PREFACE

This book offers an account of spaces, experiences, and ideologies of incarceration in the ancient Mediterranean basin, focusing primarily on sources dating between 300 BCE and 600 CE. We argue that incarceration was prevalent across this geographic and temporal span and that sources point overwhelmingly to prisons and practices of incarceration as an integral part of the social, economic, and political life of ancient Mediterranean societies. By "Mediterranean," we mean communities and regimes that hold a "middle sea" in common—who look to the Mediterranean as a central node through which cultural, economic, and social currents flow. Our data include the following: literary sources prescribing an idealized carceral order and accounts of prisons and those inside; carceral facilities known through archaeological investigation; documentary evidence from and about prisoners, including letters, bail receipts, tax receipts, and orders for arrest; and visual depictions of captives and spaces of incarceration. We aim to demonstrate that the prison is not a modern, medieval, or even late ancient invention, despite widespread and persistent claims to the contrary.

Our method is to foreground voices of incarcerated people and their experience of carceral facilities through documentary, archaeological, and visual sources, and to use that material to reframe our reading of literary sources—especially legal materials. This approach has dictated the contours of our archive: We begin around 300 BCE with the earliest significant corpus of documentary sources on papyrus, and we end with the emergence of new empires, structures of governance, and dominant languages across the Mediterranean around 600 CE, as the late antique world lumbered into the Middle Ages, a period in the history of the prison whose long roots Julia Hillner (2015) has thoroughly traced and that Guy Geltner (2008) has investigated marvelously with respect to the Italian city-states. Likewise, J. Nicholas

Reid (2022) has recently subjected ancient Mesopotamian sources to detailed analysis, yielding useful new insights about the earliest written materials depicting prisoners, prisons, and the administration of state punishment, and Marcus Folch (2026) is completing a significant cultural and literary history of ancient Mediterranean incarceration beginning with the earliest Greek literary evidence.

While other scholars have investigated ancient Mediterranean carceral ideals and practices from a variety of angles, our analysis bridges a gap in the field by allotting archaeological and documentary evidence as much analytical weight as literary materials. To give a sense of evidentiary asymmetry in classic works on the ancient prison, we should consider this small but telling datum: in December 1997, sixteen of the leading voices on the study of ancient incarceration met in Strasbourg, publishing their proceedings as a book in 1999 titled *Carcer: Prison et privation de liberté dans l'Antiquité classique* (Carcer: prison and the deprivation of liberty in classical antiquity). The collection's index of ancient sources includes thirteen pages of literary materials, while documentary sources comprise just shy of a page and a half. Privileging the experiences of prisoners as seen in documentary materials alongside the ideology of their captors brings much-needed evidentiary parity, which, we argue, suggests somewhat different conclusions about the nature and place of incarceration in ancient Mediterranean societies. With this book, we especially aim to decenter legal ideals as the premier source for the status and function of incarceration in the ancient world and to recenter prisons and carceral practices in scholarly imaginations of ancient life. We hope to demonstrate that attending closely to archaeological and documentary sources offers a different picture than what emerges primarily from literary materials.

As we discuss below in detail, our archive is irreparably lumpy: the overwhelming majority of documentary sources are preserved in Egypt, for instance, while archaeological, literary, and visual materials span the Mediterranean basin, however unevenly. Legal materials, for their part, shed more light on the third century CE and beyond than they enlighten earlier periods. Patterns of scholarly interest and publication also inflect the availability of evidence: Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine materials have received the most sustained scholarly interest; as such, they are better represented than the few sources that survive from marginalized communities and away from imperial metropoles.

This book makes a different argument from those that have come before within the field of carceral studies, yet it builds on a trend in ancient history that contends the prison has a history not of two centuries but of two millennia at least, and doubtless much longer. In fact, if it is origins that we are after, then we should probably say that the jail—defined as a separate purpose-built facility intended solely to detain people before trial—is an invention of Late Antiquity, while the prison's roots plunge deeper into history than our surviving data attests. These are strong claims that invert a common sense in carceral studies; at this point, they are merely assertions disputing a century-old consensus, but we are not the first

ancient historians to raise this challenge. Nevertheless, as we demonstrate in our analysis and document across the corpus of materials related to ancient incarceration, sources attesting the prison's long history are abundant. Taking them seriously—both individually and as a corpus—must change our historical framework. While ultimately there may prove to be no lessons to learn from antiquity about a more just carceral system, we hope that from a new framework, new historical consciousness may arise around contemporary practices of incarceration. More than anything else, this material points to the extraordinary durability of carceral structures across time, and their fundamental imbrication with issues of class, ethnicity, gender, and imperialism. Even so, seeing this material gives us an opportunity to learn something about our own choices, aided by what Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013) called "the hermeneutic significance of temporal distance" (291–99). These sources help us to see that choices to incarcerate, including how, whom, where, and why to cage people, are just that—choices encoding an ideology of punishment that, in the absence of critical examination, we might mistake as obvious, natural, innocent, or without real alternative.

Our analysis is built on data collected over the course of nine years, including dozens of visits to sites of ancient incarceration, hundreds of inscriptions, papyri, and ostraca translated anew (and not a few for the first time), and literary and visual sources selected, excerpted, and mobilized to contextualize the material remains of carceral practices. A wide variety of sources underlie our analysis, and we survey them throughout. Even so, this is not a sourcebook. It is a synthetic account that offers new data and arguments, especially regarding incarceration as a practice, as an institution, and as a system of social control. With this book we hope to offer an arena in which to ask new questions about the nature and scope of the prison's history, to open a number of new lines of inquiry, and to offer a few moments of provocation. Nevertheless, our analysis is hardly comprehensive. It is neither the first nor the final word on any of the topics covered—just as we build on the work of previous scholars, we hope that this book will serve as a resource for others going forward.

Most of the data are available in an open access database at historyofIncarceration.com. Source citations throughout this book include a database ID comprising two parts: a letter indicating the type of evidence—D (Documentary), A (Archaeological), V (Visual), or L (Literary)—and a number indicating the specific source within that category. The sequence of sources was determined by sheer happenstance. Thus, a source labeled A34 is the thirty-fourth archaeological source listed in the database, while D183 is the 183rd documentary source. In-text citations indicate the relevant publication information, database ID, and date. We encourage readers to visit the database to explore the evidence in full, to interact with three-dimensional models of archaeological materials, and to read commentaries that we have written for each source.

This book aims to speak to more than one audience. As ancient historians, we hope that the book aids colleagues studying the ancient world by offering a fresh

perspective on what we argue was a central feature of many ancient Mediterranean societies. We also hope that the work will be useful to scholars in the field of carceral studies and to those with a general interest in the history of incarceration. To the degree it is possible to speak to a general readership interested in the question of incarceration without compromising academic rigor, we have tried to do so. Because of our broad intended audience, citations to scholarly debates and secondary sources are judicious, indicating direct interlocutors or important interventions with which our analysis interacts. Our citations should not be interpreted as reflecting the breadth of scholarship available on any particular source or question. A more comprehensive bibliography of relevant sources is available in the companion database, which we hope will serve scholars, public policy workers, and the interested public alike as a resource.

A brief word about what we mean by incarceration: our approach invokes a number of overlapping terms in critical prison studies. A prison is a physical place where incarceration happens, though incarceration occurs in facilities that are not formally prisons. "Prison systems" indicate larger networks of practice—political, social, economic, and so on—that intersect, support, and are implicated with the institution of incarceration as a critical node. Courts, for instance, are part of the prison system, but they are not prisons; nor are they the only system that interacts with the prison. "Incarceration" refers to a constellation of practices that involve confinement of human bodies for perceived deviance: legal, social, political, economic, or otherwise. For us, then, incarceration includes confinement in a civic prison as a result of legal proceedings, but it is not limited to that one form. Incarceration also includes other systems in which someone with power enforces involuntary confinement of another human for perceived deviance within a physical space. We argue below that any clean bifurcation between people condemned to hard labor and "prisoners" is a distinction without a substantive difference; in practice, both were incarcerated. The relevant data supports this capacious definition—ancient sources often use the same terminology for both penal laborers and people confined in civic prisons, as we detail below. Over the course of this book we also employ the common distinction between a jail, which indicates a purpose built structure intended for detention before sentencing, and prison, a space intended to hold people after conviction, as one part of their punishment.

The following chapters distinguish between spaces, experiences, and ideologies of incarceration, building on Henri Lefebvre's (1974) spatial trichotomy comprising lived spaces, perceived spaces, and conceived spaces, each of which offers a different epistemic perspective. By "ideology of incarceration," we do not mean to signal that our analysis is a form of ideological criticism. Rather, we mean something more generic: how incarceration was conceived of working, most often by people *outside* the cage. This framework allows us to consider archaeological and documentary evidence as a way of foregrounding lived experiences of incarcerated persons (lived and perceived spaces), and to keep them conceptually separate

from various depictions of the prison (conceived spaces) as presented in literary materials, including in the law.

Finally, at a number of points we allude to modern carceral practices. It is important to note that when doing so, we do not intend to draw a direct comparison or to suggest that ancient and modern practices are identical, or even genealogically related. Rather, we make these comparisons because insights from the field of carceral studies can, at times, provide a fresh lens on the ancient data and can help us formulate new and fruitful questions. Conversely, a number of contemporary carceral practices widely considered to be uniquely modern have, in fact, been in evidence since antiquity. It is productive to understand earlier instances of such practices, and when relevant comparanda appear, we will occasionally note them.

In 2014–15, the artist Titus Kaphar produced a series of paintings called *The Jerome Project*, each inspired by his experience of searching prisoner databases for records relating to the incarceration of his own father, Jerome. Kaphar found ninety-seven men who shared his father's name and went about interviewing many of them, investigating their histories, and producing portraits that are part mugshot, part Byzantine icon. To our eyes, the icons evoke another stylistic category: they look like painted memorials to departed women and men who lived in Egypt's Fayum oasis during the Roman period, a type of artifact now widespread in museum collections whose piercing, veristic eyes often evoke a presence to viewers even today, some two millennia later. Kaphar dipped many of his portraits in tar, the image obscured in proportion to the amount of time its subject spent behind bars.

We chose *Jerome II* for our cover because in Kaphar's portraits the past burdens the present, surrounding and framing it. He does not ask after the logic or processes that underlie or seek to justify these men's incarceration. Time, tar, and prison silence these Jeromes, stripping them of individuality and humanity. Kaphar's art requires the viewer to hold these men's gaze—whatever is left of it—and confront the desire to look away or to forget these men whom society has segregated and silenced. The portraits are a provocation, "a pondering of whose lived experiences we consider, whose we forget, and whose we erase" (Kaphar 2023). We began to frame this book amid conversations with Kaphar in New Haven from 2012–2017. Our approach to the ancient world parallels Titus's insistence on attending to overlooked people in the contemporary moment.

We are ancient historians, though we concede that we do not solely look backward: we are also invested in a more just future. The prison is not a recent invention, nor are prisons, prison systems, or practices of incarceration. Claims to the contrary are too easy—bordering on facile—one-liners, often deployed by well-meaning people who wish for a world without prisons. We also desire a world without prisons, and so we aim to take a fresh look at the deep prehistory of a contemporary society that posits, in the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), "cages as a catchall solutions to social problems" (2).