* was a notoriously harsh tax, and almost inevitably engendered massive fiscal arrears. As

The results of the project ‘Models of Representation of the Past in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period’ carried out within the framework of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2019 are presented in this work.

<sup>1</sup> The inscriptions and commentary are accessible in I.Stratonikeia 1204 (= SGO 2/6/15 = LSA 657), I.Stratonikeia 1387 (= LSA 1200), I.Stratonikeia 1521 (= LSA 1201), I. Stratonikeia 1530 (= LSA 1202). For a recent discussion and further bibliography, see Ward-Perkins 2015.

<sup>2</sup> For the relationship between the (super) rich and the poor in late antiquity, most centrally in Christian contexts and discourses, see e.g. Allen, Neil, and Mayer 2009; López 2013; as well as the magisterial, if controversial, Brown 2012.

a result, large numbers of people were suppressed by hopeless debts, and could even be brought to the state of debt bondage. The predicament could be resolved, almost exclusively, only through the intercession of powerful patrons like Maximos. Men and women were therefore effectively ‘bought out’ from the incessant poverty and debt to the state, as well as to lenders, to whom they were forced to apply in an effort to remedy their failed budgets.<sup>3</sup>

As I will discuss in what follows, the complex financial, social, and symbolic interactions between financially struggling individuals and their benefactors inspired metaphors, and wider theological thinking, about God and the fallen humanity, that were widespread in late antique liturgically set texts in Greek (homilies and hymns). The scope of modes of this struggling could be wide, and its specific character could vary, as the pertinent recapitulation on recent academic discussions of ‘poverty’ in antiquity has shown.<sup>4</sup> In the discussion below, I will mostly speak of the so-called ‘conjunctural’ (episodic/epidemic) poverty incurred by people who would struggle for sustenance under dire circumstances, including tax imposition and episodes when they were pursued by debtors. The poor, in these terms, regularly found themselves in danger of, or already immersed in, incessant indebtedness that led many of them to debt bondage, and would be occasionally rescued from this bleak state by private patrons like Maximos or emperors annulling tax arrears and debt records. Likewise, Christ as the saviour of humanity from the primordial debt of sin was imagined, and portrayed, through socially grounded metaphors and imagery.

By selectively exploring late antique homiletic and hymnic writings in Greek, I will highlight the role of metaphors of sin as debt leading to enslavement, and of Christ as liberator from debt enslavement to Satan.<sup>5</sup> I will also discuss the social underpinnings of these religious mindsets. I will suggest that Christian authors of homilies and hymns, and their audiences, imagined their liberty from sin in terms of ideological matrices

<sup>3</sup> For the tax (*collatio lustralis*), see Jones 1964, 431–2, 858–9; Bagnall 1993a, 153–4 (with further bibliography). For late antique attitudes to it, see Amato 2014, 19–30, 295, 321. For the periodic annulment of the tax, see p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> See the stimulating overview of ancient terminology of poverty, modern bibliography, and a sketch of potential new takes on the subject in Chapter 1 of Allen, Neil, and Mayer 2009 (alongside case studies in the subsequent chapters). For an earlier collection of studies on various aspects of ancient poverty that follow a range of methodologies, see Atkins and Osborne 2006.

<sup>5</sup> For a stimulating and methodologically advanced study of metaphors of slavery in early Christian writings, see Kartzow 2018a.