

Labora Aselle: Donkeys and Slave Labor in Roman Culture

On the Palatine hill, on the walls of the imperial *paedagogium*, an unknown writer scratched a graffito of donkey harnessed to a mill with the caption *labora aselle quo modo lavoravi et proderit tibi*, “work, little donkey, as I worked, and it will be useful to you” (Solin and Itkonen-Kaila 1966, 289). While it has long been established that imperial and senatorial households included *paedagogia*, schools in which their *vernae* could receive some basic education, scholars have often assumed that literary education would elevate the value of enslaved persons and provide them with better opportunities, possibly avoiding hard menial jobs (Mohler 1940; Forbes 1955). However, the author of the sketch seems to recount that he worked like a donkey, meaning hard physical labor, despite his education or perhaps before he began his schooling.

It has been suggested before (Joshel-Petersen 2014) that the author of the graffito had to be an enslaved individual from the imperial household, someone who had the capacity to write an original sentence and access to the space but also experience of hard labor. This graffito is evidence that harsh labor was present even in the households that educated their *vernae*.

Moreover, it is telling that the author of the drawing identified himself with a donkey, an animal often portrayed in fables as disparaged and abused character, who is not safe even in death, for its skin beaten up into leather (Phaedrus 4.1). Although educated and probably now relatively safe from harsh labor, this anonymous *servus* associates himself with an abused donkey; the past tense of the verb *lavoravit* indicates that the author of the graffito saw himself similar to a donkey in the past, but he was not subject to harsh labor in the present. In addition, Bradley (2000) has recognized how the masters themselves promoted an association between the

enslaved with beasts of burden, thus animalizing the *servus*. In particular, he suggested the *Metamorphosis* of Apuleius provide invaluable evidence on how Lucius' sufferings and reactions can be seen as a metaphor for the condition of enslaved individuals.

Therefore, the donkey graffito on the walls of the Palatine *paedagogium* fits into a long established history of animalizing the enslaved as a tool to assert the master's dominance and negate the *servus*' innate humanity. The graffito also challenges us to take a deeper look at issues such as child labor, slave education and training, and also the similarity between human and animal work perceived by its author.

Bibliography

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