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Iza Biežuńska–Małowist and the History of Ancient Slavery*

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will focus on two important features of Professor B i e ż u Ń s k a – M a ł o w i s t ’ s work. These are, first, her analyses of social life in Greco–Roman and Ptolemaic Egypt, a body of largely empirical but complex and rewarding scholarship based on papyrological research; and, second, her important role in the epochal developments in history of slavery that took place in the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania and Hungary after the death of Stalin. After 1953, scholars in these countries gradually began to offer new interpretations, often with a sociological emphasis that was misunderstood, ignored, or disparaged in ‘the west’. That this work took seed during a period of dictatorial repression is fascinating. I will argue that even in the ‘dogmatic period’ of 1933–53, historians were wrestling with hard problems about ancient labor forces, and that these efforts eventually brought rewards.

I (ESCLAVAGE)

Biežuńska–Małowist’s entry into slavery history nearly stopped when it began, after the publication in 1949 *Some Problems of Hellenistic Slavery*, which Jerzy K o l e n d o says contains the germs of her future work.¹ After 1948, the Soviet regime became even harsher than usual, continuing to impose the Stalinist five–stage theory of historical change, primitive communism, slavery, feudalism,

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¹ J. K o l e n d o, ‘Iza Biežuńska–Małowist’, *Gnomon* 70 (1998), p. 90.

capitalism, and socialism and making real research difficult for Biežuńska: ‘... la théorie du régime économique basé sur l’esclavage et de l’Antiquité comme société esclavagiste. La problématique de l’esclavage ... prend ainsi une importance politique tout à fait particulière’.²

Rather than wrestle with what Kolendo calls ‘overly simplified schemas that resisted honest study’, Biežuńska–Małowist ‘decided to suspend her research for a decade’. (We’ll return below to Stalinist stage theory).³

From the day she returned to the topic in 1959, Biežuńska’s writing was distinctive: lucid but dense with data, especially at moments when she is criticizing another scholar. One of Biežuńska–Małowist’s most useful works is *L’Esclavage dans L’Égypte gréco-romaine*, published in 1974. Here we see her in her best investigative–scholarly mode, working through large bodies of evidence, contesting earlier scholarship, trying to determine what the ancients thought and how they acted. The *texture* of this discussion — the level of fine–grained detail acquired through reading many papyri — is impressive.

Esclavage opens with chapters on the ‘origins’ of slavery (chapter 1) and takes up slave employment, the role of the state, and ‘social conditions,’ though the 1991 book has more subdivisions. But when we look at the details, important differences emerge. In the 1991 text, the author eschews footnotes and invokes or alludes to other scholars, without deep inquiry into their findings. *Esclavage*, on the other hand engaged in serious argument, particularly with other papyrologists. The meanings of nouns like *παῖς* (15), the treatment of prisoners of war (19), including Jewish prisoners (23), the question whether warfare was a prime source of slaves (27), and what papyri tell us about debt–bondage (41–43), *oikogenesis*, and *enfants abandonnés et asservis* (49–53), are all discussed with compelling citations of papyri. Biežuńska–Małowist calls for ‘prudence’ at the outset (16). Her rhetorical achievement, without ever appearing imprudent, is to level a devastating array of arguments against chosen targets, including William Westermann (e.g. 22, 27, 46). She concludes that while ‘A la lumière de tous les documents résumés plus haut, l’emprisonnement et l’esclavage pour dettes fiscales ont existé pendant l’époque ptolémaïque,’ the Ptolemaic need to maintain a work force minimized debt–bondage. (47)

² I. Stalin, ‘O dialekticheskom i istoricheskom materializme’ [‘On the Dialectic and Historic Materialism’], [in:] *Kratkij kurs istorii VKP(b)*, Moscow 1938, p. 42; Kolendo, ‘Iza Biežuńska–Małowist’, p. 91.

³ The East Berlin historian Heinz Kreissig parodied one element of the official dogma historiography with an Aristophanic catalogue of the varieties of slave–owner: ‘Zu ein und derselben ‘Skavlenhalterklasse’ gehören makedonisch–orientalische Konig..., athenische Bankiers, die Dutzende von Skavlen..., concluding in despair: ‘Der Klassenbegriff wird hier offensichtlich ad absurdum geführt’. See H. Kreissig, ‘Prolegomena zu einer Wirtschaftsgeschichte Seleukidenreiches’, *Klio* 56 (1974), pp. 521–527.

The second chapter, on ‘Employment of slaves in Ligid Egypt’, makes it clear that slave labor played only a ‘tiny role’ in Ptolemaic agriculture (65, 82–83): slavery was concentrated instead in the artisanat, particularly weaving (66, 83). This is followed by a compact but very learned summary of the attitude of Macedonian authorities toward private slavery, primarily aimed at Westermann’s assertion that these authorities sought to prevent its expansion. Finally, Biežuńska–Małowist takes up the ‘social condition’ of slaves, which varied greatly depending upon their assignments. In conclusion, the emphasis falls decisively on the ‘social position of proprietors’ (134). At the end of the Ptolemaic era, economic decline ‘seems’ to have swept the land, affecting primarily the rich, but balanced to a degree by increased workshop activity. (‘Seems’ is only one example of several signs that this case is not certain).

W i l c k e n and Westermann, she says, ‘ont prétendu que le travail servile n’a joué qu’un rôle minime à Alexandrie... Je me range à l’avis de R o s t o v t z e f f et de Cl. P r é a u x que dans les grands ateliers en Égypte, donc aussi à Alexandrie, on profitaie au III^e siècle de la main-d’oeuvre servile’ (137).

II

As noted, Biežuńska’s *La schiavitù nel mondo antico* has a different orientation. It is a far more general book, and less intent on scholarly dispute. And despite her massive knowledge of papyri, Biežuńska–Małowist here uses them here with a light touch, while saying more about methodology and theory: references to Westermann give way to mentions of U t c h e n k o, D i a k o n o v, ‘diverse forms of dependency’, and the nature of the labor force.

Like its predecessor, this book opens with ‘Origins of Slavery’: slaves’ *provenance*, bondage of abandoned children, the slave market, and acquisition of slaves in war or through debt. The ‘Roman state’ is the chief acquirer of slaves. Readers are warned (not for the first time) against *ex silentio* argumentation, which is always a danger.

Chapter Two, ‘Slaves in Different Sectors of Production’, deals first with agricultural slavery (endorsing the contested claim for slave quarters at Settefinestre), then with miners and artisans (especially weavers). Then we turn (Chapter Three) to domestic slavery, with a particular emphasis on slaves’ role as members of the family. Often at the mercy of literary texts, we know most (pp. 100ff) about the small percentage of loyal domestic slaves whose work may bring manumission. To illustrate the treachery of textual sources, a single page (146), concerns papyri testifying first to the affection and fidelity of one ‘family relationship’ in which slaves are included, and then to the cruelty, desperation and hatred of an entirely different group.

‘Slaves in State Service’ and ‘The Juridical Position of Slaves’, the titles of chapters four and five, are topics that allow the author to plunge into the details of civic life. In Athens, ‘state service’ by slaves was the reverse of a coin on which the obverse was full non-professional leadership by citizens who could not have done without their slave bureaucrats and policemen. Aeschines mentions the wealth of Pittalacus, who ‘lived apart’ — i.e. was possibly a slave — and may have held high office.

At two points, Biežuńska–Małowist calls attention to the social role of successful slaves. They did at times form ‘family’ unions with free women (119–120, 129–130). In the first passage we learn of non-legal but lasting relationships between upper class women and slaves: ‘questo fenomeno compare molto più frequentemente tra gli schiavi imperiali che tra gli schiavi privati’. Later, on p. 129, we have this:

‘... Di alcuni documenti dell’archivio di Zenone, risulta che gli schiavi si formavano spesso delle famiglie, e per il periodo romano abbiamo delle testimonianze di unioni tra schiavi e donne libere. Si trattava sicuramente di unioni socialmente riconosciute; ma se esse fossero disciplinate dalla legge o dalla consuetudine rimane pur sempre un punto interrogativo’.

‘Legal’ or ‘by custom’? The question merits study. Equally significant is this remark: ‘La cosa più importante era la posizione sociale, fors’anche quella materiale, di una persona e non certo il suo status giuridico’.

Biežuńska–Małowist does not shrink from a conclusion: ‘In the eyes of free men, particularly of the lower classes, imperial slaves represented first and foremost the functionaries of the imperial administration: their *legal* situation was less important’ (p. 120).

The tension between legal and social status of slaves receives substantial attention in these two chapters, inviting further research. In Ptolemaic Egypt, at least at the start of the Lagid period, slaves had particular juridical status and were protected by laws. We have no ‘proof of legal recognition’ of this activity autonomous or a right to the ownership of slaves. But the behavior seems to have been evident.

After two more chapters probing such ambiguities (‘Proprietors and Slaves: Reciprocal Relations’, and ‘Hope and Desperation: manumitted, escapees, rebels’), a brief but trenchant Conclusion builds on Moses I. Finley’s ‘genuine slave societies’ in which slave labor provided ‘the bulk of the immediate income from property ... of the elites’.⁴ Briefly put, Biežuńska–Małowist’s own research, as well as others’, finds that Egyptian agriculture did not significantly rely on slaves. Her conclusion is sensible: in the ancient Greek and Roman world,

⁴ M.I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, ed. by B.D. Shaw, Princeton 1998, pp. 150 and 274.

only some sectors — the ‘classical periods’ of Greece and Rome — conform to Finley’s pattern (197).

In sum, this is a powerful book, conveying a convincing picture of the ancient world, balancing general claims with fine-tuned analysis, perhaps most exciting when it deals with the material basis of ancient slavery.

Beyond the labor force, Biežuńska–Małowist calls attention to the social role of successful slaves, and poses an intriguing methodological question: some slaves formed ‘family’ unions with free upper-class women, extra-legal but lasting. Biežuńska–Małowist concludes from the Zenon archive that unions between slave and free were ‘socially recognized’ (‘socialmente riconosciute’), but whether they were ‘regulated by law, or by custom’ (‘disciplinate dalla legge o dalla consuetudine’), remains a question. She adds, quite wonderfully, that ‘the important thing’ (‘La cosa più importante’) was the social or material position of a person, not his legal status, ‘il suo status giuridico’. In fact: ‘in the eyes of free men, particularly of the lower classes, imperial slaves represented first and foremost the functionaries of the imperial administration: their *legal* situation was less important’.

The author savors social complexity, the possibly incommensurable legal and social categories, and the sort of ‘behavior’ that will occur with or without ‘proof of legal recognition’. Biežuńska–Małowist’s work on social conundra of this sort merits further attention.

III

The author, in these and her other ‘basic’ books, says little about social theory and underlying principles. It is impossible for a scholar like myself, distant in time and space, and from an alien political environment, to determine whether and how the institutional politics of Polish intellectual life shaped her choices. But a glance at her other work does complicate, or enrich, the picture.

In one of Biežuńska–Małowist’s first appearances on the international scene, she was thrust into a leading role. This was the tumultuous and significant Eleventh International Congress of Historical Sciences for which Russian and West German delegations had been preparing: the West Germans, among other things, had for nearly a year been collaborating with the West German *Auswärtiges Amt*, the Foreign Office.⁵ Of all the speakers at Stockholm, only one came from East Germany.

⁵ On the *Auswärtiges Amt*’s involvement in academic and civil affairs, though not Stockholm, see E. Conze et al., *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit: deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik*, Munich 2010, and U. Pfeil, ‘Deutsche Historiker auf den Internationalen Historikertagen von Stockholm (1960) und Wien (1965),’ [in:] U. Pfeil (ed.), *Die Rückkehr der*

For ancient historians at the event, the one-day discussion of slavery was the most chaotic. The West Germans had distributed in advance issues of a journal that attacked Stalinist historiography, ignoring non-Russian scholars in the eastern block and failing to notice that Soviet historiography had changed significantly since the death of Stalin in 1953. Biezuńska-Małowist and André Aymard presided over the panel.

This was an event that changed the study of ancient slavery. Siegfried Lauffer and Friedrich Vittinghoff delivered the key papers, and Vittinghoff's was long remembered for its fierceness. Moses Finley and Joseph Vogt were in the audience, and Finley was to blame Vogt for his performance. Several participants reported that the discussion following the papers was particularly hostile. Biezuńska-Małowist reported on the event two decades later:

'As a participant of that stormy session of the historical section at the Stockholm Congress where the controversy came to a head, I wholeheartedly share Finley's opinion that what took place was not a scientific discussion, but rather a collision of political views with the attacking party unwilling to recognize either the differences in the interpretations of ancient slavery in various Soviet works, or the rejection of the overly schematic patterns of the 1930's which was becoming apparent. Nor were the anti-Marxists willing to concede that any of the works published *outside* the Soviet Union should be considered as Marxist. I also share Finley's opinion that ideological and political questions are of great importance for evaluating and discussing the various stand points in recent research'.⁶

It is possibly noteworthy that Biezuńska, who criticizes the *argumentum ex silentio*, seems *never* in her later scholarship to mention the work of Joseph Vogt, though they both spent decades writing about ancient slavery. She never gave a reason, but perhaps did not have to.

As it happens, the Stockholm event seems to have had its positive as well as its negative side. It appears to have brought several scholars of Greek social history together, possibly for the first time: Finley, Biezuńska, and Dionisie Mihail Pippidi. They remained in contact: all three contributed to *Problèmes de la terre en Grèce ancienne*, edited by Finley. During the decade after 1960, Finley had also developed and solidified contacts in France: Alain Schnapp, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Yvon Garlan, and Jean-Paul Vernant, as well as Jan

deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft in die 'Ökumene der Historiker': ein wissenschaftsgeschichtlicher Ansatz, Munich 2008, pp. 308–313. For more details, see D. Tompkins, 'What Happened in Stockholm? Moses Finley, the Mainz Akademie, and East Bloc Historians', *Hyperboreus* 20 (2014), pp. 436–452.

⁶ I. Biezuńska-Małowist, 'Ancient Slavery Reconsidered', *Review* [Fernand Braudel Center] 6 (1982), pp. 111–126, on p. 114. Compare I. Biezuńska-Małowist, 'Historia starożytna na Kongresie sztokholmskim' ['Ancient History at the Stockholm Congress'], *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 68 (1961), pp. 562–563.

Pečirka in Prague. The papers of Pierre Vidal–Naquet, at the École des haute Études en Sciences sociales in Paris, contain a very useful trove of letters by these and other contributors as the volume was being shaped, although Biežuńska–Małowist was one of the less voluble participants.

Biežuńska–Małowist also conceived and produced a collection of essays by Soviet historians, *Schiavitù e Produzione nella Roma Repubblicana* (1986), in 1972. The essays, by Št a e r m a n, Utchenko and other established Soviet scholars, exemplify the ‘new’ Soviet historiography that began with the death of Stalin. As Biežuńska says, the assemblage challenges the ‘omogeneità delle strutture sociali dell’antichità’.

Other historians, often explicitly using Marx, joined this effort in the years after 1953, and several came from Finley’s correspondents and colleagues: Pečirka, D a n d a m a e v, K r e i s s i g, and Detlev L o t z e. On thrust was to challenge binary distinctions such as ‘slave vs. free’, and Finley’s essay ‘Between Freedom and Slavery’ was frequently cited by Russian and eastern bloc scholars. Finley’s friend Emily Grace K a z a k e v i c h wrote from Moscow, ‘The irony is, your works circulate like Agatha Christie’s. Do you find that flattering?’⁷

CONCLUSION

After Khrushchev fell from power, Soviet historians were pressured to return to the five–stage theory. One of the many accounts of this effort is a 1994 essay by Roger M a r w i c k.⁸ Jan Pečirka is a reliable guide to the ideological–historical disagreements of those years. The Marxian tradition of social history is perhaps at its strongest when dealing with labor forces, and the painstaking efforts of T j u m e n j e v from the 1930s, even during the ‘dogmatic period’, continue to merit respect. One outcome has been a long tradition of probing for accurate information, suppressed but not until the death of Stalin in 1953. L e n g a u e r traces this activity, usefully noting the different choices made by journal editors even after 1953.⁹

⁷ July 5, 1966. Finley Papers. The Finley essays that were eagerly sought included ‘Between Freedom and Slavery’ and ‘Servile Statuses’, both collected in M.I. F i n l e y, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*, ed. by B.D. S h a w and R.P. S a l l e r, New York 1982. Soon enough, they were being cited not only by historians of Greece and Rome but by Near Eastern scholars like Dandamaev. For a fuller discussion of Finley’s reception in Russia and other Warsaw Pact countries see T o m p k i n s, ‘What Happened in Stockholm’.

⁸ R.D. M a r k w i c k, ‘Catalyst of Historiography, Marxism and Dissidence: The Sector of Methodology of the Institute of History, Soviet Academy of Sciences, 1964–68’, *Europe–Asia Studies* 46 (1994), pp. 579–596.

⁹ W. L e n g a u e r, ‘Storia dell’antichità in URSS (1917–1956)’, *Index. Quaderni Camerti di Studi Romanistici* 28 (2000), p. 92.

For half a century, Iza Biezuńska-Małowist and Marian Małowist did historical research that won international respect. Both used Marxian scholarship effectively, never becoming heavy-handed or doctrinaire. This is a tradition that would benefit immensely from further research.

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