

EXCERPTS FROM DEED OF SALE OF A SLAVE

Introduction

Tang China was not a slave society in the sense of having an economy that relied on chattel slavery along the lines of the economies of the Roman Empire or the ante-bellum American south. However, slavery did exist. Poor men and women might sell themselves into slavery, and poor families might sell children into slavery. During the Tang dynasty, slavery was hereditary, and slaves could be bought and sold. The following document records the sale of a female slave.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from Deed of Sale of a Slave

On this day the functionary, Han Yuanding, having expenses to meet and lacking sufficient stores of silk, sells his household slave Jiansheng, aged about twenty-eight. The slave is being sold to the monastery dependent, Zhu Yuansong, then to Zhu's wife and sons, etc. The price of the slave has been fixed at a total of five bolts of silk, consisting of both finished and unfinished goods. ...

After the woman and the goods have been exchanged and the sale completed, it is agreed that the son and daughters of the Zhu family shall be masters of this slave forever and ever, from generation to generation.

Questions:

1. What does the need for a contract tell you about the society in which this transaction takes place?
2. How do the terms of the contract compare to bills of sale for slaves in other societies?

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on *EXCERPTS FROM DEED OF SALE OF A SLAVE*

Longer Selection

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Excerpts from Deed of Sale of a Slave

A contract executed on the 12th day of the eleventh month of 991.

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After the woman and the goods have been exchanged and the sale completed, it is agreed that the sons and daughters of the Zhu family shall be masters of this slave forever and ever, from generation to generation. If in future a relative of the seller should reclaim this slave, it is ordered that Han Yuanding and his wife, Seventh Daughter, seek out an adequate slave as a replacement. If an imperial amnesty should be declared subsequent to the sale, it may not be used to reopen discussions among the negotiants.

The two parties to the contract have met face to face and have reached their agreement after joint discussions. If one of the parties should default, he shall be fined one bolt of decorated silk and two large rams — all to be turned over to the non-defaulting party. In light of the chance of this contract's not being made in good faith, the following persons have witnessed it and will serve as its guarantors:

(Note: In case this woman should prove to have a sickness, a waiting period of ten days has been agreed upon. Beyond this time withdrawal from the agreement will be impossible.)

The woman whose person is being sold, Jiansheng
The seller of the woman, her mistress, Seventh Daughter
The Seller of the woman, her master, Han Yuanding
A relative by marriage, who has participated in the discussion, Fuzhen

A witness, Monk Chouda of Baoen Monastery
A witness, Monk Luo Xian of Longxing Monastery

¹ Bolts of plain silk of standard size and quality were used as a unit of currency for larger transactions in the Tang and even formed a part of the standard tax payment.

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(Additional note: In place of one of the bolts of finished silk it has been decided to furnish six lengths of Zhu serge and six lengths of white serge, making a total of twelve lengths, each measuring between ten and twenty feet. These goods are to be delivered by the fifth month of next year.)

[Translated by Patricia Ebrey and Clara Yu]