

Slavery in ancient rome



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A slave was a person who was usually captured in battle and send back to Rome to be sold. Most slaves in ancient Rome were acquired through warfare, and the Roman armies would bring back captives as part of a reward for their presence in battles. Some of the defeated soldiers were also brought back as slaves and normally brought in a lot of money and this could also serve as an alternative to imprisoning them or killing them. Fathers could also go on and sell their children into slavery if they had a need for money and this was actually lawful. The abandoned children on the streets could also be brought up as slaves. Slaves were brought in from all over Europe and the Mediterranean especially among the Germans, Thracians, Celts and Eastern Mediterranean. It was against the law to enslave Roman citizens or Italians living in Gallia Cisalpina. New slaves were acquired first by wholesalers who dealt directly with the Roman armies. Many of these dealers were Jewish in origin and slavery trade served as their main source of livelihood for the Roman Jews. Julius Ceasar once sold the whole populace of a conquered region in Gaul of almost 53000 people to slave traders at a go.

Slaves were sold at public auctions within the empire or in shops and the most valuable were sold by private sales. The sales were overseen by Roman fiscal officials called Quaestors. Sometimes the traders built revolving stands where the slaves stood and they hung around their necks a plaque describing each slave in terms of their origin, health, intelligence, character and any other information that would help the buyer make a sale. Prices were usually pegged on age and strength and some sales have been documented to have fetched thousands of dollars in today's dollars. The dealers gave a six months guarantee if the slave showed any defects that

were not stated at the time of the sale by taking back the slave or returning the buyers money. Slaves that were sold without a guarantee were made to wear a cap at the time of the auction.

The experiences of slaves generally varied with the place and the person who owned them. There were many reports of abuse and harsh treatment given to slaves though it is not possible to indicate how widespread this was at the time. Cato the Elder was recorded as saying that he expelled any old and sick slaves within his household. Some defeated soldiers usually chose to commit suicide rather than be taken into slavery by the Romans'. Seneca who was a Roman writer held the view that a well treated slave performed better than a mistreated slave. An example of different experience by slaves would be that of Cicero who had a slave called Tiro. Tiro was Cicero's secretary, confidant' editor and right-hand man. After Cicero's death Tiro went on to publish a number of Cicero's speeches since he had known where they had kept them. Tiro also wrote the biography of Cicero, a grammar book and a book on philosophical questions and also invented a new type of shorthand that he had used to take notes from Cicero. Cicero's brother and his family were very close to Tiro and when Tiro had been taken ill before, his master; Cicero had literally taken care of him like he would have his own child. Cicero's son, Marcus, often wrote to Tiro whenever he needed any advice and the two had a relationship more of an uncle and nephew rather than that of a young lord and family slave. In 53BCE, Cicero freed Tiro. On that day Cicero's brother Quinto's wrote him a letter of congratulations that read,: " I am truly grateful for what you have done about Tiro, in judging his former condition to be below his deserts and preferring us to have him as a

friend rather than a slave. Believe me, I jumped for joy when I read your letter and his. Thank you, and congratulations.” [Tr. K. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*]. Scholars believe that Tiro may have turned 50 on the day he was freed. This relationship raises many questions about slavery, why did it take Cicero so many years too free Tiro if he had noted for all those years how loyal and true Tiro was? Most compelling of all, if you grew up in a world where the social institution of slavery was normal, even normative, how could one recognize the human dignity of any slave?

“ As many enemies as slaves” was common proverb heard throughout Roman lands. Most citizens believed there was a constant danger of servile insurrection, which had more than once seriously threatened the republic, and as such this justified the severest measures in self-defense. They used the law of collective responsibility: if a slave killed his master, the authorities put all of the slaves in that household to death. Slaves who misbehaved have been known to be beaten, burned with an iron or sometimes even killed, regardless of their age or sex although most slaves were usually males. Slaves normally sought freedom by escaping their homes. Historian Moses Finley noted as such, “ fugitive slaves are almost an obsession in the sources”. Harboring of fugitive slaves in Rome was illegal and professional slave-catchers were hired to hunt down runaways. Advertisements were posted everywhere which provided descriptions of escaped slaves, and offered rewards in some cases. When caught, fugitives were brutally punished and branded on the forehead with the letter F, for fugitivus. Sometimes slaves had a metal collar riveted around the neck and such a

collar was preserved in Rome and states in Latin, " I have run away. Catch me. If you take me back to my master Zoninus, you'll be rewarded."

The legal status of slaves in ancient Rome was well defined. First and foremost slaves were property and their owners exercised dominium over slaves. Dominium was the absolute right to dispose of and control the use of a piece of property. Secondly, slaves could have no family. Any children conceived of the slaves automatically became slaves and mothers chose to kill their babies rather than expose them to slavery. Slaves formed families but they had no legal authority to protect these relationships. Third, a slave by all definition had no honor and dignity and the essence of being a slave was the inability to protect one's body. A slave was also defined by the absence of the right to a fair trial and appeal before suffering any physical punishment. Owners could beat slaves as they wished and even demand for sexual relations with slaves of either sex. The mere experience of a state in which an individual could not protect his own body from abuse was inherently and permanently degrading. As in the case of Tiro and Cicero, Tiro was still a slave in spite of all the respect and loyalty he received from his master and his family.

No-one is sure how many slaves existed in the Roman Empire. Even after Rome has passed its days of greatness, it is thought that 25% of all people in Rome were slaves. Slavery in the Roman Empire did not suddenly end, but it was slowly replaced when new economic forces introduced other forms of cheap labor.