

Ancient Mediterranean Prison Societies

The previous chapter considered prisoner experiences inside carceral facilities, both real and imagined. This chapter turns to those “outside,” asking about the impact of incarceration on the wider society, and how members of those societies recognized, imagined, or described life in chains. We focus on four topics that illustrate interactions between the prison and the communities that hosted them: (1) economic impacts of the prison, (2) social support for inmates, (3) public pressure on prison proprietors, and (4) the public transcript of incarceration.

ECONOMIC REALITIES

Ancient prison policies and practices responded to economic demands, as the circulation of goods fueled the carceral engine. As shown by Brian Muhs (2018, 99), already in the Ptolemaic period civic prisons played an important role in the collection of public and private debts, and John Bauschatz (2007) argues that debt was the single most common reason for incarceration at the time (47). The trend did not end with Ptolemaic rule: scores of papyri from the Roman and Byzantine periods show that incarceration continued to be a central facet of the debt economy.

Debt incarceration and bail release, however, only form the tip of the iceberg; other economic factors play a role at least as significant in driving practices of incarceration. Frequently, we find evidence of prisoners requesting release not because they were innocent or solvent, but because it was a critical season and the local economy required their labor. A beekeeper petitioned Zeno in the third century BCE, asking for release because he had been in prison already twenty-two days and it was time to transport hives to their pastures (P. Cair. Zen. 3.59520,

D38 [263–229 BCE]). Another letter from the same archive shows two men complaining that they will die in prison if they aren't released, and that their pigs will die, too, for lack of being tended to (P. Cair. Zen. 3.59495, D141 [263–229 BCE]). A third letter dispenses with all pretenses toward magnanimity, demanding that Zeno consider his own self-interest: "Have you fallen asleep, overlooking me in prison? Think of your flocks and herds! Know that if the goats of Demetrios remain here, they will perish; for the road down which he drives them to the pastures is enough to kill them" (P. Mich. 1.87, D50 [263–229 BCE]). The debtor even offers a form of bail: "If it seems good to you I will leave my wife in prison to be answerable for me, until you inquire into the matters about which they accuse me." In the few instances in which petitions like this address a prisoner's guilt or innocence, the issue is secondary—they request release on the basis of economic expediency, and on the idea that their solvency is directly related to their capacity to ply a trade. A Coptic ostrakon from late antique Karnak (Egypt) likewise speaks to the import of prisoners for the seasonal labor force. A man named Komes begs a local official to have mercy on a prisoner, and to release him "because it is the season of work and I need him, as I have no one else" (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 1168.B, D297; Crum 1902, 79). Interestingly, in this example we see that an earlier Greek word typically reserved for war captives (*aichmalōtos*) has shifted to be a general term for prisoners in Coptic.

In the late Roman period, even debt collection was bound up in seasonal economic forces. In the fourth century CE, a son wrote to his father, threatening to send soldiers to incarcerate him for a debt of vegetable seed that he had owed his son for a year and that now should be available, given that the harvest season had arrived (P. Fay. 135, D119). Prisoners regularly complain of economic hardship incurred through incarceration, too, like a farmer at the turn of the Common Era who complains of being imprisoned for failure to pay taxes (even though he has a receipt of payment), causing him to miss the sowing season for his fields and the opportunity to labor on public lands that he had lawfully leased (P. Col. 8.209, D69 [3 CE]). In these cases we see the peculiar double vulnerability of the destitute, in which incarceration for debt compromised their ability to tend to their only source of revenue by which they might, eventually, pay and be released. The rural poor and migrant laborers, already vulnerable to incarceration, are also those most attuned to the waxing and waning of seasons and the ongoing life of their crops, a flux rendered in acute relief by the artificial stasis of the prison and by the whims of urban officials, whose lack of attention to the round of seasons reflect a different lived reality. The distinct relationship between stasis and seasonality shows up even in the visual record, with the largest proportion of depictions of the natural cycle of seasons occurring in the houses of African landowners whose seasonal laborers, in a very real sense, fed the Roman Empire (Shaw 2013, 176). These examples illustrate how prisons were a mechanism within a larger economic system. Seasonal needs drove both incarceration and the release of laborers. Yet even this is only one side of the coin.

The interimplication of the prison and economy is perhaps clearest on the other side of the coin: in the case of forced convict labor, especially mining operations. Ancient Mediterranean regimes required vast mining operations to meet demands for stone and metals—such a demand that in the Roman period, extractive industries left a significant geographical and environmental mark that is still detectable across the Mediterranean basin and even as far as the polar ice caps (Rosman et al. 1997; Hirt 2010; A. Hillman et al. 2017). Romans extracted hundreds of tons of copper per year from the island of Cyprus alone, which was just one among many centrally operated mines turning incarcerated and enslaved labor into revenue for the state (Raber 1987).

Polybius wrote that in the second century BCE, forty thousand laborers worked the mines near New Carthage, Spain, producing twenty-five thousand drachmae each day “for the benefit of the Roman people” (Quoted in Strabo, *Geography* 3.2.10, L142 [early first century CE]). Such numbers represent little more than a guess, but even if inflated they give a sense of the scale, and they indicate social understandings about the scale of Roman mining practices along with their economic importance. Writing in the first century BCE, Diodorus Siculus lamented that those mining under the earth give their bodies in search of revenue for their captors. “Those working for the mine overseers produce revenues in sums defying belief, while they themselves wear out their bodies in the diggings under the earth day and night, dying in large numbers because of the exceptional hardships they endure” (*Library of History* 5.38, L168). Likewise, Strabo tells us that when mining operations were unprofitable, they were temporarily shuttered. “What is more, the mine [at Mount Sandaracurgium] is often left idle because of the unprofitableness of it, since the workmen are not only more than two hundred in number, but are continually spent by disease and death” (*Geography* 12.3.40, L167 [early first century CE]). In these instances, the bodies of forced laborers were the fuel of the industry, and if mining concerns weren’t profitable, these authors urged that the operation should cease. While Fergus Millar (1984) questioned whether mining operations were in fact profitable, sources like Polybius, Diodorus Siculus, and Strabo insist that they were intended to turn the bodies of incarcerated and enslaved miners into profit for the state. Nevertheless, to reduce carceral practices solely to questions of economic rationality is to dispense with the fact that prisons have almost never been profitable—even modern private prisons produce a profit only through redirecting public money to private hands, not purely through the labor of their captives. Ultimately, the prison’s utility (if that is the right word) derives from the input of captive bodies, and not from the output of labor.

As Alfred Michael Hirt (2010) has argued, extractive mining efforts were of utmost importance to the central Roman state, but quarries like Simitthus, Mons Claudianus, and others “were thus run primarily for non-economic reasons connected with the display of imperial power and its projection through the means of art and architecture” (366–67). A letter from the middle of the third century BCE illustrates the economic exploitation of prisoners by private contractors

overseeing mines owned by the Ptolemaic king. The address, on the back, reads: “Notice from Horos the stonecutter concerning the prisoners [*desmōtai*] working the *āōilia* [unit of measure, two cubic cubits] and concerning the mine-shafts.” It is worth quoting in full.

To Zeno. Greetings from Horos the stonecutter. Herieus reports concerning the prisoners, from the second of (the month of) Phaophi until the tenth of (the month of) Choiak, that each man has worked two *āōilia* every day, there being ten men in all, so that within each month 600 *āōilia* have been worked, and within the two month period 1,200 have been worked, and over the course of eight days 160 have been worked. The total of *āōilia* worked is 1,360. If it seems best to you, send someone who will make a measurement, for there are 130 (prisoners) who have not yet worked. And know that we have received the contract for the excavation of the mineshafts, so that we may work. But Herieus, after receiving grain from you for the work, has not worked, but . . . the workers (?) . . . And the channels for which we received the contract, (at a cost of) 2.5 obols per five *āōilia* of rock and 1.5 obols for those transporting ten *āōilia* of rock, these I have completed at a cost of two obols and one obol, respectively. For I have workers here with me, so that the work was completed very quickly. And we have worked the royal stone from the rock toward the south at a cost of one obol, and we have received nothing for it. Therefore you would do well, if it seems best to you, to please give us some grain, so that we may be able to keep working until you make an examination about these matters. Farewell. (PSI 4.423, D58 [263–229 BCE]; trans. Bauschatz 2013, 256)

This fascinating report offers a window into nearly every aspect of the economic exploitation of prisoners in Ptolemaic Egypt. Laborers called prisoners were detailed to mines under the authority of Hereius and Horos, contractors who were awarded (or who likely purchased) the right to quarry royal mines and were paid a set fee for each unit quarried and delivered. The overseer indicates that he has 140 men at his disposal, and yet that over a period of sixty-eight days, only ten of them worked in the mines while the remaining prisoners sat idle, awaiting their turn to work in what must have been a sizable detention facility. We don’t have archaeological evidence for this particular incarcerated miner’s quarters, but the facility at Simitthus is a relevant comparandum, capable of holding more than one thousand workers. Also relevant is the report discussed above in which prisoners were ordered by the Ptolemaic king to be moved out of a local prison and transported up the Nile in order to labor in the mines (SB 28.16854, D5 [225 BCE]). Horos, the mine overseer, notes precisely the payment schedule and the costs incurred, and requests that administrator Zeno send grain “so that we may be able to keep working.” The logic motivating the transaction can be rendered clearly enough: food was allotted to captive workers as fuel to power extraction.

Similarly, a fragmentary papyrus from the early second century CE, apparently a daily report on the troop movements and whereabouts of a Roman auxiliary cohort in Lower Moesia (modern-day Romania and Bulgaria), notes personnel

missing from the ranks for various duties. Some soldiers were across the Danube on expedition; some had been sent to Gaul to bring back wheat for the troops. Some were sick and some, it notes, had been sent on official duty to oversee the mines in Dardania (C. Pap. Lat 112 [mid-September, 100–105 CE]; Fink 1971, 224–25). Taken together, these sources allow us to imagine how mining camps could function as a (quite literal) prison-industrial complex built on a convict leasing model. Even so, it seems that most days the typical laborer sat inside a carceral complex, waiting their turn in the mines and being kept alive for that purpose by the contractors who purchased the right to their bodies. Prisoners supplied gold, silver, copper, alabaster, marble, and other precious natural resources for public buildings and private homes, for coins and weapons, for jewelry and housewares. The deployment of unpaid convict labor was one of the cornerstones of the economy.

As we have noted a number of times already, Ulpian was a legal reformer, with dissenting opinions, most famous in carceral studies for his pronouncement that prisons should not be used for punishment (D 48.19.8.9, L120 [early third century CE]). His regular refrain, that lower-class deviants ought be condemned to labor of various sorts rather than simply imprisoned, perhaps indicates something about the nature of his objection to penal incarceration: prisons should not be used for punishment because doing so involves a wasted opportunity for labor extraction benefiting the public good, instead holding prisoners and feeding them at public expense (D 48.19.9). If this was the rationale underlying Ulpian's infamous objection, he was not alone. In the early second century CE, the Roman governor of Pontus and Bithynia (two provinces in the eastern Mediterranean on the coast of the Black Sea) wrote to the emperor Trajan about the matter of prisoners condemned to forced labor instead of serving lighter sentences as public slaves. In his letter, Pliny the Younger worries about the prudence of returning sometimes elderly men to their initial punishment and about the cost of feeding them a prison ration without forcing them to work. The emperor takes a hard line in his response: anyone sentenced within the last ten years was to return to serve their sentence, while those who were sentenced more than ten years prior (and were thereby advanced in age) should be sent to do similar, though lighter, work than that to which they were originally sentenced. Such men, the emperor suggests, "are usually assigned to the baths, or to clearing the sewers, or again, to laying roads and streets" (*Letters* 10.32, L40 [109–10 CE]). Trajan's response illustrates how, while idle incarceration was an available punishment for crimes, it was not lost on the powers that be that captive bodies could and should be put to labor within the broader economy. A fragmentary inscription of a law from the mid-sixth century (likely from Justinian) appears to take a different tack, opposing this exact practice by forbidding the use of prisoners as labor on public projects, except when the schedule is tight and prisoners are necessary to complete the work on time (SEG 8.355, D166 [542 CE?]).

In all, the evidence paints a telling picture. In the hands of the powerful, incarceration was a multipurpose tool, capable of suppressing undesirable behavior and reorienting free people to perform unpaid labor for the benefit of state priorities. Economic and social factors inflected carceral vulnerability, as well: the destitute were more likely to end up in prison in the first instance, and when convicted of a crime, they were more likely than those of means to be sentenced to punishment by prison or forced labor. It is simultaneously optimistic and naïve to view carceral systems exclusively under the rubric of crime and punishment. In the prison's position as a cornerstone of the ancient economy, we witness instead the disarticulation of crime from punishment, and find instead a clear vista onto incarceration's other, less noble uses (Davis 2006). Prisoners did more than pay a debt, whether private or societal. They were a useful resource for society itself, cogs in a machine that fit tongue and groove with economic priorities of successive empires that quite simply could not function in the absence of a carceral system that consumed their labor and, often, their lives.

SOCIAL SUPPORT AND ASSOCIATIONS

As we have argued, ancient judicial sources on incarceration, and the contemporary historiographical analysis of them, leads to the false impression that incarceration in antiquity was primarily a matter of justice delayed and that “prison” is the wrong term altogether to describe these spaces; instead, they were merely jails or “lockups”—temporary holding cells used sparingly with little social impact, and even less impact on the historical record. From their placement at the center of cities, however, to their use as one form of punishment, to the exploitation of prisoners in extractive and labor-intensive industries, and even incarcerated people's reliance on external aid, we see that prisons were fully integrated into the life of ancient cities across the Mediterranean. The prison was a social institution, involving the family members and community of the incarcerated, as well as local politics, public relations, and the local and transregional economy.

First, prisoners relied heavily on community support—above all, for food, as discussed at length in the previous chapter. Prison windows that opened to public spaces, common in the archaeological record, apparently served as sites of social networking. A number of early Christian accounts of incarceration and martyrdom speak to regular visiting hours for family and community members, along with the apparently common tactic of bribing prison officials to gain access to those inside (*Acts of Paul and Thecla* 18, L28 [mid-second century, CE]; *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 3, L15 [third–fourth centuries CE]). In the first century CE, the apostle Paul claims to have both received visitors while in prison and dispatched them to others with letters in tow, and in the third-century *Acts of Thomas*, a visitor is depicted bribing a guard with 363 staters of silver in order to gain access to the apostle Thomas locked inside (Paul, *Philemon* 12, L80 [mid-first century CE]; *Acts of Thomas* 151, L36 [early third century CE]).

Associations, or social groups, often played a key role in caring for imprisoned members. A letter from an Egyptian gravediggers' association shows the group petitioning the Ptolemaic king for release of one of their members, requesting that he not be harassed by the head prison guard while he awaits trial (P. Tarich. 5, D138 [ca. 189 BCE]). The letter, from the early second century BCE, includes what might be construed as a threat of collective action, with the gravediggers reminding the king that they are useful to him as justification for local authorities to leave them in peace. The association was quite active in this space, it seems: their archive records two more similar petitions on behalf of incarcerated gravediggers within the span of about a year (P. Tarich. 3, D156 [189 BCE]; P. Tarich. 4 (a & b), D157 [188 BCE]; Armoni 2013, 40–59). While food itself is not explicated in these documents, given the thoroughgoing financial and legal effort to support their associates, it is reasonable to imagine that they also sought to ensure the nourishment of incarcerated gravediggers within their association that were wrongly being “destroyed in the prison . . . [not] having the necessities,” and that “spending [their] own” in these cases referred also to supplying food to prisoners for sustenance (P. Tarich. 3 ll. 35–37, D156 [189 BCE]). By Late Antiquity, even associations of sports fans were banding together to influence politics in major cities like Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople, including petitioning for the release of prisoners during the famous Nika riots of 532 CE (Bond 2025, 179).

Religious associations were particularly prominent as caretakers for incarcerated members. In the middle of the second century BCE, members of an association of Jews in Herakleopolis wrote a petition on behalf of members incarcerated in Tebtunis, requesting that they be released from prison (P. Polit. Jud. 17, D202 [143 BCE]). Another member of the same Jewish community wrote about a decade later to the leader of the group, claiming “since I happen to be duly admonished, and grasp the experience of prison and have wasted away for enough days, being away from home and not having the basic necessities, I beg and pray with supplication not to overlook [*huperidein*] me but, should it seem right, to assist me and dispose that I may be called from the [prison] . . .” (P. Polit. Jud. 2, D272 [ca. 135 BCE]). In the first century CE, another religious community—this time followers of a Jewish messiah—made visits and wrote petitions in an attempt to secure release for one of their leaders (Paul, *Letter to the Philippians* 1:18; 2:25–30; 4:10–20, L66 [mid-first century CE]). Roughly contemporaneous Christian sources speak to the care for incarcerated associates as incumbent on the community, including, importantly, provisioning Christian prisoners with food (*Gospel according to Matthew* 25, L213 [late first century CE]; *Letter to the Hebrews* 13:3, L220 [late first century CE]). By the second century, Christians were known to a broader public not only for providing for their own incarcerated coreligionists, but as an association of people particularly invested in caring for all prisoners in need of help. Lucian of Samosata openly mocked Christians for their gullibility and ostentation in caring for prisoners who called on them for aid, including the religious freelancer and (in Lucian's estimation) scam artist Peregrinus.

When [Peregrinus] had been shackled, the Christians, regarding the incident as a calamity, left nothing undone in the effort to release him. Then, because this was not feasible, every other form of amenity was furnished to him, not casually but eagerly. From the break of day old widows and orphan children could be seen waiting near the prison, while their higher-ups even slept inside with him, having bribed the prison guards. Then elaborate meals were brought in, and sacred texts of theirs were read aloud, and most blessed Peregrinus (for he was still called this) was called “new Socrates” by them. (*Passing of Peregrinus* 12, L197 [late second century CE])

It has long been noted that civic associations—professional, religious, or social—were particularly attractive to people who lacked other networks of social security and were also in need of protection against such risks of litigation and assurance of proper burial. However, association support in prison has also been recently discussed at length (Last and Harland 2020, 151–86). To these benefits we should add another important benefit: insurance against incarceration and assurance of aid should people of little means find themselves on the wrong side of the prison gate.

Incarceration had impact beyond the individual, as social risk radiated from the condemned to those in their orbit. Diodorus Siculus wrote about the relatives of convicts also sent to the mines, and Seneca the Younger complained of people deserting incarcerated friends “at the first rattle of the chain” (*Library of History* 3.12–13, L71 [60–30 BCE]; *Letter* 9.9, L215 [63–65 CE]). Eusebius recorded among other outrages of the emperor Licinius that during his short reign over the eastern Roman empire he legislated “that those suffering hardship in prisons should receive no human kindness in the form of food distributions,” and further that people caught delivering food to prisoners should be imprisoned themselves, “that those offering any humane service be bound in chains in prison and endure the same punishment as those who had been so sentenced” (*Ecclesiastical History* 10.8.11 [ca. 324 CE]). He also spoke of the physical risks of certain Christians being stopped by guards at the gate while visiting other Christians imprisoned in the mines, thereby putting their own lives at risk (*Martyrs of Palestine* 11.6, L77 [325 CE]). Visitation was not limited to exchange of supplies and words of support: the luckiest captives awaiting trial were able to procure legal assistance, as in the case of SB 16.12949, an account of legal proceedings in the third century CE where an advocate speaks in defense of an accused prisoner (D62). The detailed nature of the litigation strongly implies that the advocate did not take the case sight unseen, but rather that he had met with his incarcerated client and prepared a defense on their behalf. The papyrus does not indicate whether this meeting occurred through a window or during a supervised visitation, but, taken together, sources like these speak to prisons as socially porous spaces where visitors came and went on a daily basis with provisions, support, and services. In the fourth century CE, Libanius even spoke of the blessings that visitors bestow on prisoners “through a little window” (*Letter* 1428.1 [363 CE]; De Simoni 2022, 170).

Windows, gates, and even supervised visitation inside kept prisoners in touch with their social networks. The narrative of Lucian's *Toxaris* draws on a cultural assumption of set hours and specific procedures for prisoner visitation, with prison guards locking up and slaves overseeing the facility at night (30, L143 [163 CE]). While separation was a priority in some prison facilities, we have argued that prisoner access was also an intentional design feature of carceral spaces, and while some sources speak to the subversive nature of prisoner contact with the public, others demonstrate that prisoner contact with the broader public was a feature of the carceral system, and not a bug. In his *Autobiography*, Libanius speaks of personally persuading the governor to release a student's father from prison so that he could return home—apparently, a regular task for the professor (232 [385 CE]; Schouler 2006, 284). In late ancient Egypt, monks commonly replaced politicians and businessmen in the position of carceral go-between, as we see in P. Lond. 6.1914 and O. Mon. Epiph. 163 (D118 [335 CE]; D194 [sixth–seventh centuries CE]). While the offices and identities of the elite changed, the social logic remained static: having friends in high places just might save a prisoner's life, and in order to receive a hearing, bail, or work release, prisoners often relied on influential members of society to manipulate the judicial system.

Scores of letters in the Zeno archive illustrate this fact from the earliest period of our study. Zeno was a complex social actor: on paper, he was first a business associate and secretary of a man named Apollonius, a local Ptolemaic finance minister (*dioiketes*), then he was the manager of Apollonius's estate in Philadelphia, and eventually he became a private businessman in Philadelphia. His private archive is substantial, comprising over 1,800 individual papyri spanning the period between 263 and 229 BCE, and including over two dozen letters from or about prisoners, each of which demonstrate his abiding ability to influence the actions and decisions of judges and wardens, both as an associate of a powerful man and as a power broker in his own right (Vandorpe 2013). Zeno is one such well-attested power broker, but he is hardly unique. Letters from or about prisoners were often to local elites—retainers or representatives of the political establishment and local businessmen—requesting release from prison or aid for those inside. The evidence suggests that across Mediterranean antiquity, if you hoped to get released from prison, knowing the right people and how to get a communication to them was at least equally important to knowing how to navigate the judicial system.

Documents rarely offer full insight into networks of movement that carried these letters from the prison to the public, but the archive offers glimpses. For instance, another prisoner letter in the Zeno archive indicates that “the bearer of the letter is a brother of the detained person” (P. Mich. 1.85, D120 [263–229 BCE]), while a Coptic ostrakon from the opposite end of our time period suggests that letters could be sent through carriers to be paid upon arrival, by its recipient. Two women, held in prison as collateral for their husband's debts, write, “Pay the wage

of . . . who shall bring this potsherd to you” (O. Mon. Epiph. 177, D139 [500–799 CE]). Evidence for modes of dispatch is scant, preventing us from saying, for instance, that family letter carriers were more common in the Ptolemaic period and postpaid on arrival was common in the Byzantine period. Rather, we ought to view each as one option among many for a prisoner wanting to communicate with those outside.

Physically speaking, prisoners were separated from the general population through infrastructure that segregated their bodies while allowing limited interaction with the public. And yet, incarcerated individuals were connected to the broader society through a number of key nodes. While it is often noted that prisoners relied on the support of friends and family to stay alive, in chapter 5 we suggest two further modes of connection: regular prison visitation by trained writers, passing by to take and dispatch petitions; and communication networks based on letters whose postage was paid by the recipient upon delivery, again implying that private couriers visited prisons with some regularity, hoping to contract business with a prisoner inside (p. 165–168).

There is, in fact, a letter from the late sixth or early seventh century CE that speaks to one such private courier who was himself in danger of incarceration. In PSI 7.824, the administrator of a private estate wrote to the estate supervisor Iulianus, reporting “the letter-carrier came saying that you are holding his wife in the prison and that you seized his other possessions [or: his horses]. Please release his horses and keep his wife under guard” (D13 [575–625 CE]; emendation Berkes 2015). The letter carrier needed to keep working to pay off his debt; he needed his horses to work, carrying letters like this one, as well as those discussed above. While he worked, his wife sat in prison as collateral. Such were the impossible choices faced by the economically vulnerable captured by a carceral system intent on making them pay.

Connections between social networks and carceral facilities happened in a variety of ways, most of which never took material form and thus never left a trace in the documentary record. Nevertheless, the sheer quantity of preserved petitions, often written in a trained hand and sent to local administrators, indicates that prisoners had ongoing access to people who could understand, record, dispatch, and ultimately communicate their needs to the relevant parties. Prisoners were in regular contact with the “outside world.” But what did the public think about the plight of the prisoner?

PUBLIC PRESSURE AND CONSENT

In the preface of his book *On Medicine*, the Roman physician Celsus remarks on the practice of advancing science by vivisectioning “criminal people received from the prison” (*nocentes homines . . . ex carcere acceptos*). It is an awful and gruesome story, at the end of which the doctor contemplates whether the ends justify the means. He reports that most people in his day contended that the execution

of criminals through medical vivisection was cruel and unjustified, while others, himself included, thought that such violence against convicts was justified because it allowed doctors to “seek remedies for innocent people of all future ages” (*On Medicine* pref. 23–25, L195 [47 CE]). Celsus’s brief anecdote reveals a live issue in the middle of the first century CE: a public debate over the treatment of public prisoners. Some saw vivisection as fundamentally cruel and hoped for its end, while others saw the practice as necessary for scientific progress and found it worthwhile to destroy the bodies of the convicted with hopes of saving the innocent. Celsus’s anecdote shows that broader publics were aware of practices of incarceration, and that many had opinions about them, all of which inflected prisoners’ experience. The issue was debated in antiquity, and experimentation on incarcerated populations is not a relic of a bygone era—debate over the validity of such practices continues today (Knight and Flynn 2012).

Incarceration is a social phenomenon implicating more than just a prisoner and that prisoner’s captor; the public has always played a role in legitimizing the carceral apparatus. Across Mediterranean antiquity rulers were often criticized for excessive use of the prison, and they regularly opened the prison’s doors in hopes of gaining the favor of a public that variously protested, or consented to, its abuses. To our knowledge, no source from the ancient world questions the validity of the institution of the prison itself—there were no ancient prison abolitionists, in other words, though the notion that tyrants abuse the prison system, while good leaders reform it, is common enough to constitute something of a late antique literary trope (Hillner 2013, 389–90).

In his *Roman History*, Cassius Dio reports that toward the end of his reign the emperor Tiberius came under increasing public pressure for abusive practices of incarceration (59.6.1–3, L126 [ca. 230 CE]; Chauvot 1999b). As a political remedy, his young successor Gaius (Caligula) released people who had been held in prison, including political prisoners who had reportedly been incarcerated already for seven years. Dio reports that Gaius burned legal evidence from the prisoner’s cases in order to form a contrast with his predecessor; without the relevant documents, the new emperor would be “unable to punish” these alleged enemies of the state with indefinite incarceration, as Tiberius had done repeatedly. A century earlier, the historian Suetonius similarly accused Tiberius of tyrannical abuse of the prison to punish his rivals, and in some instances to avenge mistreatment of imperial officials by local populations (*Life of Tiberius* 61, L19 [ca. 120 CE]). In one instance, Suetonius reports that the emperor dispatched two cohorts of soldiers to a small city east of the Apennine Mountains, where locals were holding a centurion’s body ransom. Soldiers entered the city quietly through two different gates and “sent the majority of the plebeians and the city councilors [*decuriones*] to prison for life [*in perpetua vincula*]” (*Life of Tiberius* 37 [ca. 120 CE]).

Written during the late first century CE, the *Gospel according to Mark* tells a story of another instance of politically expedient prisoner release by one of Tiberius’s provincial governors, Pontius Pilate. In this account, the governor was

said to be in the habit of releasing one prisoner each year on the occasion of a Jewish Passover holiday, and the public had some say over which prisoner was released (15:6–15, L62 [late first century CE]). The historical details of this story are unlikely to be true. Nevertheless, the circumstances described by the gospel account were legible within its ancient context, in which the identities of current prisoners were known to the populace, the public could effect incarceration or release of prisoners through popular pressure, and that rulers used the prison as a tool not solely to coerce and punish individuals but also to intimidate and placate the broader population.

Local populations and administrators alike used prisoners as a bargaining chip to pressure or appease the other, while elites could use their sway to effect the release even of people who had been convicted and condemned to prison as part of their punishment. In the late fourth century, Libanius's speech before emperor Theodosius I noted precisely that at Antioch, the whole swath of punishments available to a governor were intended as a public institution through which the state telegraphs ideas about deviance to the broader society, with salubrious deterrent effects. It is the governor's task, he argues, to execute people who deserve death so as to "restrain the others through fear of a similar fate" (*Oration* 45.28, L52 [386 CE]). Punishments are part of a well-ordered society, Libanius argues, including the punishment of being cast into a public prison. But to let people die in prison before they have been tried and convicted is a moral catastrophe of a high order (45.29). Over a century later, a letter from the Ostrogothic king Athalaric to the urban prefect of Rome reports a familiar story of judicial abuse: two residents of the city suspected of sedition during the reign of King Theodoric sat in prison—either having been convicted with minimal deliberation, or perhaps simply awaiting trial—and as a result were "wasting away under the punishment of lengthy incarceration [*longae custodiae poena maceratos*]" (Cassiodorus, *Variae* 9.17, L8 [533–34 CE]). Theodoric had died at least seven years prior, which strongly suggests that the men in question were not still awaiting trial—perhaps the allegations never went to trial or, alternatively, the conspirators were convicted and left to rot in the civic prison of Rome as punishment. Either way, it was described as a punishment (9.17.2: *longae custodiae poena*; cf. Hillner 2015, 134n78). The king's letter makes clear that the bishop of Rome was aware of the plight of these prisoners because he checked on them, an interesting correlation with the law of Honorius suggesting precisely that local bishops were responsible to check on the prison population in their jurisdiction once a week, on Sunday (*CTh* 9.3.7, L44 [409 CE]). As in earlier cases, these men were granted pardons and released on a royal order—this time at the behest of John, the bishop of Rome; Shane Bjornlie (2019) points out that these letters comprise the first evidence within Cassiodorus's collection of royal assent to a papal petition (375). In assenting to such a request of a well-heeled local, King Athalaric followed a precedent in evidence already for

a thousand years, by which prisoners petition elites for release, appealing to the incarcerator's sense of justice along with their desire to appear merciful in the eyes of a public who knew the identity of those incarcerated in their cities (cf. P. Cair. Zen. 3.59482, D35 [263–229 BCE]; O. Mon. Epiph. 163, D194 [sixth–seventh centuries CE]). An influential figure petitioning for a specific prisoner's release was not novel—what's new was that a Christian cleric had risen to the role of the influential figure doing so. King Athalaric's letter specifically notes that there was a public outcry about these prisoners, suggesting again that the deviance of prisoners was purposefully on public display.

Then as now, the public had a role in an individual's experience of incarceration. Those who opposed the imprisonment of specific people could do something about it: they could write to local leadership, issue their complaint, and plead their case. Likewise, if prisoners or their immediate social circle felt their incarceration was unjust or unwarranted, they could appeal to a public, who had opinions about the case and could supply and bottom-up political influence. And it appears that these actions sometimes worked to put someone in prison, or to have them released. It is perhaps worth pausing to consider what it might mean that, at either end of our timeframe, we regularly meet local power brokers who stood outside of the formal legal apparatus but nevertheless possessed the power to loose and bind. The broader public was at times well aware of who was incarcerated in their midst, even though their bodies were carefully hidden from view and direct access.

Representations of prisoners, on the other hand, were everywhere: sometimes in stories about their plight, and sometimes in artistic renderings that broadcasted to society messages about their experience, culpability, and social status. Prisoners were not the only members of ancient society to experience the prison, in other words—depictions of prisoners invited society as a whole to reflect on the place of incarceration within it. We turn now to public and private depictions of prisoners, asking about the experience of the prison for those outside of it, and for those involved in its day-to-day operation. Or, put differently, we ask: How did nonincarcerated members of society recognize the prison and its captives?

PUBLIC TRANSCRIPT

Prisoners were depicted in a staggering array of places and media across the ancient world: on monumental civic architecture, in private domestic spaces, on tombstones and dedications, figurines, and even on clothes. These representations offer insight into the public transcript of incarceration: the visual lexicon available to residents of the ancient Mediterranean when imagining prisoners and places of their incarceration. This public transcript results from images commissioned by individuals, communities, and the state, and manufactured by artisans. James C. Scott (1990) describes the public transcript as “the *self*-portrait of dominant

elites as they would have themselves seen . . . It is designed to be impressive, to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites, and to conceal or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule" (18). We extend Scott's usage to consider how elites represented themselves publicly in relation to carceral facilities and imprisoned subjects. Together, these representations of prisons, prisoners, and the idealized judicial order by elites and for an elite gaze created and reified a series of visual typecasts of incarceration to the public. Put differently, they announced to passersby how to "know a prisoner when you see one."

In what follows we offer readings of visual sources, attempting to understand typical features common among representations of prisoners and prisons. One goal is to understand what a typical person in antiquity might have conceived when faced with stories and reports of incarcerated people—what the broader public's experience of incarceration looked like, even outside of carceral facilities. Another goal is to understand the visual lexicon produced by those commissioning and crafting images of deviant bodies that had come into contact with state power. How do representations of prisons stereotype the bodies of prisoners and sites of their incarceration, and how do both relate to the visual discourse of gender, racial or ethnic stereotypes, and other depictions of state power?

Thus far our analysis has focused primarily on civic prisoners, bracketing for a moment both prisoners of war and slaves. From a purely material perspective this distinction is artificial and academic, as the methods of binding were often identical for all three categories; shackles used for civic prisoners are visually and materially indistinguishable from those used to bind slaves or prisoners of war. Nevertheless, literary and documentary sources tend to use different words for each type of bound body, and they distinguish between the three based on the rationale for their unfreedom: civic prisoners were bound on account of perceived criminality or deviance, prisoners of war as a result of military campaigns, and slaves owing to formal, legal enslavement. When it comes to visual sources, however, the distinction between bound bodies is both less clear and less useful. Relatively few surviving sources explicitly depict civic prisoners in clear distinction from prisoners of war or enslaved people; in most cases, it is not possible to determine what kind of bound bodies are represented. But slippage between these categories is not a purely modern issue: Romans themselves exploited the ambiguity. In many cases we find a studied lack of distinction that is itself both telling and analytically useful.

Consider for instance the Mosaic of the Captives, which decorated the central apse of Tipasa's civic basilica on the coast of Mauritania in Roman North Africa (fig. 15). This late second-century CE mosaic depicts a captive native (Berber) man joined by a woman and a young boy, who are presumably intended to depict a family unit. The male captive appears muscled and nude, looking into the distance with hands bound behind their back and casting long shadows from their feet, while the woman peers directly at the viewer over her shackled hands, in a



FIGURE 15. Mosaic of the Captives (V8; Tipasa, Tunisia) Late second century CE. Image courtesy Carole Raddato. See Dunbabin 1978, 26; Ferris 2000, 102–3; Bradley 2004, 300.

more sympathetic depiction. These are military captives—the man sits on a shield, unmistakably identifying him and the others as prisoners of war. But this scene was not chosen for a martial context. Designers in Tipasa chose to depict *military* captives as the central decorative motif on the floor of the *civic* basilica. A variety of events take place in civic basilicas, including human trafficking in a variety of guises; local decisions to loose and to bind captives in the civic prison were undertaken here, along with decisions about slaves sold and manumitted. It was a choice to depict military prisoners in a place where civic prisoners were presented and tried. We argue that such a decision suggests that, in relevant visual lexica, bound bodies of different types were functionally interchangeable. Further, there was utility in intentionally blurring the line between civic prisoners and prisoners of war in provincial settings like Tipasa, where such ambiguity and interchangeability served a colonizing purpose: intimidating the native local population, who were all dominated subjects of Roman military presence to one degree or another. It could hardly have been lost to indigenous populations called to the curia, basilica, or tribunal to receive judgment that Romans represented local populations as already and perpetually dominated through incarceration and trampled underneath the feet of judges.

The Mosaic of the Captives is not unique, either: a similar choice was made in Corinth in the design of the Lechaion Road basilica, variously dated from the late first to the early third century CE (V16). The southern facade of the basilica faced the forum and featured several larger-than-life captives in an Orientalized

guise, two of which survive almost in their entirety (Stillwell 1941, 55–88; Richardson 1902). The exact date of their installation at the entrance to the basilica is debated (and the details need not concern us here) but a second-century CE time frame is a reasonable hypothesis (Ajootian 2014, 364). Visually, the captives follow a common pattern in imperial Roman sculpture that Rolf Michael Schneider (2012) has called the handsome Asian: “a clean-shaven face framed by long coiffured hair and crowned by the Phrygian cap . . . a visual stereotype [that] made it possible to represent all the people of the Asian East as uniform and thus essentially the same” (85–86). At Sarmizegetusa, too, Dacian prisoners of war decorated the facade of the basilica complex, directly adjacent to the civic prison that stood underneath the eastern tribunal (Étienne et al. 2002, 135). At these sites, war captives decorate the entrance to a space where civic judicial matters were decided, even though it was civil prisoners, and not war captives, who would have seen and passed these objects to receive judgment. We do not know what any particular person in antiquity thought about the visualization of military prisoners to decorate a civic basilica. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to think that an ancient observer standing in the forum in Corinth or Sarmizegetusa would have seen a correspondence between the chained prisoners of war depicted at the basilica entrance and the chained civil prisoners moving beneath them. The same holds for the floor of the basilica in Tipasa. That this motif appears regularly in civic basilicas suggests further that military captives could be employed as visual representations of prisoners writ large.

Visual sources, then, often deployed stock imagery depicting captives of various types with a sort of determined obfuscation. Since visual cultures as geographically disparate as Mauritania, Dacia, and Greece conflate civic and martial prisoners, we cautiously proceed in our consideration of how ambiguous imagery offers insight into the ways image makers and governmental officials employed incarceration within the visual lexicon of state power. In this way, visual sources are a particularly interesting point of contrast to prison graffiti: while the former offer an elite-funded view of bound bodies and their relationship with civil society, the latter give insight into tactics of resistance that incarcerated people deployed in response to such depictions, for instance in the prisoner graffiti from late ancient Corinth (Larsen 2024).

Images of incarceration were ubiquitous, appearing in a wide variety of media on different objects and visual contexts. Our dataset is intended to be broadly representative rather than comprehensive, but even selecting judiciously, sources include images of prisoners on statues, decorative columns and reliefs, wall frescoes, floor mosaics, coins, gems, pendants, plates, vases, tunics, dolls, figurines, keys, manuscripts, mummy wrapping, and sarcophagi. Such a broad range of depictions and media suggests that prisoners were represented to a wide variety of viewers. Prisoners appear on public structures, home decor, elite private objects, magical handbooks, funerary art, and on mass-produced objects available

to people across the social spectrum. These images were displayed in judicial and non-judicial spaces, in public and in private, on monuments and personal trinkets, and in formats large and small. We find prisoners depicted in Ptolemaic Egypt, early and late in the Roman Empire, and in Byzantine sources, from every corner of the Mediterranean basin and beyond. Just about anywhere an image was to be regularly found, prisoners appeared.

Incarcerated bodies populate the public transcript more than carceral spaces; representations of prisons themselves are comparatively rare. Even so, a number are extant, all from Roman and Byzantine contexts. These sources depict prisons as dark, underground chambers with small windows opening to the outdoors. For instance, at Pompeii we find the myth of Pero and Micon depicted in four different places—three frescoes in private residences along with a small terracotta statue found at the entrance to a public bath complex. The story is extant in three different literary versions, each involving a parent convicted of an unspecified crime and sentenced to die in prison by starvation, and a daughter keeping the parent alive by feeding them with her breast milk on repeated visits (Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 5.4.7, L14 [14–37 CE]; Hyginus, *Fables* 254.3 [early first century CE]; Pliny, *Natural History* 7.36, L150 [ca. 77 CE]). While the names of the characters change between tellings, and even the gender of the parent is in flux, the tale is recognizably stable and undoubtedly what is depicted in the Pompeiian frescoes.

All three frescoes appear to be based on a portrayal of the mythical prison scene in Rome, and each depicts a dark space with a window high on one wall (Rohden 1880, 57–60). Bars cover the window in depictions at the house on the Via Stabiae (9.2.5, V12 [mid-first century CE]; fig. 16) and the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (5.4.a, V13 [mid-first century CE], while the opening appears to be unbarred in the depiction at the House of Bacchus (7.4.10, V15 [mid-first century CE])—though this last depiction seems to have significantly decayed shortly after excavation in 1826, and we are reliant on early drawings. In all three frescoes, light beams diagonally through the window, emphasizing that the prison is a dark and underground space, with a window opening to the public, as seen in the person peering down from above in figure 16. Critically, in these frescoes the prison is not the focus of the story but merely its setting: it is a stage built from stock features and is meant to be immediately recognizable to viewers as a civic prison. The proliferation of this particular image, from Rome to at least three houses in Pompeii and undoubtedly to countless others, as well as its representation across the late Roman period, makes these scenes important indicators of how the material aspects of a Roman prison were popularly imagined.

Just within Pompeii, the myth appears in a variety of spaces: the fresco preserved at the House of Bacchus (7.4.10, V15) is from a public space—the atrium at the entrance to the home—while the version preserved on the Via Stabiae (9.2.5, V12) decorated the triclinium of a combination storefront/home, in a semipublic



FIGURE 16. Left: Fresco of Pero and Micon, Via Stabiae, Pompeii (9.2.5, V12 [mid-first century CE]); MANN inv. 115398. Photo by Giorgio Albano. Right: Drawing of fresco by Nicola Vople, 1870. MANN inv. ADS 970. Both copyright, courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, National Archaeological Museum of Naples.

room intended for entertaining and display. A statue depicting the myth was found at the entrance to a public bath complex (2.4.6, V14), while the version of the myth in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto graced the wall of a *cubiculum*: a bedroom opening to the house's atrium. This version, decorating a private bedroom, offers further insight into why the homeowner elected to have this scene represented in their home, because it includes a Latin elegiac poem written within its frame. The poem reads,

The food which the mother was preparing for her little children
 hostile Fortune has turned into food for her father.
 The deed is worthy of eternity. [See how] the old veins in the thin neck [shine as]
 the milk [passes through.]
 At the same time, she herself, Pero, strokes Micon with her face pressed to him:
 along with piety there is in her a sad modesty. (CLE 2048, D199 [first century CE];
 trans. Milnor)

The homeowner chose a fresco evoking this story because it presents the virtue of filial piety, not because it depicted a prison. Nevertheless, for the story to be effective, viewers must already have a stereotyped idea of what a prison looks like, and of the people inside of them. Literary accounts of the myth depict lower status people as peculiarly vulnerable to incarceration, and these frescoes participate in a larger visual pattern of viewing prisoners as particularly worthy of charity (Harley-McGowan 2015). Because a civic prison is merely the setting of this story, it provides us insight into what these homeowners were led to believe the inside of a public prison looked like. As we have seen, these facilities look surprisingly

similar to the civic prisons that are attested archaeologically, even though the images were intended to present a moralizing tale and in at least some cases to remind viewers of a social debt owed to their families.

Carceral facilities appear in a few other depictions, as well. For instance, a large mosaic uncovered outside Antioch depicts a succession of public buildings and monuments as they appeared in the fifth century CE, including two identical large buildings on a central urban artery, “imposing and austere in appearance.” A high-ranking official stands in front of one of these buildings while a figure rushes towards it carrying a loaf of bread and a small white bag. The building features a legend reading to *dēmosin*—“the public facility,” or, as Michel Matter (2004, 65–67) argues, the public prison—a usage of the term that goes all the way back to Thucydides (Yakto Mosaic, Hatay Archaeology Museum, V5 [late fifth century CE]; Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 5.18.7 [late fifth century BCE]). As we discuss below, another story taking place in a prison—the Christian apostle Peter drawing water from a rock in the Tullian Prison—appears in a few depictions, though both dwell on the characters in the story more than the space of the prison itself. A sixth-century manuscript illustration represents the Roman client king Herod’s prison at Machaerus as a dark space with a barred door as its entrance, inhabited by prisoners with long, haggard hair and beards wrapped in heavy brown cloaks, while a roughly contemporaneous depiction of the biblical patriarch Joseph from Antioch presents his prison as small and cramped, with vaulted ceilings (BnF Sup. grec 1286(10v), V61 [sixth century CE]; Weitzmann 1979, 491–92, no. 442; Princeton Art Museum, Antioch C515-S630, V7 [490–550 CE]).

Soldiers serve as guards more often than not in extant representations of prisoners and prisons, which has led some interpreters to understand the scenes as depicting prisoners of war. Across the Roman world, however, soldiers were regularly detailed to public prisons; conversely, civilians were regularly incarcerated in military prisons and guarded by military personnel (Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.19–20, L24 [109–10 CE], *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 7–9, L15 [third–fourth centuries CE]). In other words, the depiction of a soldier serving as a guard is not an indication of the status of their prisoners. A first-century CE limestone relief from Nickenich (Germany) represents an imposing Roman soldier in the upper register transporting two prisoners, hunched and small in the lower register (Landesmuseum Bonn inv. 31.86, V21 [first century CE]). In one hand the soldier holds a club; with the other hand he controls a chain connected to collars around prisoners’ necks. As noted above, the methods of binding civil prisoners, prisoners of war, and slaves were often formally identical, and the presence of a soldier as guard does not shed any interpretive light on the intended status of the bound individuals. What we can say, however, is this: the image depicts prisoner transport with startling fidelity to the material aspects known from archaeological sources, including extant remains of shackles, and it echoes what someone might have seen as any sort of prisoner was marched through their town (Thompson 1993, 233–40).

Prisoner transports were common in various parts of the ancient world, so far as literary and documentary sources attest—and especially so in Asia Minor, as described in the edict of Hadrian concerning the treatment of soldiers transporting prisoners discussed in chapter 5, for instance, along with the letters of the early second-century CE bishop Ignatius depicting the movement of prisoners over land in the provinces (p. 184; SEG 59.1365, D175 [129 CE]; Ignatius of Antioch, *Romans* 5.1, L216 [early second century CE]). A second- or third-century CE relief from Miletus (Balat, Turkey) represents a similar scene: a soldier controls a chain connected to the hand of one prisoner, who is in turn attached through chains and collars to two others (Istanbul, Archaeological Museum inv. 2042, V43 [second–third centuries CE]). The motif is repeated in roughly contemporaneous reliefs from Smyrna and Ephesus, both of which depict *damnati*: prisoners en route to die in the arena, often holding placards apparently intended to indicate their crime to the public as they pass by (Oxford, Ashmolean inv. ANMichaelis.137, V44 [ca. 200 CE]; Selçuk, Ephesos Museum inv. 244, V45 [second/third century CE]; Vismara 2001, 42–43). It is often impossible to say whether the prisoners depicted are civic or martial, but the ambiguity persists from antiquity, along with the visual effect of the images, which stress the dominance of Roman order over deviant bodies. We argue this ambiguity is itself analytically useful because it reflects well a common and sustained metonymy in the public transcripts of the ancient Mediterranean world.

Nevertheless, there are some unambiguous depictions of Roman soldiers guarding civic prisoners. For instance, a pair of fourth-century CE sarcophagi from Rome, along with a fifth-century ivory box from Rome, depict the arrest of the apostle Peter and his miracle of causing a rock to flow with water so that he could baptize the guards overseeing him in the Tullian Prison (MET 1991.366, V6 [early fourth century CE]; MV 31551.0.0, V26 [early fourth century CE]; BM 1856,0623.10, V40 [ca. 430 CE]). In all the depictions the guards are soldiers: they wear a short tunic, military boots, and Pannonian caps, and in one literary source they are even given names and described as “senior agents of the Master of the Offices [*melloprincipes magistrani*]”—an usual phrase that seems to refer in this instance to agents of the emperor Nero’s personal military cadre (*Acts of Martinian and Processus* 1, L171 [500–550 CE]; Lapidge 2018, 385n14–15). These objects show the use of common visual identifiers for prisoners being adapted creatively in a new mythical context, and they show that soldiers could be depicted as guards in an unequivocally civic facility. And importantly, viewers were expected to recognize relatively stable visual codes of incarceration, rendering it possible to deploy the same motifs in service of a new, Christian narrative.

As represented in visual sources, the job of a prison guard consisted primarily in transport and surveillance, and the common presence of both small ante-chambers and windows into individual cells suggest that direct oversight was a design ideal implemented in many carceral facilities. The Pero and Micon fresco in the house on the Via Stabia in Pompeii gives further insight into the function

of these windows (9.2.5 V12 [first century CE]; fig. 16). While literary accounts of the myth simply record that the guard was able to look into the prison, this fresco depicts the moment of discovery itself: the guard, standing outside the prison, peers in from the window above and, representing the story's audience, catches the daughter in the midst of her act of filial piety. The detail, faded on the fresco but clear in the drawing that Nicola La Volpe made some twenty years after its excavation, offers insight into the public transcript of how a prison guard might surveil inmates without needing to enter the prison.

When sources have more than one register, prisoners are almost uniformly depicted in the lower part of the composition. Put differently, in the public transcript, power is consistently mapped upward, and captivity downward. The representation of prisoners as physically lower in visual sources connects to a coherent ideology of state power literally *over* bodies, as we see, for instance, in the placement of the Mosaic of the Captives physically underneath the seat of judgment, and in the common trope of prisons placed directly underneath courts and temples (Mosaic of the Captives, V8 [late second century CE]); Cuicul Prison, A5 [169 CE], Lambaesis Prison, A7 [early second century CE]). Likewise, it was important to the designer of the Sousse relief (fig. 20) to place the triumphant emperor physically over the body of his captive, and in the first century CE relief from Nickenich, a single soldier stands alone in the upper register, controlling with a chain two captives who appear underneath his feet, at three quarters his height (Sousse Archaeological Museum, V29 [third century CE]; fig. 20; Landesmuseum Bonn inv. 31.86, V21 [first century CE]). The theme continues even in depictions far removed from elite imperial display; a terracotta statue of Pero and Micon from a Pompeiian bath presents the prisoner noticeably smaller than his daughter and seated at her feet (V14 [mid-first century CE]). Visual sources consistently employ size and position to reiterate that prisoners are subdued and weakened in relation to free people; they are both socially and physically inferior. The famous Gemma Augustea and the Grand *camée de France* are large, carved stone depictions of the Roman emperor in triumph—among the most elite, refined, and rare works of imperial art produced in or surviving from antiquity. Both depict the effortless dominance of the emperor, and by extension Roman imperial power, over captive bodies (KMW Antikensammlung IXa 79, V24 [9–12 CE]; BnF *camée* 264, V63 [early first century CE]). They are what Keith Bradley (2004) designates “abstract symbols of Roman power,” and each gem depicts an emperor in heroic nudity in the upper register, crowned by the goddess Victory, while the lower register displays vanquished prisoners alongside their captured military equipment (300). These prisoners are unambiguously martial, but nevertheless they appear remarkably similar to representations of other types of bound bodies: they are wrought low, hands bound behind their back, haggard and dejected, men and women alike. Both objects depict captives being prepared for display as a battle-field trophy, a typical scene extending from classical Greek to late Roman contexts

in which captives were stripped naked, with their bodies and armor set for display (Havener 2018; Nielson 1983). This same visual language of power persists into early Christian art, as we see for instance in an early fourth century CE sarcophagus from the catacomb of Domitilla in Rome that directly inverts common symbols of Roman dominance, porting them into a triumphalist Christian register (MV 31525.0.0, V73 [ca. 350 CE]). Thus, rather than the crowning of an emperor by the goddess Victory, Christ is crowned in laurel by a Roman soldier, while in the central panel a cross dominates, topped by a Christogram. Under the cross's arms sit two Roman soldiers, their heads hung, dejected under the symbol of Christ's resurrection. In place of legionary standards, this object, from roughly 350 CE, depicts the Christian cross topped and below it, instead of prisoners, Roman soldiers. Likewise, in another sarcophagus that depicts Peter baptizing a soldier-guard in the Tullian Prison, the apostle stands tall, towering over the soldier, who is rendered small and subordinate (MV 31551.0.0, V26 [300–330 CE]). In the late Roman period, then, we find Christian imagery that inverts the registers of the traditional Roman program of displaying guards and criminals, even as broader visual codes remain intact.

Such scenes of prison guards are not depicted solely on prestige items like a sarcophagus fit for display, or items connected to the imperial family—we find them also on media with much wider circulation. For instance, a bronze coin minted in Rome in 176 and 177 CE depicts a familiar scene on its reverse: a battlefield trophy towering over a seated, captive Sarmatian woman and man (RIC 3.1188, V62). An early first-century terracotta plaque also from the city of Rome represents a similar scene: a Gaulish prisoner guarded by a Roman soldier, arms chained, looking at his armor hung for display on a tree to his left (fig. 17).

No matter their status as prisoners, slaves, or spoils of war, captives are most often depicted with hands chained behind their back. We find this particular motif across vast stretches of time and space: in Rome in the Augustan era (V24, V41), Palestine in the first quarter of the first century BCE (V56), in Italy in the first century BCE/CE (V27), in Germany in the late first century or second century CE (V10, V11), North Africa of the second (V8), third (V29), and fourth centuries (V57), Cilicia in 251–53 CE (V60), and fourth-century Egypt (V58). As a motif it is not universal, however: occasionally, hands are tied in the front, clasped in what Cassius Dio calls “the manner of captives” (*Roman History* 68.10.1 [ca. 230 CE]). Extant examples include scenes from the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome and a small but growing collection of bronze figurines from sites on the edges of the Roman Empire (V17 [203 CE]; Jackson 2005). Likewise, prisoners' arms are bound both behind the back and in front in a series of sixteen figurines of captives from the Idumean city of Maresha (Beit Guvrin, Israel), dated roughly to the second century BCE, all deposited together in a single room of what the excavators understood as a Seleucid military barracks (fig. 18, V55). Hands bound by ropes or chains are the most common visual indication of a prisoner, simplifying for



FIGURE 17. British Museum 1805,0703.314 (V32 [ca. 1–20 CE]). The inscription reads M(arcus) Anton(ius) Epaphra.

ease of identification a rather wider panoply of restraint modes and styles known archaeologically (Thompson 2003, 217–44).

Like visual sources, literary materials typically depict prisoners as naked, dirty, and miserable, with males often sporting a beard and long, unkempt hair. An anecdote of Quintilian offers a good example of the public typecasting of a stripped prisoner. In his *Orator's Education*, he mentions a certain Quintus Curius, whose accuser had painted a picture on a canvas as a visual aid to argument. While he mobilizes the depiction in service of a different point, Quintilian notes specifically that the prisoner was portrayed as stripped naked, conforming

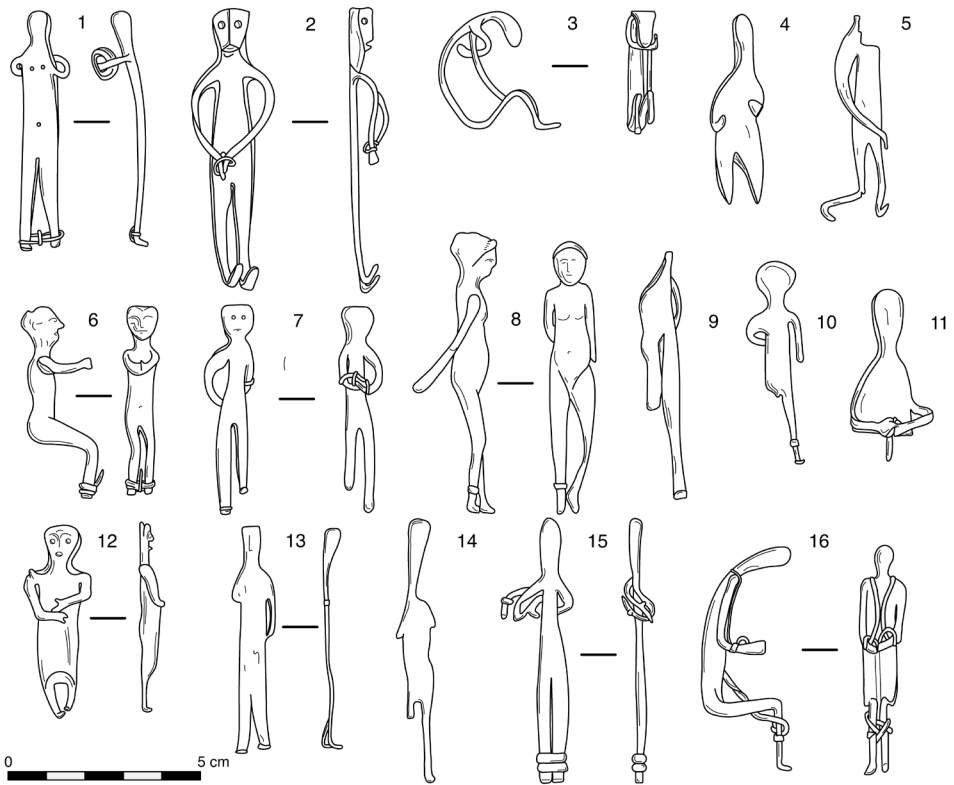


FIGURE 18. Sixteen lead figurines depicting prisoners in a variety of styles and positions. Excavated at floor level of a Seleucid military outpost, understood as either “votive offerings after a battle, in the form of bound captives,” or “they represent the intended victims of incantation” (Bliss and Macalister 1902, 154). Image by Evan Levine after Bliss and Macalister 1902, plate 85.

to stereotypes of prisoner representation and pointing again to a durable connection in the visual lexicon between the act of incarceration and the physical exposure of prisoner bodies (6.3.72–73, L194 [late first century CE]). A century later, the satirist Lucian imagined a civic prisoner in an iron collar and manacles, shackled to stocks alongside other prisoners and “having become unrecognizable through his miseries . . . [with] long hair, all unkempt and matted” (*Toxaris* 29–30, L143 [ca. 163 CE]). The early fourth-century astrologer Firmicus Maternus likewise warns that the moon ought to be observed as part of any person’s full birth chart, and that in certain configurations it “places some in custody, some it throws into the prison, some are subjected to public trials; some are condemned, others are crushed by the filth of the prison and of public incarceration [*squalore carceris et publicarum custodiarum*] and die covered in filth and repulsive” (*Mathe-sis* 4.14.2, L20). Third-century Christians condemned to work in imperial mines

wrote back to the bishop Cyprian with a vision of their own plight: a vignette at once representative of their experience, and also, one suspects, intended by them (or the ancient editor of the collection) to be legible as a portrait of people toiling deep underground:

Those condemned with us give the greatest thanks to you before God, dearly beloved Cyprian, because you have refreshed struggling hearts by your letters; you have cured members wounded by cudgels; you have released feet bound with chains; you have smoothed the hair of half-shaved heads; you have illuminated the darkness of the prison; you have brought the mountains of the mine down to the plains; you have even brought fragrant flowers to noses and have dissipated the foul odor of smoke. (Cyprian, *Letter* 77.3, L141 [ca. September 257–September 258 CE])

Asked to draw a generic prisoner, a contemporary American might depict a figure in an orange or black and white striped jumpsuit; an ancient Roman would more likely have drawn a haggard man stripped naked, hands bound behind his back.

Some sources depict clothing that has been removed from prisoners, and even the stripped prisoners themselves—for instance, in the Gemma Augustea and the Mosaic of the Captives, both discussed above (KMW Antikensammlung IXa 79, V24 [9–12 CE]; Mosaic of the Captives, V8 [late second century CE]; fig. 15). One telling example is the Mosaic of the Damnati, which decorated the floor of a private home near ancient Thysdrus (El Djem, Tunisia) in the second century CE (fig. 19). Two men appear with long, unkempt hair, matted beards, and hands tied behind their backs as trained animal handlers (*bestiarii*) hold them upright and guide them to the teeth of an advancing leopard. Military standards decorate a stage at the center of the arena where these men were sent to die. Their mortifying state reinforces not only their violent fate but implies also that their suffering as prisoners has lingered for a substantial period already: they awaited their execution with no access to facilities for such hygienic activities as bathing or trimming hair. The dark, damp filth of the Prison for the Condemned in Cagliari brings affective texture to the scene, and helps to illuminate some of the carceral realities embedded in a depiction like the Mosaic of the Damnati. The viewer is supposed to grasp intuitively why the prisoners' hair was matted and their beards were unruly: these men languished in dire circumstances for a long time prior to their final moments in the light of the arena.

A contemporaneous literary source from across the Mediterranean deploys a similar stock image, with the same readerly expectation. The *Mishnah* tractate *Moed Qatan* enumerates acceptable actions during festivals, including exceptions to a general prohibition on cutting one's hair and washing one's clothes. Those allowed to groom themselves include people who have traveled from overseas, men and women who have become ritually impure through menstruation or genital emissions, and prisoners who have been released from a "place of [martial] captivity [*beit hashivyah*]" or a "prison [*beit ha'asurin*]" (3.1, L144 [compiled late second century CE]). This Roman provincial text assumes that prisons were places



FIGURE 19 Mosaic of the Damnati (V28 [second century CE]), El Djem Archaeological Museum, Patio de l'Amphithéâtre (west, Room 3). El Djem, Tunisia. Author photo.

from which someone could be released, and that when they were, they would need two things in particular: a haircut and a change of clothes. Whatever the historicity of the source, such an idea accords with the visual public transcript of how prisoners were imagined to look as they left a stay in a carceral facility. The common impression that prisoners typically sport long, disheveled hair appears even in later legal materials, including in a fourth-century law from emperors Valentinian II, Theodosius I, and Arcadius concerning the release of low-level offenders from prison on the occasion of Easter. They decree that “accused persons, with their disheveled hair in deathly disorder should [not] be dragged [out of the prison] as objects of the common pity,” as their appearance was out of place in “in the midst of festive ceremonies and the venerable rites of a sacred season” (*Sirmondian* 8, L99 [386 CE]). The phrase, “disheveled hair in deathly disorder [*horrentibus passis feraliter crinibus*],” while clearly rhetorical, does in fact capture

something of the essence of the public transcript of what a prisoner was imagined to look like—a sorry state evoking public pity.

As in the documentary record, male prisoners are overrepresented in visual sources. Even so, female prisoners appear in representations across the period covered here, from Ptolemaic Egypt (V2) and Seleucid Palestine (V55) to Rome near the turn of the Common Era (V24), to Greece in the first or second century CE (V16), to North Africa of the second (V8) and third centuries (V9), and to Rome (V53) and Asia Minor of the fourth century CE (V50, V54). Two sources in particular demonstrate typical differences in the depiction of female captives in particular, both discussed above: the Gemma Augustea, from Rome of the early first century CE, and the Mosaic of the Captives, from the second century CE in Tipasa on the North African coast. In both, male captives are stripped naked with hands bound behind their back while female captives remain clothed, hands tied in front of their bodies. These depictions are likely idealized, and certainly prudish; they do not indicate that female prisoners were not stripped in reality, nor that depicting as much was discouraged. For instance, while the left side of the lower register on the Gemma Augustea depicts a clothed female bound next to a stripped male, a stripped female captive sits to the far right, holding her hand to her exposed breast as her body is pulled by her hair (KMW, *Antikensammlung* IXa 79, V24 [9–12 CE]). Late Roman literary sources also describe the stripping of female prisoners, a practice echoed in roughly contemporary visual sources (*Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 3.2, 6.3, L15 [third–fourth centuries CE]; V52–53). For their part, juristic sources commend both options: some prescribe that all prisoners should be stripped after conviction without distinction of gender, while others suggest that prisoners should be allowed to keep some modest amount of clothing, regardless of their conviction status (D 48.20.2, L33 [198–211 CE, though with reference to a rescript of Hadrian of 117–38 CE]; D 48.20.6, L124 [early third century CE]). Again, legal sources attest to their own secondary status: they prescribe a variety of ideal worlds that are neither internally consistent nor coherent with contemporary practices.

Similarly, child incarceration is rare in the visual record, but it nevertheless appears at times, like in the Mosaic of the Captives above, and is mirrored in both documentary and literary materials (Mosaic of the Captives, V8 [second century CE]; P. Cair. Masp.1.67005, D86 [568 CE]; *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 2.2, 5.2, L15 [third–fourth centuries CE]). Like literary and juristic materials, visual sources suggest that practices varied from place to place, even as certain practices appear as regular tropes. Together, common depictions offer insight into what ancient people might have considered as typical, like stripping men while allowing women to remain clothed, or generally avoiding the incarceration of children. While the documentary record shows that this last point is certainly wrong—children were at times incarcerated with their mothers, especially in the later Roman



FIGURE 20. Relief of a triumphing emperor, with a prisoner of war in tow (V29 [third century CE]), Sousse Archaeological Museum (Sousse, Tunisia). Author Photo. A 3D model of the relief is available in the Ancient Mediterranean Incarceration Database with the ID V29.

world—the visual record allows us to see incarceration through the eyes of the public, who would not be privy to the letters, receipts, and legal proceedings explored here.

While it is often impossible to tell what type of captive is represented, some differences stand out, especially between prisoners of war and civic prisoners. Prisoners of war are generally muscular and imposing; a third-century CE relief from Sousse offers a typical depiction (fig. 20). A triumphant emperor is depicted dominating a muscular prisoner, himself stripped down to a short cloak. The physical prowess of the captive appears exaggerated, with bulging shoulders and pectoral musculature. In this and similar cases the rationale for representing captured warriors as physically intimidating is reasonably clear: enemies of the state are presented as strong and visually impressive in their own right in a manner that stresses the comparative strength of the empire that subdued them. Presenting formidable captive enemies facilitated the notion that a great public service had been done in maintaining peace against such worthy foes, and it justified a continued widespread military presence. We see particularly muscular prisoners

of war on the Gemma Augustea, (V24 [9–12 CE]), a marble column base from Mainz depicting a prisoner in the guise of the Farnese Hercules (V10 [late first century CE?]), a grave relief from Neumagen, (V11 [second century CE]), the Mosaic of Captives (V8 [late second century CE]), a Phrygian relief depicting men condemned to death, (V42 [second century CE]) and the Mosaic of Triumph of Dionysius from Setif (V9 [third century CE]).

On the other hand, civic prisoners are often represented as slight and emaciated, as we saw above in the Mosaic of the Dammati (V28 [second century CE]). The various visualizations of Pero, the father condemned to die and nursed at his daughter's breast, uniformly present the body of a man weakened by his incarceration. The accompanying poem in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto stresses the old man's frailty, echoing and focalizing the emaciated body depicted visually: "See how the old veins in the thin neck shine as the milk passes through . . ." (CLE 2048, D199 [first century CE]). The attenuated bodies of condemned prisoners serve a similar, albeit inverted, principle from the substantial bodies of prisoners of war: such representations stress the state's ability and prerogative to use incarceration to eviscerate subjects deemed problematic.

We have argued that the theme of triumphant incarcerators above and emaciated prisoners below is prevalent in the public transcript, and though many of our data come from the period of the Roman Empire, earlier Ptolemaic sources present similar themes. For example, a bronze prisoner in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) is a Ptolemaic example of a type known widely in the Hellenistic world: statuettes depicting dwarves held in a pillory (MET 23.6.27, V1 [332–30 BCE]). Their Ptolemaic mummy wrapping is another example of a widely attested type—depicting bound captives underneath the feet of the deceased, along with an inscription indicating the power of the gods to vanquish chaos and political enemies of the state, represented by the prisoners (MET 90.6.87, V2 [fourth–first centuries BCE]). Only the legs of this mummy cartonnage survives, so it is hard to say what the rest of the decorating entailed. Nevertheless, it is telling that the artist tasked with memorializing the person wrapped inside chose the soles of the mummy's feet to depict subjugated bodies: haggard, emaciated, and bound—altogether prepared to be trampled upon for eternity in a not so subtle repetition of the conceptual imbrication of imprisonment and death. The "bound prisoner motif" is attested in Egyptian funerary art from the predynastic period (ending ca. 3,000 BCE) through the Roman period, beginning in royal burials and jumping to nonroyal uses by the early Ptolemaic period, symbolizing state domination of foreign enemies, divine conquering of forces of chaos, and the establishment of peace through governmental subjugation (Corcoran 1995, 53–55). The Ptolemaic example at the Metropolitan Museum of Art presents eighteen figures, both male and female, while an early Roman example of the type depicts only two highly stylized men: one Libyan and one Asian, restrained at their hands and feet and attached to one another with a chain (Fitzwilliam Museum E.103b.1911, V22

[30 BCE–100 CE]). In both instances, captives are stripped to loincloths with their hands and feet bound behind their back, with some attached to a post or beam and affixed to the ground, such as we also find in Roman archaeological sources (A10, A49). In Egypt this common trope lasted more than three thousand years, and it resonates with trends visible in art from Roman North Africa of the first centuries CE: captive bodies existed under the foot of the incarcerator, both visually and architecturally.

One peculiarity of Roman visual depictions is a commitment to marking prisoners as “other” through common motifs of foreignness (Schneider 2012). A third-century CE mosaic from Sitifis (Setif, Algeria) is typical: the god Dionysus is depicted in triumph, returning from India with black prisoners in tow, hands shackled behind their back, or held in chains attached to a satyr who leads the prisoners, and captive tigers, ahead of the god’s chariot (Setif Archaeological Museum cat. 21, V9 [third century CE]). The god and his attendants have a range of complexions between fair and olive, while the prisoners, by contrast, all have the same dark skin and meticulously detailed “corkscrew” hair (Ako-Adounvo 1999, 192–97). Similarly, the three central figures of the Mosaic of the Captives are clearly depicted as Berbers, with each prisoner boasting the typical features of the indigenous population surrounding Roman Tipasa (fig. 15). A second-century CE mosaic from Zliten, some thirty-five kilometers east of the Roman city of Leptis Magna (Khoms, Libya) depicts another scene of prisoners in the act of execution by animals (*damnatio ad bestias*) (Tripoli Archaeological Museum, V46 [175–225 CE]). One of the most striking features of this gruesome home decor is the yellow skin tone of the condemned prisoners, which contrasts with the pink tones chosen for their executioners (*bestiarii*)—a distinction that led Kathleen Coleman (1990) to conclude that the prisoners are purposefully depicted as indigenous tribesmen (54). Visual tropes of foreignness mark prisoners’ bodies across our archive: in a cameo vase in Berlin, (V35 [37–27 BCE]) in the Captives’ Facade from Corinth, (V16 [first–second centuries CE]) the Tropaeum of Trajan in Moesia Inferior, (V37 [98–117 CE]), in Rome on the Column of Trajan (V36 [98–117 CE]), the Trajanic Statues of Dacian Prisoners included in the Arch of Constantine (V38 [98–117 CE]), on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, (V39 [ca.193 CE]), and the Arch of Septimius Severus, (V17 [203 CE]) and in the Sousse relief (fig. 20 [third century CE]). Again, the lesson is reasonably clear: prisoner bodies were often represented as foreign and other, both physically and by virtue of their deviance, attributes that are meticulously contrasted with Roman ideals of peace, law, and order (Carroll 2020).

As is the case with legal sources, in visual sources one finds a brazen disconnect and sustained distraction from the lived realities of prisoners. Nevertheless, we find unmistakable resonances between visual depictions and the documentary, literary, and archaeological sources discussed above. Visual sources reflect back to a culture its own practices and ideals but they are not a mirror. Even when they

seem to be veristic representations, they refract and focus, vignette and occlude. And yet, these representations were the closest that many ancient people came to seeing the inside of a prison. Inhabitants of Ptolemaic Philadelphia, or Roman Corinth, or just about any other city in the Mediterranean basin likely saw depictions of prisoners more frequently than they saw incarcerated people, perhaps by many orders of magnitude. This is not because prisoners were absent from ancient society—as we argued above, they were often accessible at the center of cities—but rather because depictions of prisoners were ever-present. When interpreting the prevalence and coherence of the corpus of visual sources, we must remember that we are not gazing at an uninterested archive; prisoners were represented for a reason.

The public monuments and imperial images offer access to an official message, carefully curated to the masses: this is what prisoners look like, these are society's deviants, and this is how state power crushed them. What we learn from these materials is that, above all, across Mediterranean antiquity prisoners were represented in service of an ideology of domination, or what Giorgio Agamben (1998) has called sovereign power over bare life; the ability to decide when life is "politically relevant," and for what political purpose it is relevant to display (142). Ultimately, the key issue here is that those in power felt the need to project their dominance over dangerous forces. Defeating and capturing, however, were only the first steps; the next step was controlling, which required careful systems of management, planning, and personnel.