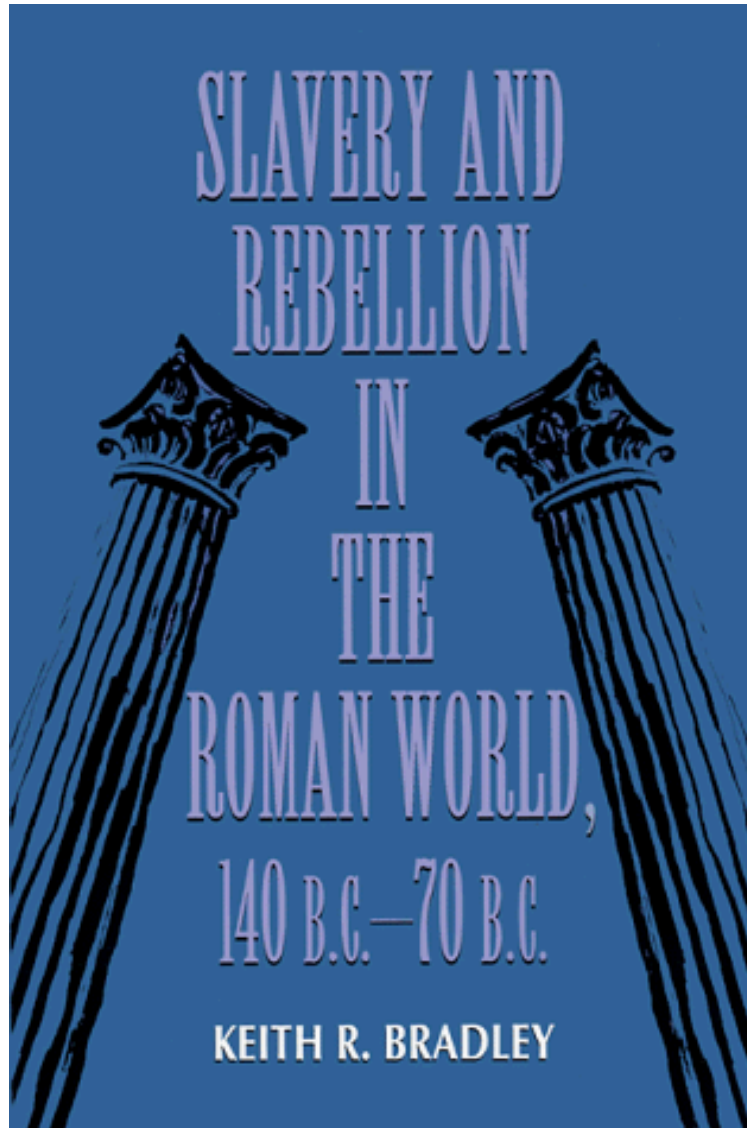


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Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World, 140 B.C.70 B.C.

Keith R Bradley, K R Bradley

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#3179519 in Books 1989-12-01Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.62 x .68 x 6.471, #File Name: 0253312590202 pages | File size: 72.Mb

Keith R Bradley, K R Bradley : Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World, 140 B.C.70 B.C. before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World, 140 B.C.70 B.C.:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Slave Revolts in Ancient RomeBy P. WebsterSome historians claim that our disgust at the slavery of the ancient world is an anachronistic reaction because the Greeks and Romans themselves took the existence of slavery for granted. Bradley's book shows that this claim is largely false, but that in

one respect it contains an element of truth. It is false because the slaves themselves certainly did not passively accept their situation. Bradley sees the slaves as "human agents" who were constantly resisting the cruelty and exploitation they were subjected to. It is true that there were only three large-scale slave revolts in ancient Rome: two in Sicily in the second century BC, and the most famous one led by Spartacus from 73 to 71 BC. But small-scale resistance was widespread. The most usual form of resistance was to attempt to achieve freedom by running away. Bradley relates the inspiring example of one of Cicero's slaves who did this and who was never recaptured. But there was also the sabotage or theft of slave-owners' property, suicide, and quite a few local, small-scale revolts which were quickly suppressed. Full-scale revolt was rare because of the risks involved and because of the lack of unity amongst the slaves who came from many different parts of the world and did a variety of different jobs. The three large-scale rebellions all started off as spontaneous, local revolts caused by extreme provocation. They were not planned in advance, but they snowballed until they involved tens of thousands of slaves who, in the case of the Spartacus revolt, at one time threatened Rome itself. However, the claim that slavery was taken for granted in the ancient world does contain an element of truth, in the sense that no one was putting forward a coherent set of ideas advocating the destruction of slave society and its replacement by something else. The slaves wanted to get out of the situation they were in: they wanted their freedom. But they did not have an alternative to the system. (For example, the slave leaders in Sicily set themselves up as kings, with all the associated trappings.) There was also the problem that despite the growth of large estates owned by the rich and farmed by slaves, the majority of the population were small peasants and other free poor, not slaves. Few of these free poor seem to have joined the slave revolts. Of course this comes as no surprise to Marxists. At that stage of development a classless society was not a material possibility. If the slaves had won, the only possible outcomes were either escape from the control of the Roman state or the slave leaders becoming a new ruling elite. Unfortunately, Bradley is not a Marxist. He claims that the class struggle approach is "inherently inappropriate" for explaining the slave revolts. This is because he mistakenly thinks that a Marxist approach would mean seeing the slave revolts as class-conscious, planned affairs with worked-out aims for an alternative society. He thinks that Marxists are wrong because the slaves were driven to revolt by their experience of brutality and degradation, not by "ideological imperatives". This is a caricature of the Marxist view. Marxists argue that class struggle is the inevitable outcome of exploitation. But that does not mean that the participants in the struggle are necessarily fully class conscious or politically aware. The fact that it was the exploitation of the slaves which drove them to rebel is precisely what a Marxist approach would suggest. No Marxist would expect slaves in ancient Rome to have a fully developed Bolshevik programme. Bradley also emphasises the spontaneity of the revolts in a manner which leads the book at times to become deflating rather than inspiring. For example, instead of celebrating the fact that tens of thousands of slaves joined the revolts, he suggests that the growth in numbers was a problem because it made organisation difficult and invited Roman retribution. Despite its weaknesses, though, this book can fill out our knowledge and understanding of some truly inspiring rebellions by the oppressed and exploited. Phil Webster. (England)

In the 70 years between 140 B.C. and 70 B.C., Rome was confronted with three major slave rebellions. Two of the uprisings occurred in the province of Sicily. The third and most memorable, led by the gladiator Spartacus, took place in Italy and posed a serious threat to the city of Rome. Bradley's work carefully describes and analyzes these rebellions in their respective contexts. In addition to examining the immediate historical context of each rebellion and the relationship of the uprisings to the overall development of Roman slavery in the second century, B.C., Bradley offers an original analysis of the rebellions against the broad background of resistance in modern slave societies. Emphasizing the material conditions that led slaves to resist and the practical means by which their resistance was maintained, Bradley demonstrates the relationship of the Roman slave wars to other types of slave resistance.