

## Vernae

BERYL RAWSON

The Latin term *verna* usually meant “home-born slave” in Roman literature, law and inscriptions. It also had an earlier meaning of “native-born.” Children born to a slave mother were themselves slaves and belonged to the mother’s owner. They had no father in the eyes of the law.

Slaves born and raised in an owner’s household were more highly valued than those bought on the open market (often foreign-born). They were considered better behaved and had closer bonds to their owners and their owners’ families. They could be trained in special skills from an early age, as attested for Atticus (Nep. *Att.* 13. 4) in the mid-first century BCE. He owned a large library, and used *vernae* for manuscript-copying. The term *verna* is seldom attested in Republican evidence, and is not used by Nepos of Atticus’ slaves, although the phenomenon clearly existed. In the Imperial period, when affluent urban households became larger, there was greater differentiation between specially favored home-born slaves and the mass of other slaves.

The affectionate bond was likely to be stronger if the *verna* was a *collactaneus*, reared by

the same wet-nurse as a child of the owner. A *verna* might become a surrogate son (or occasionally daughter) and heir if an owner were childless. Slaves in such positions were more likely to win freedom early and thus to take the family name (*nomen*) of their owner. This involved obligations of continuing service and responsibility for preserving the memory of the owner and the owner’s name. This could include providing and maintaining a tomb, in which the ex-slave might also find burial.

Records of *vernae* increase in the second century CE, as the term *Caes(aris) verna* became a career grade in the imperial household. *Vernae* are attested in some Italian towns, but less often than in Rome.

SEE ALSO: Childhood, Greece and Rome; Slavery, Greece; Slavery, Rome.

### REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

- Hermann-Otto, E. (1994) *Ex ancilla natus*. Stuttgart.
- Rawson, B. (1986) “Children in the Roman *familia*.” In B. Rawson, ed., *The family in ancient Rome: new perspectives*: 170–200. London.
- Weaver, P. (1972) *Familia Caesaris: a social study of the emperor’s freedmen and slaves*. Cambridge.