

Slavery and Slave Religion in Macrobius' *Saturnalia*

This paper investigates the function of the Roman festival of Saturnalia in the late Roman Empire, primarily through Macrobius' *Saturnalia*. *Saturnalia*, a 5th-century text set in the late 4th century, offers a unique perspective on its namesake festival as an imagined dialogue between pagans written when Christianity was the state religion of the Empire. While *Saturnalia*, like all extant Roman literary sources, was written by a free person, to disregard the experiences of the enslaved as impossible to reconstruct is ultimately dismissive. There is a lack of literature exploring such experiences, especially in the late Empire, though previous work has been done with Roman comedy in particular. Macrobius' characterization of pagans and Christians within the imagined historical dialogue provides insight as to how enslaved people might engage and be engaged by those religions.

In particular, this paper looks at the speech given by Praetextatus, a prominent Roman pagan, in defense of slaves through its reception by the other characters and function in the text. Though Christianity is never explicitly mentioned in the text, by reading through characters implied as pagan or Christian, we may see what Macrobius considers to be the prevailing thought on slaves and the role of slaves in religion for both of those groups. The antiquated pagans seemingly defend the place of slaves in religious observance, though only through their contributions to the religious activities of the master, in contrast to the use of the slave metaphor in Christianity and other inclusion of slaves. Through treatment of a biased literary source, this paper contributes to the ongoing exploration of the lives of Roman slaves, recognizing the imperative to inquire into their experiences despite the inherent complexities of historical sources.