

SLAVERY IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Slavery was a central institution in both the **late Roman Republic** (roughly 2nd–1st century BCE) and the **early Roman Empire** (1st century BCE – 3rd century CE). It played a critical role in the Roman economy, society, and culture.

1. Introduction and estimates of numbers

In both the late Republic and early Empire, slavery was fundamental to Roman life – economically indispensable, socially embedded, and legally institutionalized. It touched every aspect of Roman civilization, and its legacy was felt long after the Empire fell.

A rough estimate of the number of slaves in Italy in the middle of the 1st century BCE: 1.5 – 2 million, approximately 20 percent of the total population. Estimates for the provinces are unreliable. Larger cities, such as Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, would have had a higher proportion of slaves.

2. Sources of slaves

Slaves came from several main sources:

- **War captives:** Rome's military expansion, especially during the Republic, brought hundreds of thousands of enslaved people. For example, after the Third Macedonian War (168 BCE), 150,000 people were enslaved.
- **Preference for slaves from the east,** as Germanic and Gallic slaves from north and west were perceived as troublesome, especially after the Spartacus revolt of 73-71 BCE.
- **Piracy:** In the earlier Republic, Mediterranean piracy was a common source of slaves until Pompey's campaigns in the 1st century BCE.
- **Kidnapping:** A ruthless trade in kidnapped people existed on the margins of the empire.
- **Slave breeding:** Children born to enslaved mothers automatically became slaves (*vernae*). Increasingly the source of slaves as Rome's wars declined in the 1st century CE.
- **Exposure and sale of infants:** Abandoned Roman infants, especially girls, were often raised by others to be sold into slavery.
- **Debt bondage:** Though largely phased out by the late Republic, earlier forms of slavery included Romans enslaving themselves or others due to unpaid debts (*nexum*).

3. Roles and labour

Slaves were a commodity, an asset. Aristotle referred to slaves as 'human tools'. Slaves filled a wide range of roles:

- **Agricultural labour:** Especially on *latifundia* (large estates), where they worked in harsh, plantation-like conditions.
- **Workhouses:** *ergastula* – to sleep at night. Flat and low enough that slaves could not stand up.
- **Domestic service:** Wealthy Graeco-Roman households often had dozens of household slaves – cooks, tutors, cleaners, bodyguards, etc. E.g., household of Cornelius (Acts 11: 14) ... Aristobulus ... Narcissus (Rom. 16: 11-12) ... Chloe ... Stephanas (1 Cor. 1: 11, 16). Greek word *oikos* and Roman word for household, *familia*, always included free and slave members.
- **Skilled labour and professions:** Some slaves were highly educated Greeks who served as doctors, teachers, accountants, and architects.
- **Public slaves** (*servi publici*): Worked for the state in administrative roles, maintenance of public buildings, and infrastructure.
- **Entertainment and sex work:** Slaves were forced to perform as gladiators, actors or prostitutes.
- Slaves worked alongside freeborn and freed workers, especially at hard manual work. Such **competition** depressed wages and eliminated inflation from 4th century BCE to end of 1st century CE.

4. Legal and social status

- Slaves were **property** (*res*) in Roman law – they could not own property or have rights of citizenship.
- Limited legal right to marry – *contubernium* not *matrimonium*
- Masters had **absolute power** (*dominium*) over slaves, including corporal punishment and even execution.
- Slaves running away and stealing quite common, e.g., Cicero had two slave librarians who absconded with his books.
- The Zoninus collar – Romans had a great deal of anxiety about the people they enslaved running away. Runaways were subhuman – nobody and nothing.
- Punishments for any offense and especially for running away were very harsh – hard labour, branding, whipping, beating to death and crucifixion were common.
- Common attitudes of citizens towards slaves ran from disdain to sadism, with fear and anxiety about their dependence and vulnerability. Roman proverb: '[You have] as many enemies as [you have] slaves.'
- However, there were social norms and economic reasons for humane treatment of skilled or valuable slaves.

- The philosopher Seneca and others discussed *humanitas* in slave treatment, though this didn't extend legal rights.
- Some slaves could earn and accumulate very small amounts of money, the *peculium*, to purchase their freedom or start a business once manumitted.

5. Manumission and freedmen

Manumission (freeing of slaves) was relatively common, especially in the Empire:

- Freed slaves were a huge part of Roman life.
- Cicero wrote that slaves were typically freed after seven years of service. Most were free by the age of 30.
- Many were freed before they became expensive in old age.
- Freed slaves received nothing from their masters – no money, goods or pension. Many stayed in the household as servants. If slaves secured their freedom, they went into permanent subordination or into exile.
- Freed slaves (*liberti*) were often loyal clients to their former masters and occasionally their business partners.
- Manumission did not convey Roman citizenship.
- Some freedmen became wealthy through trade and business, though social mobility remained limited.

6. Slave resistance and revolts

While many slaves adapted to their roles, resistance occurred:

- **Everyday resistance:** Shirking, sabotage, escape, faking illness, etc.
- **Organized revolts:** The most famous was the **Spartacus Revolt** (73–71 BCE), where a Thracian gladiator led a large slave army, augmented by other rebellious ex-soldiers. It ultimately failed, and over 6,000 surviving rebels were crucified along the Appian Way.

7. Transition and decline

By the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE:

- The flow of new slaves declined as military expansion slowed.
- Economic changes (rise of tenant farming or *coloni*) began to replace slavery in agriculture.
- Christianity's spread slowly began changing attitudes, though slavery persisted for centuries.

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