

Slaves and Freedpersons in Rome

One of the most challenging things about Rome for a passionate anachronist is that Roman values can be quite at odds with ours today. These elements can be distinctly uncomfortable to think about, but persevering within that discomfort is crucial to understanding both who they were, and how they have influenced us.

When treading these paths it is important to keep in mind that this was a very different world than ours, in two particular ways.

One, is that the intrinsic value of human life was not yet a paradigm. The roots of that concept were starting to form and made progress during the Roman period, but would take over a thousand years to reach enslaved persons. Compassion as we think of it, applied to anyone outside the familia, was not a positive or desired trait, and the closest acceptable thing to be found is what's known as "enlightened self interest". (This is not to say it was entirely absent, it would not have been a vice if it were not recurring.)

Second is that the Roman system of slavery was very different than the American model of chattel slavery. There are some similarities, particularly that both were terrible, but the lives of Roman enslaved persons were overall less restricted, less oppressed, and lacked the distinct anti-black sentiments that underpinned the practice and followed American manumitted slaves into free life and the centuries beyond.

- 1) Slaves comprised roughly 15% of the general population of Rome, or roughly 9 million people.
- 2) Most slaves were primarily engaged in domestic work for elite families.
 - a) Not many people could afford one, at most 1 household in 7 had a slave^{Knapp}.
 - b) Aristotle stated that the wives and children of those without slaves provided the domestic labor that to him, was normally done by slaves^{Bradley}.
 - c) Having only one slave was a bit of an embarrassment, as family members would still have needed to work alongside them. A small household might require the work of 3-4 enslaved persons for the family to pursue non-maintenance activities.
 - d) Out of a survey of 127 households in 100 BC, only 2 had more than 3^{Croom}.
- 3) Slaves were not actually necessary for the economy to function, rather their value was primarily social.
 - a) Power over others is a core dynamic in Roman society. Owning slaves was an essential part of Roman status and measurement of power.
 - b) Enslavement was a state of complete powerlessness, where power over the self had been forfeited or removed. This lack of power was a sort of shame.
 - c) The cultural transformation of people into things (and back) can be understood as a state of living death. Basically at some point you would have died, except someone took responsibility and ownership of your life at that point. Your free life ended then and they owned you going forward. Slaves were people and yet things; they had all the rights of a corpse. So none.

- 4) Slaves did all sort of work. Only military service and preparing the dead were off limits.
 - a) Rural seasonal and/or heavy physical labor was generally supplied with day laborers, the ever present poor who were easy to gather, direct as needed and return with pay instead of any worry as to their care and upkeep.
 - b) Skilled, capable or simply available slaves could be hired out to other people as a means of generating income.
- 5) The best way of generalizing what work might be done by slaves and what would be hired is to consider the work as either a utility or amenity, or a commodity.
 - a) If you wanted running water, for the most part, someone ran for it. Waterbearing was a constant task that multiple people in a household might be responsible for.
 - b) Similarly, if you needed a scribe once a year, you might contract or hire one, but if you needed scribal assistance year-round you might purchase one.
 - c) Slaves designated for maintaining particular duties for a place were considered to be equipment of the place, while persons without designated tasks were considered to be liquid or portable assets^{Bradley}. Law established which staff were part of a home or villa, for purposes of inheritance.
- 6) Being comprised of people of literally every background, and due to the fact that slaves wore the same sort of clothes as ordinary people, there were next to zero indicators of a person's status as slave, freed or free. Were it not for opulence of dress, slaves would blend in seamlessly with the rest of the public, both socially and visually.
 - a) Persons of distinction might disguise themselves as a slave by simply dressing down. To dress below your station was such a shame and embarrassment that there are many accounts of nobles, patricians and other rich persons slipping away by committing the unthinkable act of abandoning their retinue.
 - b) Collars, brands and distinct clothes were used to distinguish slaves who were caught after escaping, that might have otherwise used this anonymity to their advantage.
 - c) The clothing of a slave reflected on their owner, so being dressed adequately but not ostentatiously would be normal. Rural slaves, or mining slaves in particular, might have shabby to little clothing, due to not being seen by neighbors.
- 7) Manumission was not unusual; while most slaves could not count on such an outcome, it would have been a reasonable aspiration within certain circumstances.
 - a) In comparison to the 9 million enslaved people, freedpersons numbered about half a million.
 - b) Manumission was limited, by age, and ratio of owned slaves, as well as by owner's inclinations. Different forms of manumission granted differing status.
 - c) The most common form of manumission gave enslaved people full citizenship, but their freed status stayed with them and imposed restrictions on their futures.
 - d) Freedman limits did not get passed down; their children were fully free citizens.
 - e) Manumission did not end an owner's power over the previously enslaved person. Depending on the terms of manumission, work, even daily work, could continue to be owed to the previous owner, now a patron. A patron might even continue to support the freedman, especially if this support were linked to a continuing task.

- 8) In larger, richer households and in the workings of government, slaves were educated as well as skilled.
 - a) Many needed and necessary jobs could only be trusted to persons whose loyalty rested entirely with the family. Slaves were members of the household, and their wellbeing rested on the wellbeing of the family.
 - b) While the operation of the home was the primary concern, assistance was often needed in business dealings both in town and farther away.
- 9) Jobs that required more autonomy might be performed by freedpersons
 - a) slaves who showed talent, compliance and reliability that were freed with the understanding that services would continue to be provided.
- 10) Circumstances varied greatly amongst enslaved persons: volume and nature of work, likelihood of manumission, ability to accumulate individual wealth, days off, etc. Countless factors influenced an enslaved person's chances in life, and almost none of them were within that person's control.
 - a) This is part of why there were as few revolts as there were. Lack of shared conditions, as well as disparate ethnic identities kept enslaved people from working together for group betterment.
- 11) There were 7 different means by which a person could find themselves enslaved.
 - a) Prisoners of war. This is the longest-lived tradition of collecting people for forced labor, and defines the Roman cultural attitudes toward slavery.
 - b) By birth. Being born to an enslaved mother meant you were a slave of her owner.
 - c) Being found. Unwanted children were regularly left out to die of exposure, and anyone could collect a newborn child to raise as property. This was tricky, as foundlings could have been free-born and it was illegal to keep a free person as a slave. But with no one of import to speak for them, consequences were rare.
 - d) By contract. A father could sell any of his children, due to their absolute power within the family, but it was a controversial move.(note that if your whole family was sold, you'd have no possibility of controlling where your kids were sold, or of buying them back)
 - e) A Roman citizen could not sell themselves directly, but they could contract themselves into slavery, in order to save their family from penalty or torture on account of debts, or for other reasons.
 - f) By capture. The capture of peoples in wartime was not a consistent source of slaves. Slavers were a horrifying fact of life. These bandits, pirates and kidnappers targeted vulnerable people wherever they could be found. Urban homeless, the rural poor; anyone without guards or the ability to escape could be rounded up and turned into property by slavers. Frequent violations of acceptable means of capture were known, but consequences could not be pressed.
 - g) By sentence. People could be sentenced to the mines, thereby having their freedom and citizenship stripped from them. It was a death sentence
- 12) While the children of enslaved people were born into the state of enslavement, producing more slaves biologically was not a business model,
 - a) No slaveholding society ever outside of the US has sustained its slave economy by breeding people. Other means of generating new slaves were preferred.

- b) With the exception of some senators who caused significant economic upset with their enterprises; plantation-style models were not common. They did exist and hold masses of people trapped there, however.

13) While thoroughly and entirely unquestioned as a fact of life, enslavement was not generally viewed in Rome as a natural condition, i.e. one that was divinely ordained, naturally suited or in any way inherent to the people who suffered it.

- a) This did not keep people from investing heavily in feeling superior to slaves, and telling themselves that their imprisonment was a kindness.
- b) Aristotle made a case for slavery being natural in the sense that “some people are thinkers and planners and others are best at doing, so it is reasonable that they should be slaves”. The point that the state of enslavement was largely brought by chance and not strategic ability might have been lost on him, but not Rome.
- c) Roman law defined slavery as “the law of nations”, wherein one person came in ownership of another.
- d) It was not uncommon, especially among Stoic philosophers, for people to think that slavery was unnatural, cruel or wrong. Much has been written about the ills, concerns and wrongs of slavery, yet no one really reached the point of “But what if we just didn’t?”.
- e) These philosophers, even the rare ones who were freed slaves themselves, benefited from slavery and the goodwill of slaveowners, and their guidance revolved mostly about calm and considerate treatment being in the best interest of the owner.
- f) Out of all groups and movements, the Stoics had the most beneficial impact on the lived experience of slaves in their time. This is not saying much.
- g) There are no records of enslaved people’s thoughts on their experience. Presumably no one found it relevant enough to commit material to preserving such thoughts, and freed persons did not generally reflect on their pasts.
- h) Even though slavery was not considered to be a natural outcome for anyone, there were certain traits that were considered “slaveish”.
- i) Many of the traits that slaves are maligned with, and were considered typical of slaves, are now understood to be acts of resistance. Behaviors perceived as laziness, insolence, ineptitude, etc were often small expressions of personal power that made the lives of enslaved persons more bearable^{Bradley}.

14) Across the span of Rome’s history, ordinances prohibiting the worst kinds of mistreatment were slowly added, but cultural attitudes became less compassionate.

- a) In later periods (WHEN??) it was deemed inhumane to sell apart families, and it was prohibited.
 - i) From the constitution of Claudius (Cod. 3 tit. 38 s11) “that in sales or division of property, slaves, such as husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters, should not be separated.”
 - ii) This may or may not be related to forbidding slaves to have children?

15) What/how did my persona think of this?

16) Other things

17) Bibliography

- a) Invisible Romans, by Robert Knapp.
 - i) I highly recommend this book overall for filling the gaps in our understanding of the people of Rome. It covers the actual whole of society, is well written excellent read, and my library had several copies!
- b) Slavery and Society at Rome, by Keith Bradley
 - i) This source is very detailed but dense and not very clear, but thorough.
- c) This site was used to supplement the syllabus at most, but covers many similar topics and is freely available to read
http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Servus.html
- d) Running the Roman Home by Alexandra Croom, 2015.
 - i) A wonderful look into the infrastructure and resources that supplied the Roman home and made it work.
- e) Another older text, but still may be useful to those without a library handy
https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6049&context=penn_law_review