

Recall This Book

Episode 166: Imperial Depths: Mark Letteney and Matthew Larsen on the Roman Prison system (JP)

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John Plotz

Hello and welcome to Recall this Book where we invite scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems and events. So I'm John Plotz at Brandeis solo again today, and today we tackle, I'm tempted to say Michel Foucault and something he got wrong. But that is unfair, because it narrows down a huge set of investigations into the life and death of prisons, and alongside them, jails and other forms of incarceration to the single durable question that many people remember from Foucault's pathbreaking *Discipline and Punish*, which is the purportedly modern invention of the prison.

Our two guests today, who are scholars of the ancient world, Professor Matthew Larsen and Professor Mark Letteney, have written a rich, deep and memorable book about the entire long-lived system of and this is the book title, Ancient Mediterranean incarceration. So if along the way, they show what that Foucault was mistaken to mark the advent of modern notions of long term imprisonment as opposed that is to other kinds of temporary detention or jailing on the way to trial or other sorts of punishment, the point of their book, I think, is much more than simply disordering or unsettling that narrative about the modern episteme, which is filled with a new kind of biopolitics that requires imprisonment. So, dark underground prisons for 100 denarii, let's go!

So Mark and Matthew, welcome to Recall this Book. I kind of want to out all of us now, as in the realm of abolitionist thinking; people who are at least interested in and invested in the question of what prison abolition in the contemporary context might look like. But first, let me say that Mark Letteney is an ancient historian and archeologist working in the history of incarceration, book history and the archeology of military occupation. He is an Endowed Professor in ancient history at University of Washington, and his previous books include *The Christianization of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* intellectual and material transformations. And Matthew Larsen is professor at the University of Copenhagen, and he's the author of *Gospels Before the Book*, as well as being a filmmaker and doing digital reconstructions of ancient sites. There's so much to unpack there, but any case, welcome to you both, and we like to start our conversation by asking you to tell us

about the book, its origins and its main intervention, perhaps. So over to you guys.

Mark Letteney

Yeah, thank you so much for having us. So this book is a synthetic account of the various forms that incarceration took across the ancient Mediterranean. By the ancient Mediterranean, we mean the world which saw the Mediterranean Sea as the central node. It spans, in that sense, a broad geographic space, from, let's say, the Levant to modern day UK. And it also spans a broad swath of time from about 300 BCE, which is to say from the beginning of the period of a significant corpus of documentary papyri, which could tell us something about not just the ideas of incarceration, but the experience of it. And it ends with new forms of government, new linguistic regimes and new forms of contact across the Mediterranean in about 600 CE.

Fundamentally, we want to describe the variety of systems of incarceration and the variety of ways in which incarceration undergirds ancient Mediterranean life writ large. Our book has already been seen as a response to Foucault, in a way that is, in some ways true, but in some ways is not really. One of the ancillary aims is to show not an earlier moment of birth for the prison, but that the prison is not the kind of institution that's likely to have a birthday to mark in the first place. And that to look for origins is probably to ask the wrong question.

Because you brought up the question of abolitionist thinking: to imagine a world before the birth of the prison makes abolitionist thinking simpler in some ways, because it allows us a vision of a world that we hope to return to, but we don't think that it offers either a historically viable vision, nor does it offer us much to think with. And the point of this book is to offer comparanda to think with about what a more just future might possibly look like.

Matthew Larsen

The way we approach a lot of things in ancient history is "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there," etc, etc. It's going to be really different. And what we sort of like had to eventually find a way to say: it's more hauntingly similar than we would have liked to have seen. And especially when you change your reference point and look at the mines, for instance, like mining camps as a site of carcerality; actually a lot of this sounds more familiar than we might have expected.

John Plotz

I was thinking of two different ways in. One is that, basically there was a presumption that there had always been jails, sure, but prisons were harder to find.

But in fact, you found the opposite, which, to me, is really counterintuitive, because it does seem as if jails ought to be the thing that everybody finds.

So, I thought maybe we could start there. And then the other thing is, I just want to make sure we talk about the five features that you guys identified, centrality, surveillance, separation, depth and punitive variability as like concomitant through-lines. Totally taking your point Matthew that you would see similarities, but also to try to stay with the distinctive Roman flavor of how this was done. Yeah. Do you guys want to go with the five features, or jails and prisons?

Mark Letteney

Yeah, sure, I'll start with jails and prisons, and then maybe Matthew can start with our five features. So I think just for the purpose of this podcast and listeners who may be unfamiliar, we should start by defining the difference between a jail and a prison, right as it occurs in modern criminological thinking. So a jail is typically understood as a place of pre trial detention, where folks are sent waiting for trial, or possibly shortly after trial, on route to some form of punishment. And a prison is thought of as a place of punishment in and of itself. That is to say, a place where people who have been convicted are sent for a variety of purposes. They could be reformatory, they could be penal, et cetera. What is striking is that this distinction between a jail and a prison is itself quite modern. That is to say that there would be a different purpose built facility for each of those functions is something that only appears in a third rowing sense in the early modern period, and actually really in the in the last, let's say, 150 years.

But the assumption among ancient historians has been that in antiquity there were only jails, that is, that there were only purpose built facilities or reused facilities, or ad hoc facilities meant for holding people waiting trial in some sort of a custodial carceral facility, and that after trial they would be sent off to some to real punishment. And real punishment meant maiming or service in the mines or public service or exile or something like that. What's fascinating is that the distinction doesn't seem to attain, which is to say that at least in the Roman world, but also in the broader ancient Mediterranean world: jails and prisons were the same facility more often than not. So there were people awaiting trial and people after trial in punitive control in the same facility and two that there seem to be purpose built spaces for punitive incarceration essentially as far back as we have documentary evidence, but that the first evidence for something like a purpose-built jail that is intended precisely for people who have not yet been convicted, in order that they can be held distinctly from people who have been convicted, actually comes from the sixth century CE in modern day Jordan.

Matthew Larsen

I'll pick up on the kind of five features that we outline, and that is a place where there is a lot of difference, and the difference in the especially in the Roman context, about where prisons are, is one of the things that is so helpful for us as moderns to look back, because some of the things that that may feel intuitive, unavoidable, obvious from a modern point of view, such as "where do we put prisons?" etc, all of a sudden become strange and unique choices that we as a society have made.

So in a Roman society, your civic prison is in the very middle of town, and it usually has two chambers, and it's underground, and it allows for surveillance. All these things don't sound like what most people would think about how a prison sounds. And yet, that difference, that's actually more historically middle of the road in terms of where prisons tended to be situated across different societies. Our practice, at least in the United States, building these large prisons far outside of town. That's the unique thing.

John Plotz

Can I ask a question about that? And maybe this is just a dead end and we don't go anywhere. But I guess part one of the question is whether you guys are fans of the Wengrow and Graeber book, "The Dawn of Everything" which is a sort of "proliferating paradigms" book, I guess I would say. Mark, I really heard you say, like, this thing that we think we're going to get away from, it's everywhere. "Dawn of Everything" sort of makes the case that there's nothing that's everywhere, like everything has some iterations, and then other societies that don't do it. So I guess Question one is like, Do you buy that? And if so, you know what follows from that?

And then question two, Matt, really, to your point about centrality and the prison is just like, you know, I grew up like a lot of nerdy kids really into the Middle Ages. You would think about something like the Tower of London, which is where the jewels are and where the prisoners are both. So there was that was presented to us as kind of like a functional account. Well, you have one place with heavy stone walls and iron bars, so naturally, you'd have your treasure there and you'd have your prisoners there. But are you making more--is there more, like a genealogical case to be made that actually, like what you see in the Middle Ages comes out of these Roman practices, but just transmute like they leave a legacy in that kind of centrality and depth, I guess. Sorry, I know that's two different questions, but yeah, I think they kind of relate.

Matthew Larsen

And so what I would say is like you do see something happening in late antiquity, and then it emerging more in the medieval period, where prisons often go from underground to towers. But I think they're both around the same logic that you point out, which is like they're both secure strong rooms. We're holding things for keeping perceived criminals in or perceived criminals out, right? And it's about containment and restriction of movement. There's also a logical containment; there's an economic feature that, like, for instance, and Guy Geltner's "The medieval prison" brings out of like, there was this enormous I think it's a flood in Florence, and they urgently save all the prisoners. Because the prisoners are sort of like living debt that if they die, their debt goes away. So there's an economic issue, and then also there's an issue of prisoners as a kind of displaying a prisoner rhymes with displaying a treasure.

Mark Letteney

So, asking an archeologist whether they like the book. "The Dawn of Everything" is probably its own podcast. I think it is a deeply important book. I think it is a tremendously long book, and it [does not] need to be as long as it is to make the point. And I think you're right about what at least one of the central points that at least among social structures, there is nothing universal, and I think in terms of precise social structures, that is probably true. And the question then is, what kind of institution is the prison?

Because there are social structures that are something like universal, which is to say something like the import of lineal descent, which we would call families, right? Families are something like universal, whereas democracy has a point of origin. Most scholars would say that every culture has had something that we could identify as religion, similarly as we could say every culture has something that we could identify as dumplings. And the question is, is the prison more like democracy, or is it more like the family? Is it the kind of institution that doesn't need a single point of origin and could be conceived and seems to have been conceived in a variety of different ways, at a variety of different points, by completely independent people? Or is it the kind of institution that requires a single point of origin and that finding and describing the genealogy is important to understanding the way that it exists in contemporary society.

John Plotz

Can I just say I really love that framing Mark. Thank you so much. That's an incredibly helpful framing of what, thank you, what one takes out of that book, or what you know what that book is good for.

Mark Letteney

Thanks. We would say that the prison is more like the import of lineal descent, which is to say that to understand its genealogy does not necessarily mean that you understand its contemporary form. Nevertheless, understanding the varieties of the varieties in which it has appeared in genealogically distinct societies, nevertheless gives you something like a mirror in which you can view your own instantiation of the same from a new angle. And that's what we hope that this evidence does. We're not saying that there is a strong genealogical connection between, let's say, the Tower of London and the Carcer Tullianum in Rome. There may well be, but that connection is always going to be at best, tenuous. But I think to see those two instances in which deviance is both exemplary and central allows us to interrogate the contemporary fiction in which prisoners don't exist and we live in a society which places especially punitive incarceration, long term incarceration, far outside of cities and far, at least ideally outside of the cultural imaginary. To see the centrality of this the Tower of London or the Carcer Tullianum maybe allows us to interrogate that choice, but it doesn't actually explain that choice.

John Plotz

This is great, and you guys have now given a couple of other directions to go. One of the big corollary questions that you raise is just the question of thinking about Rome as Imperial society, or settler-colonial society, in which you just have I'm going to use Ireland as a poor analogy for this, but you have states or places within the empire where you might want to just imprison people, not because they were the particular bad felon, but because you're trying to do an act of settler colonial control.

John Plotz

So one question would be, how much the prisons that you're describing are pointedly around individual acts of crime, versus more, like the establishment of police, a policing practice. So I'd love to go in that direction. But I just want to make sure, do you guys have more things to say about: again, centrality, you've covered surveillance, I think you've covered the need to keep an eye separation is really important. Depth seems like a crucial point for you guys, that the below-groundedness of the spaces you've discovered, and also the punitive variability, the way that things can change within the prison, how much people are being punished, or how they're being punished. So any other sort of main things you want to like lay out about that?

Matthew Larsen

I can talk a bit about punitive variability for listeners who haven't read the book. What that really means is like they it assumes the prison is punitive, and then it does things like you can toggle the space one way or another to make it more punitive or not based on how you want to treat people. So stuffing up the windows or access to light or access to whatever, you know that there's all these different ways of sort of like calibrating exactly how punitive you want the space to be in response to who's in there and how you want to treat them.

Mark Letteney

Just add on to Matthew's comments. So these five attributes that we go through in chapter two are not the only ideals that seem to be encoded in in these spaces, but they are five that show up both in the spaces themselves and seem to be corroborated by literary and documentary evidence. And the the aim that we had in identifying these sort of five attributes of ancient Mediterranean carceral spaces is attempting to first assemble an archive of archeologically attested spaces of carceral control, and then to read them as sources themselves. Chapter Two really tries to lay out something like a typology of carceral spaces, and ends with this attempt to look at those spaces not just as the sort of dramatic stage upon which we place literary sources or documentary sources, but as sources in and of themselves, and when we put them together and look for something like family resemblances between spaces and among the spaces and the other source of evidence.

Those are the five aspects that really shine through these spaces are central, often in cities, they have some capacity for surveillance, which is to say that prisoners were were being watched over. Prisoners could be separated, one from another for a variety of reasons. They're often underground, or they have some sort of form of depth or height, which allows prisoners to be placed in different sections of the prison, and that seems to relate to attempts to treat different kinds of prisoners differently, and as Matthew said, to dial up or to dial back the punitive aspect, or maybe, if not the punitive aspect, at least just how unpleasant it is to be in different sections of these facilities,

John Plotz

Matthew, one issue you raised with the notion of the kind of prisoner as visible treasure was probably the relationship to something like debt peonage or debt imprisonment. But can I, and then I already asked you guys the kind of vague and abstract question about, like, a settler colonial practice, like, how much it needs to be, you know, peoples who you're imprisoning rather than persons? I guess maybe these things both fall under the heading of an assertion you make is that we have to understand this is, I think, on page 13, "prisons were weight bearing beams

of societal infrastructure." And I really like that phrase, partly because you guys talk about actual physical weight a lot of the time. But here you're talking about infrastructure. And you know, one of the evidentiary hurdles that you're trying to get over is that people don't a lot of times, say in prison. You know, directly there is a prison, this is how many years people were sentenced to. And even when you talk about letters, it's not super clear from letters that people are prisoners in the way we think of prisoners. But when you assert weight bearing beams, you're saying not just these things were there, but they did a lot of work. Can you just kind of unpack that?

Matthew Larsen

Yeah, yeah. I mean, the idea behind that is in response to the person who's sort of still doubtful that prisons could have existed in the Roman world. I mean, when we started writing this, you know, you'd have some different scholars that not people who've worked on this topic, but who have just worked on the ancient world, generally be like, "what a silly book. There are no prisons in the ancient world." And so to kind of like, take it a step further and say, not only are there, but actually what we're seeing, the sources we're looking at, suggest it would be impossible to account for the ancient world as a whole without incarceration. So from economics to family to all to like you name it like, there's just so many segments of society that are being built up by incarceration, you know. So the like the flooring that's going into elite houses in in southern Italy, in Roman villas in southern Italy, a lot of people would have known that was being produced by incarcerated and enslaved labor in camps and being brought out so and so. It's really kind of like it was, frankly, I think, surprising to both of us when we came across a sort of cache of documentary sources that were like, oh, people were paying a prison tax in the kind of early to basically across a lot of the second century, you know, where it's like, this is a taxed that they that someone is paying and the and it's also then perceived as a sort of like state service that it's offering to its to its to society that, like, you will pay this amount, and in exchange, you are, we're providing prisons, you know. So it's really not so much like the society operated and they happen to have prisons. It's like it's integrated into the logic, like, and so, and yeah, so we did use an architectural metaphor very It probably came to us because we're, like, often working underground and looking at, like, actual architecture buildings. But I can see on Mark's face that he wants to jump in.

John Plotz

So Mark, before you do, can I just ask one question, and this to come back to that, you know, people make this distinction, which you guys heard me make,

between a slave society and a society with slaves. And it just occurs to me, listening to you make the point that you could equally say that there's such a thing as a society with prisons, and a prison society like maybe America nowadays is actually a prison society like we need it, as opposed to just happening to have it. So that's that's part of what I hear you saying, and maybe we can tease out the implications of that. But I interrupted you, Mark, sorry. Go ahead.

Mark Letteney

No, I wanted to respond to your question about sort of the the idealized use of the prison and the relationship between incarceration and settler colonialism. And I'm going to offer an unsatisfying answer, which is that we actually don't have meaningful insight into what the prison was for, at least in the Roman world, beyond jurists who are thinking not systematically, but at least theoretically, about the place of the prison in society. And the problem with the juristic material is that it seems at very best, let's say not widely heeded and at very worst, and probably closer to the truth, at least with sources like Ulpian, a sort of legal fantasy land, idealized world that actually never existed. So we don't have great theorists of Roman grand strategy, nor of Roman sort of social theory that talks specifically about the place of the prison.

One of the things that we do see in the documentary evidence is that folks with indigenous names seem to be more often victims of carceral control, and folks with the names of the colonial state, or names in the language of the colonial state, are more often incarcerators, right? So in the Ptolemaic period, you will have more, let's say native Egyptian names as prisoners, and more Greek names as incarcerators. And when Roman control comes to Egypt in 30 BCE, you start to see Roman names as the incarcerator and Greek or Egyptian names as those incarcerated. It is hard to build something like a vision of settler colonialism in any meaningfully sophisticated way from that evidence, but that is the evidence that we often have, and it does suggest something like a differential victimization and possibly a use of the prison, exactly to your point, as a form of social control that is actually not illegalistic.

Matthew Larsen

In the book we talked about, it's called the mosaic of the captives, and it's essentially the floor of a place of trial in the in North Africa, a place called tipasa now and the this sort of they built a place of trial where the Roman administrator would sit and hear trial. And on the floor of it is a representation of, I can't remember the exact number, but it's a family of three in the middle. And then do you remember the number? Marks like 12 other Berber faces around, yeah, but it's, but in any case, it's

absolutely representing the local population as the people who are captives, right? So it's built by Romans, or Roman to hold court, and on the floor, literally under foot, would be people who are, who are Berber. So I think it does speak to that issue. You know, it's still kind of, it's hard to map that one to one, but it speaks to the larger question I think you're trying to get at

John Plotz

Great. And can I, you know, I've already thrown in the sort of question of slaves and slave society, but maybe just to, I really appreciate your focus on the archeological evidence for the centrality of these prison spaces. But can I just hear you talk more, maybe, about how you understand people being sent to the mines, or mine labor? And let me just check with you. I think that you have some instances of mine labor where it really does seem like there's like a need for labor, and so people are being sent there in order to be consistently circulating through and their, you know, bodies at work, which we would think of as, like, that's like the 13th Amendment problem in America. Like, you know that prison labor can be compelled in easy ways. But also, don't you have examples of times when people are in a mine labor context, but it doesn't actually seem that that many of the people who are imprisoned are actually in the mines at any one time. In other words, they might just be there, like confined waiting their turn in the mines, which at least suggests a variability of how the mines get deployed. And so I'd just love to hear you say more about how that fits into your understanding of the kind of weight-bearing quality of the prison system that you're **looking at**.

Matthew Larsen

One thing to say is really there is not a clean line between enslavement and incarceration, certainly the period that we're looking at and in other periods as well. We're already taking on an enormous topic, yeah, over a big geography, geographic spread and chronological spread. So we had to find a way to kind of bracket things. And enslavement became one of the things that...we've got to find a way to not also need to take on that entire set of sources and questions. But the mines became a place where it was like, you kind of have to just acknowledge that there is some ambiguity and some kind of overlap between these two things, both in how you depict someone who is a captive. And then in the mines, there are places where we know from all kinds of different sources, enslaved persons and convicted criminals were being detained. And one of the sources that I think is really illuminating, that we talked about in the book, and I know Mark and I have both talked about separately and together, as the kind of the book is beginning to be discussed, is there's a source, a documentary source, that talks about this number of people were

held. This is the number of people that were used, and this is a number of people who are not used. And it implies that, let's say I'm convicted of a crime, I'm sent to the mines. If I'm there for three years, I might actually only be in the mine working for five, six months, and the rest of the time you're sitting inside a room waiting to work. So then that becomes really interesting in terms of thinking about all the questions that that you raised.

Mark Letteney

This is one of the really interesting and productive facets of putting together data across different carceral regimes and different intellectual regimes. So the papyrus that that Matthew referenced is from the third century BCE. It's a report of a mine overseer basically asks, saying, we've done this much work and we'd like to get paid. And it's a report telling a local sort of aristocrat how many people worked over a certain amount of time. It says over a 60 day period, 130 prisoners, and 10 of them worked, which tells us that one there's some facility where these people are sitting, and whatever that facility looked like, it is, definitionally, a prison and that to be sentenced to the mines in the Ptolemaic period is not necessarily to be working in the mines.

What's really interesting is putting that together with Roman mine facilities that are so enormous that it's not possible that everybody sitting inside the carceral facility next to the mine were working in the mine at the same time, which is to say that we seem to see a durability between the Ptolemaic period and the Roman period, that suggests that even if the carceral ideals are changing, the carceral practices actually seem to be staying relatively static. And one of those practices is the use of idle bodies, often in local prisons to do work, sometimes in mine, sometimes in cities. And the fact that to place somebody in a mining context does not mean that they're mining, and it does not mean that they are not incarcerated. And so placing these two placing sources together across even a temporal divide, actually shows us something that we might not have seen if we only had one piece of evidence or the other.

John Plotz

That's super helpful. And I think I would love if we can at some point circle back to the question of prisons relationship to debt or debt peonage, or what it means, you know, like the cost or the worth of a body but, but I think there's one other category that you guys talk about in such interesting ways that I hadn't really thought about, which is soldiers. And so soldiers in the prison doing the job of administering, but also I guess there's military prisons. Is that? Right? That exists a

separate category. And so basically, more thoughts about how that category of compelled but somewhat slightly elevated labor fits in.

Mark Letteney

Yeah, I can say something briefly about both. One of the things that we found that is distinct from contemporary conceptions of carceral spaces is that we tend to think of carceral space as intended for a certain kind of offender. So there's a women's prison, there's a men's prison. Right here in Seattle, we have a gleaming new prison for children. In the ancient world, it seems sort of broadly. It seems to be the case that different types of prisons were not associated with different types of people, but different types of incarcerators, right? So there is a military prison, which is overseen by the military, but there might well be all sorts of different kinds of people inside of it. There's one source from late antiquity, at least, claims to be a diary of a prisoner named Perpetua, in which she seems to move between three different kinds of prisons with her whole sort of retinue.

So there are different types of prisons overseen by different types of people, but they all often seem to be used for sort of multi, multi purpose functions on the question of peonage. So one of the things that we came up with when we were thinking about the relationship between debt, especially debt to the state, and carceral outcomes, is there has often been a debate among Roman historians about whether Roman prisons are profitable. What is the value of a prisoner in terms of their output? And that's important and important to think about. And there is some evidence that some of these facilities, especially mining facilities, were shut down when they were no longer profitable.

Mark Letteney

But one of the points that we came up with really in conversation with Spencer Weinreich, who is a professor at UCLA, thinking about the history of solitary confinement, is that the value, if we indeed should be talking about the value of prison and prison labor, we should not think about value nearly in terms of output, but also in terms of input, Which is to say that the value of the prison is less in its output of labor than in its input of bodies and its control of deviance by inputting bodies. And if you can extract a sort of marginal benefit by having these people work, then that's all to the good. But that one of the things that we see in the tax registers and the legal sources and the literary sources alike, is that the value of the prison is in containing deviance, and that as in that, given that that value is attainable through prison construction and maintenance, it is therefore worth paying.

John Plotz

Yeah, so maybe a final theoretical wrinkle before we sort of start turning the corner for home would be, if that's the account which I don't know this Spencer Weinreich. Is maybe Foucault matters. But are you thinking about people like Goffman, and the mid 20th century, models of deviance? Production of deviance, management of deviance, is that that helpful for you in terms of thinking about the weight bearing quality of the prison system you're looking at?

Mark Letteney

You brought up Goffman, I think especially thinking about these institutions as sort of totalizing in some sort of meaningful sense, probably helps us to see things about the evidence that we might not see otherwise, which is to say that there's a heuristic value to reading Goffman and to reading Foucault and to reading whoever else. But I I don't know that we can say again, because of the lack of theoretical literature about the way prison works or ought to work, a couple of sort of juristic examples that we can say too terribly much about the way that these spaces were experienced. Yeah, that's the kind of data that we would need to really build theoretically sophisticated picture

Matthew Larsen

I just wanted to kind of bring into this conversation a quote that I think relates, which is from Livy, when he's some of the history of Rome, and he talks about the history of the prison in the middle of Rome, and his sort of like origin story for that is like, well, you have all these like foreigners coming in, and they're not following the laws and the rules. So what are we going to do? Well, we built a big prison in the middle of Rome and the so they could see it. And I think that, for me, like the language around deviancy emerges from trying to think with Livy around like there's a norm that the people who are running society want, and then there's a deviation from that norm, and the prison is a way of taking the deviance and punishing it, or at least scaring people into wanting to not be in the deviant category, but in the normative category.

John Plotz

Yeah, that's super helpful. Okay, so maybe that leads to just the final big question, and you guys did begin to touch on this already in terms of your question of like the genealogy question versus the durability question. But just as people who are in the abolitionist thinking realm, thinking with or as abolitionist, Do you think there are some sharp takeaways here? You already talked about not imagining an

idyllic before a Rousseauvian prison-free state. But are there other sort of more salient thoughts that might sharpen abolitionist thinking that come out of this?

Matthew Larsen

Yeah, I think what I would say is the language that that that we kicked around, and that I find useful is, if there is to be a world without prisons, we will need to make it, not return to it. And I think, I think that's kind of like the big takeaway is, and which I think maybe may sound discouraging to some, but like, there's all kinds of things that we have have not existed and we've made to exist. I mean, like it like you could think of lots of examples. So I think that that would be the kind of like the Tweet-length version of the answer from my end.

Mark Letteney

I'll just add that there is a persistent ideal among people who have policy ideals similar to my own, that if we could just get society to understand, they would care that what is at issue is knowledge of what's happening behind the walls, and if everybody saw We would be, we would bootstrap our way towards abolition. And I think one of the takeaways that I have from the centrality of both these practices and their placement in cities in the ancient world is that that premise probably isn't true, that it's not enough to make people see the use or the abuse of the prison, to get them to care. And that that is sobering, but I think it is at least historically well attested that our project ought not to be simply one of education. It has to be one of change.

John Plotz

I really hear that, and I'm not trying to push back at you, but let me just complicate that by saying that it one of the things that's striking to me about your book is that you are telling a story about absence of evidence and like overlooking and not mentioning and at least one plausible interpretation of this--but you can tell me if it's a wrong interpretation--is that people actually are embarrassed: these are sordid details that people don't like to attest to or confront or talk about. And if that's true, then what would follow is that there's a durable that, like, kind of, like the education thing, might actually help, because people don't like having their dirty laundry washed in public.

Mark Letteney

Yeah, I think that there are certainly instances, at least among the Roman evidence, of people being uncomfortable with the use to which the prison is put, folks like Libanius and the fourth century comes immediately to mind who gives this

long speech in 386, which he then mails to the Emperor about the abuses of the prison in Antioch. And I think that there are attempts to expose specially abuses and an assumption that if those in charge knew they would do something. But those sources are few and far between, and what they are between are non normative, but sort of descriptions of uses of the prison that we would find tremendously unjust that are just the way it is, folks like Livy right, who Matthew just mentioned, and also the overwhelming impotence that we see, especially in legal and reform sources, which point to abuses, attempts to reform them, and then 50 years later, we see the same thing happening again. So I would say, yes, people, there is an attempt, in some instances, to show abuses, but there are just as many instances, and probably more of rather quotidian descriptions that we would find that we find extremely uncomfortable, and also, there are a couple sort of instances of reform premised on injustice or premised on showing injustice, and they actually seem to have completely failed

John Plotz

Okay, thank you. I appreciate that. I take it. I may not take it sitting down, but I will take it. This is a moment at the podcast where we invite you if should you wish to offer up what we call a recallable book, meaning, if you enjoyed this conversation, here is and here is a book you might also find worth diving into. So Mark, do you want to start us off?

Mark Letteney

I want to make a pitch for a book called "who would believe a prisoner?" It's edited by Michelle Daniel Jones and Elizabeth Angeline Nelson, and it is an account of the birth and early decades of the first women's prison in Indiana, written by current and former inmates at that prison using that prison's archives. And the reason it is so important and has been helpful, both in my thinking and in my teaching, is that it lays out there the extent to which incarcerated people's knowledge of the institution holds them has been, historically and even today, sidelined as not a true form of knowledge about the prison. It is a unbelievably rich text which starts in 1848 and ends in 1920 and it is written by people currently incarcerated or formerly incarcerated, and they just ask questions that non incarcerated folks don't tend to ask, and because they're asking those questions, they find a rather radically different history than might have been told otherwise.

Matthew Larsen

I'd say, if you thought today's conversation was interesting, I'd go read Dostoevsky's memoirs from the House of the Dead, drawn from his own years in a

Siberian prison. It captures like not only the brutality of the confinement, but also kind of a strange moral ecosystem that develops inside the walls, you know, so both the humiliation and the pride fighting for small acts of dignity, spiritual wrestling. And what I think, where it sort of rhymes with ours, is it's more, it's almost an anthropology, kind of revealing what what it means to be human. So I'd say go check out that book, which essentially mark. I didn't kind of compare notes on this, but we both pointed to like something by an actual prisoner.

John Plotz

Well, I'm gonna break the chain, because I just want to recommend Samuel Delany's Neveryon Chronicles, which is a strange set of fantasy books. They include a lot about enslavement and a lot about imprisonment in the mines. And for what it's worth, I was just thinking about as you guys, as I was reading your wonderful, wonderful book, which, again, is called Ancient Mediterranean Incarceration and has a wonderful cover, among other things. But as I was reading your book, I was thinking a lot about Delany's depiction of how both the kind of basically the erotics and the bondage of laboring in the mines work in any case, you guys, thank you so much. I hope that many people read this book and are inspired. I was so glad that the New Yorker wrote about it as well. It's clearly getting the kind of attention it deserves We just end by thanking you our listeners, and thanking you guys on behalf of listeners: a great conversation.