Slavery, Rome

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Slavery occupied an essential place in the fabric of Roman society; at its peak during the Late Republic, slaves accounted for around one third of the total population. Slave labor was relied on extensively for the primary production on which the wealth of the aristocracy was based, as well as for urban industry. Viewing slavery solely in economic terms, however, is subject to limitations: it was not used for purely capitalist ends, as in the New World; the work force included the free poor as well as slaves; the predominance of servile labor was confined to the period after Rome's overseas expansion from the second century BCE to before the time of Diocletian, and was a feature of Rome and Italy rather than the empire at large (Bradley 1994: 10–16). Slavery as a wider social institution, on the other hand, was widespread in all periods, and in all parts of the empire.

The Roman upper classes considered it beneath their dignity to dirty their hands with manual work, or to engage overtly in commercial activities. Ownership of slaves in large numbers facilitated their ideal lifestyle, with slaves employed to undertake the day-to-day operation of country estates and business enterprises. Slaves also acted as secretaries, valets, or doorkeepers. Wealthy women, whose role in the household was merely supervisory, had their own slaves to perform tasks such as cooking and cleaning, wet-nursing, and child-minding, as well as to act as personal attendants or hairdressers. Out of doors, slaves accompanied their owners to the baths, carried their litters, or lit their way at night.

As well as providing labor, slaves functioned as important status symbols, both in public, where a large retinue of servile attendants was a visible indicator of wealth and prestige, and at home, where guests could be impressed by the presence of "luxury" slaves such as dwarfs, masseurs, or waiters. Although possession of slaves in large numbers was a mark of the wealthy, the more humble citizens also benefited from slavery, for the enslaved provided a benchmark against which the free could measure their own social standing, enhancing their sense of self-worth and liberty. Thus, although the free poor engaged in the same jobs as slaves, even the lowliest could see freedom as superior to slavery.

Enslavement came about in various ways: through capture in war or by pirates (*see* PIRACY) or through the selling of abandoned children into slavery (*see* EXPOSURE OF CHILDREN); some also became slaves voluntarily to escape debt. Prisoners of war usually passed into the hands of slave traders who offered them for private sale in the provinces or sent them to the slave market in Rome, where they suffered the indignity of being paraded like cattle, subject to intrusive inspection on the part of potential buyers (Bradley 1994: 51–6). The majority of slaves, however, were born into slavery (*see VERNAE*), increasingly so during the Principate: these *vernae* were the children of the female slaves in the household, fathered either by slave partners or by their masters (illegitimate offspring took the status of the mother). This method of augmenting slave numbers was attractive because it encouraged goodwill by allowing slaves to enter into quasi-marital relationships (*see CONTUBERNIUM*), as well as providing an alternative sexual outlet for owners wanting to limit their legitimate families. Above all, it produced slaves who, not having experienced freedom, would be less likely to rebel: consequently, *vernae* were more highly valued than purchased slaves.

The status of slaves was ambiguous. Legally they were dehumanized, having no citizenship rights or legitimate kin (they could not contract a legal marriage); they could not own property, and they were totally in their owners' power. On the other hand, their humanity was recognized, for instance when legal or philosophical writers acknowledged a slave's ability to exercise independent moral judgment by showing unsolicited loyalty to his master in

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a crisis. Moreover, slaves were human members of the household, and were given a place in family tombs; in exceptional cases they were regarded as part of the family (a famous example is Cicero's secretary Tiro). On the human ladder, however, slaves occupied the lowest rung, viewed by the free as morally, physically, and intellectually inferior; in the household, a sharp distinction was maintained between servile and other family members (Saller 1996).

Country slaves were of lesser status than urban, the chained working gangs occupying the lowest position of all. The most prestigious job for a rural slave was that of estate manager (*see* VILICUS). Rural slaves have traditionally been discussed, both in ancient and modern texts, in economic terms, as predominantly male laborers, but recent scholarship has emphasized the role of the women, who engaged in tasks such as spinning as well as reproduction (Roth 2007).

Urban slaves were employed in domestic jobs as well as in industry, shops and crafts, and in professions such as teaching and medicine. They also featured prominently in the more despised occupations like acting, gladiatorial fighting, and prostitution. These slaves would generally be owned by those who profited from such occupations, such as a *lanista* (gladiator trainer) or a *leno* (pimp), though they were sometimes part of an ordinary household, for instance, the troupe of pantomime dancers kept by Ummidia Quadratilla (Plin. *Ep.* 7.24).

There were also publicly owned slaves employed in administrative jobs in Italian and provincial towns, while under the Early Empire the maintenance of Rome's aqueducts was in the charge of a slave group owned by the state (Wiedemann 1981: 157–61).

The emperor's slaves constituted the elite, in particular those in the imperial civil service, which provided them with a career path and the chance, on manumission, to attain wealth and important administrative posts, though freedmen such as the father of Claudius Etruscus, who rose to equestrian status, were exceptional. The superior standing of male imperial slaves is reflected in the unusually large number of unions which they contracted with free-born women (Weaver 1972).

Sometimes slaves were accorded the status of pet (*delicium*). These included "luxury" slaves: small children imported from Egypt, who amused by their witty chatter, dwarfs, and handsome youths serving both as wine waiters and for pederastic purposes. Funerary inscriptions for individual *delicia* show that they could be of either sex, and owned by either men or women. For the childless, they could even function as child substitutes, like the *verna* Glaucias, foster-child of Atedius Melior (Stat. *Silv.* 2.1; Mart. 6.28, 6.29).

Unlike citizens, slaves were subject to corporal punishment and to torture (in law suits the evidence of slaves was taken under torture). Savage instruments were employed, including the rack and the *flagellum* – a cat o' nine tails with metal attached to the thongs. Runaways and thieves had the name of their offense tattooed on their faces. Capital sentences might take the form of crucifixion or being thrown to wild beasts in the arena; those sentenced to the gladiatorial school had some chance, if skilled, of securing eventual freedom (*see* GLADIATORS). Under the empire, condemnation of criminals, including slaves, to work in the mines was tantamount to a capital sentence, given the dreadful conditions. Owners had free reign in inflicting corporal punishment: they would only meet with disapproval if the punishment was excessively severe, as in the notorious case of Vedius Pollio, who incurred the anger of the emperor Augustus by threatening to feed a slave who had accidentally broken a crystal bowl to his pet lampreys (Sen. *Dial.* 5.40). Cruel owners exceeded the limits at their own peril, however, as demonstrated by the murder of Larcius Macedo at the hands of his disaffected slaves (Plin. *Ep.* 3.14), a scenario which might not have been uncommon (Bradley 1994: 112–14).

From a modern perspective, one of the worst aspects of slavery was sexual exploitation, especially by male owners; women who

did so risked social disapprobation and, after Augustus' adultery laws, were also liable, unlike their husbands, to the charge of adultery (*see* LEX IULIA AND LEX PAPIA). For masters, sexual use of their own slaves, both male and female, knew no limits: sex with pre-pubescent youths was considered normal, provided that the owner took the active (dominant) role (*see* SEX AND SEXUALITY, ROME). These boys were kept artificially girlish and youthful, by making them wear their hair long, removing bodily hair, and in the most extreme cases, by castration (*see* CASTRATION, HUMAN), a practice especially associated with slave-dealers and legislated against by several emperors (Bradley 1987: 115f.).

The Romans would not have regarded such sexual use as abuse, since that would involve violation of a sense of honor that slaves were thought to lack. Objections to the practice were thus rarely voiced. It was even suggested – in fiction, at least – that slaves might themselves exploit the situation to their advantage: Petronius in his *Satyrica* makes the wealthy freedman Trimalchio boast of cynically going along with the sexual wants of both master and mistress in order to advance his career prospects (Petron. *Sat.* 75). As far as female slaves are concerned, the law allowed them to be manumitted five years before the normal age of thirty in order to marry the master, provided he was not of senatorial rank. Not all such unions must have been conducted without the consent of the female in question. But happy endings were doubtless the exception, and for the majority sexual exploitation was always a possibility.

There is no Roman equivalent of the American slave narratives: educated ex-slaves such as the comedian Terence write from the owners' perspective. Consequently we can only conjecture what it was like to be a slave in Rome. Clearly, there was an enormous variation in the slaves' experience, depending on their sex, their job, whether or not they were born into slavery, and above all, the attitude of their owner, on whom they were totally dependent. On the positive side, a slave's life compared favorably in many respects to that of the free poor. Both groups might be engaged in similar work, but the slave would have the advantage in terms of guaranteed food, clothing, and lodgings. For the lucky ones who were manumitted, slavery was not a life-long, unchangeable institution, but a stepping-stone to full integration into society (*see* MANUMISSION, GREEK AND ROMAN). For perhaps the majority, however, the negative aspects outweighed the positive. In addition to the threat of physical abuse, low life expectancy guaranteed that most would not reach the age of manumission; even then, opportunities to save the money to buy freedom (*see* PECULIUM) would have been limited, especially if working in the rural sector. Slave families were unstable, since the owner could sell a family member at any time.

Studies of Roman slavery have tended to take either a negative or a more optimistic stance. As an example of the former, Bradley (1987) emphasizes the fear and insecurity that accompanied servile status, viewing even apparent concessions like allowing slaves to form families or to hope for manumission as mere inducements to compliance; despite laws over time which might have improved the slaves' lot, the essential institution did not change over the Classical period. Advocates of the positive approach, on the other hand, have used the funerary inscriptions of slaves and freedmen to gain an insight into family relationships, work, and manumission patterns, suggesting that slaves might have gained, through their jobs and their position within the household, a sense of identity and self-worth denied to them by their legal status as non-persons (e.g., Treggiari 1975; Joshel 1992; Hasegawa 2005; Roth 2007).

Because the ethnic background and the everyday circumstances of slaves were so diverse, there were few organized slave rebellions such as that of Spartacus; resistance was shown on an individual basis, such as by running away. Voices were occasionally were raised against mistreatment of slaves, especially by Stoics such as Seneca, but even here, there is

more concern with the moral welfare of the slave owner who gives way to anger than the plight of the unfortunates on the receiving end. There was no questioning of slavery as an institution, even after the advent of Christianity.

SEE ALSO: *Augusti liberti*; Corporal punishment; Eunuchs, Greece and Rome; Freedmen and freedwomen; Labor, compulsory; Labor, Greece and Rome; Social structure and mobility, Greece and Rome; Torture; *Vernae*.

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