

Monday, 04.05.2026; 4:15 - 5:45 pm CEST

Rachel Zelnick-Abramovitz, Tel Aviv University, Israel

Partially manumitted slaves: the legal and social implications

Abstract:

Manumission is commonly seen as a process or an act that transfers a person from a state of total domination by others to a state of complete control over their own life. However, in ancient Greece and Rome as well as in some other pre-modern societies, complete freedom was not often attained, since manumission was frequently conditional and perpetuated the freed slaves' dependency on their ex-owners in a variety of ways. In any case, we tend to think of the enslaved or the free as whole persons. That is why evidence of the manumission of *parts* of slaves might strike us as strange. Partially manumitted slaves, or, to use a shortened expression, partial manumission, is little attested, but the texts that evidence it come from a wide chronological and geographical scope: from Neo-Babylonia (in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE), Judaea in the first centuries CE, Egypt in the Roman period, via Sasanian Iran, Islamic jurisprudence, Syrian Christian legal traditions, medieval Mediterranean Jewish communities, to early modern Portugal and Cuba. Where partial manumission is attested, it is mentioned as a matter of fact, which suggests that it was a known mode of manumission, though often problematic: it caused legal problems relating to the difficulties of exploiting persons only part or parts of whom belonged to their owners.

In this lecture, I will review the evidence of partial manumission and address the questions of its background, the legal problems it presented, and the possible connection between its occurrences in different societies and times.

Short Bio:

Rachel Zelnick-Abramovitz is a Professor Emerita in the Department of Classics at Tel Aviv University. She has published widely on enslavement and manumission, including the books *Not Wholly Free: The Concept of Manumission and the Status of Manumitted Slaves in the Ancient Greek World* (Brill 2005), and *Taxing Freedom in Thessalian Manumission Inscriptions* (Brill 2013). She also studies other non-citizen groups, Greek historiography, rhetoric, and comedy.