

"Their occurrence did not seem unreasonable": A comparative-analytical study of slave wars and peasant rebellions in the Roman world
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In the second and first centuries B.C.E. a series of three large-scale slave revolts erupted in Sicily and central Italy, each of which ravaged wide swathes of territory and were suppressed only after serious loss of life. These so-called Servile Wars, which were unprecedented in Roman experience to that point, provoked horrified reactions from most ancient authors and continue to excite scholarly interest today. Recent scholarship on the Servile Wars has stressed the distinctive nature of the three outbreaks, explaining them by appealing to a set of structural features peculiar to late-Republican Italy and Sicily, the unexpected consequence of rapid Roman expansion. Valuable contributions have been made as well by scholars drawing parallels from the much later slave systems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries C.E.

A focus on the label "slave," however, instead of on the social and economic roles of the specific rebels, has led scholars away from important Roman evidence for similar types of unrest and revolt. Since the rebel armies in each war were composed principally of agricultural and pastoral slaves, a profitable comparison can be drawn from peasant uprisings that occurred in other parts of the Roman world. Specifically, I argue that the second century C.E. Boukolia revolts in Egypt and those of the *Bacaudae* in fourth and fifth century C.E. Spain and Gaul can provide fresh insight into the leadership, organization and ideology of the rebellious slaves of the Republic. Through a comparative study of these events, we can usefully view the Servile Wars as part of a historical continuum, as examples of an extreme response to oppression among agricultural workers with parallels in the context of the larger Roman state.