

*Delenda est abolitio, delenda est servitudo: Classical Sources in the Antebellum Slavery Debate*

In the decades leading up to the American Civil War, an energetic debate over slavery took place throughout the United States – in legislatures and lecture halls, through pamphlets and editorials, and even in artwork and textbooks. This debate was far from new in 19th-century America. A younger United States had struggled extensively with the question of slavery at the 1787 Constitutional Convention, and discussions of slavery, of course, reached back to ancient times. A combination of factors, however, including the growing strength of the abolitionist movement, the continuing industrialization and urbanization of the North, and the expansion of cotton production in the South, brought to this debate a new energy and vehemence in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the benefit of hindsight, we also attribute particular significance to the sources of this period because they were so closely followed by the outbreak of the Civil War and, soon after, by the Emancipation Proclamation.

Both sides in the debate – Abolitionists and Apologists – called on Classical Greek and Roman sources to illustrate and support their arguments. Despite the physical and chronological gap between the ancient Mediterranean and the United States, as well as the significant differences between their respective institutions – politics, society, and the institution of slavery itself – participants in the American debate over slavery turned naturally, it seems, to the classical world.

In this presentation, I won't argue that Classical sources were the key to some winning argument for either side, nor will I claim that there is some particularly special insight on slavery unique to the Classics, without which the debate would have been fundamentally different. I will, however, briefly explore some possible reasons for the inclusion of Classical sources by each side, and examine, in turn, both the apologists' and the abolitionists' use of Classical allusions,

looking to identify some common themes and methods therein. These include arguments addressing slavery's historical precedence and longevity in the Classical world; references to specific Classical authors, particularly Aristotle; and also attempts from both sides to compare their ideas about slavery favorably with idealized Greek and Roman societies.