

Life as a Slave in Ancient Rome

Contents

- [Childhood](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Personal Relationships & Family Life](#)
- [Living Quarters](#)
- [Typical Appearance](#)
- [Typical Meals](#)
- [Typical Earnings](#)
- [Typical Day](#)
- [Societal Standing](#)
- [Personal Time](#)
- [Religious Life](#)
- [Political Life](#)
- [Bibliography](#)

Listen

American Accent ▼

Ancient Roman Slaves at a Glance

The Roman Empire depended upon **slave** labor more than any other society in history. According to modern estimates, the population of the Roman Empire at its beginning in 27 BCE was between six and seven million--a third of which was **slaves**. Unlike modern forms of slavery, enslavement during the Roman era was not based on race, but rather on the spoils of warfare. **Rome** acquired the majority of its **slaves** through the conquest of other peoples and lands. To these conquered peoples, slavery became an inevitable fact of **life**. Victorious Roman legions shipped tens of thousands of **slaves** from lands such as Greece, Gaul, Asia Minor, and North Africa in order to keep pace with their growing empire's demand for **slave** labor. When the Roman Empire was at peace, Romans turned to breeding **slaves**.

Slaves occupied the lowest social class in Roman society. They had no legal protections, could not officially marry, and could be punished and killed on the word of their owners. However, **slaves' life** experiences varied greatly throughout the empire, depending primarily on where and for whom they worked. Roman **slaves** were categorized into two groups: servi privati (private **slaves**) and servi publici (public **slaves**). Private **slaves** included household **slaves** (familia urbana) who were owned by Romans in urban areas, and farm **slaves** (familia rustica) who worked on villas or large farming estates. Public **slaves** were owned by the state, individual cities, or the emperor.

- **Time Period Dates:** 200 BCE-200 CE
- **Time Period Name:** Ancient Rome

- **Geographic Location:** At its height at the death of Emperor Trajan in 117 CE, the Roman Empire encompassed forty provinces that included parts of forty modern-day countries. **Rome** had, under its control, the Mediterranean Sea and all lands bordering it, including the provinces of Tarraconensis, Baetica, and Lusitania on the Iberian Peninsula (modern-day Spain); the whole Mediterranean coast of North Africa, divided into the provinces of Africa, Mauretania, Numidia, Cyrenaica, and Aegyptus; the entire lands of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) in the east; portions of the modern-day Middle East, including Israel, Syria, and parts of Armenia and Iraq; and, in the north, Britannia (modern-day England), Gaul, which now comprises much of west-central Europe, and the province of Germania, ending at the Rhine River. The Roman Empire also encompassed modern-day Italy and Greece, and the Roman provinces of Moesia, Thrace, and Dacia today make up the Balkan countries.

- **Class Rank:** Slave

- **Typical Life Span:** The typical **life** expectancy for a **slave** was just over thirty years of age. However, because people became **slaves** at different times in their **lives**--captured in war as soldiers, as children, as criminal punishment, etc.--determining the typical **life** span of a **slave** is difficult.

Childhood

Slaves were most valuable as adults, simply because they were at their physical and intellectual peaks. Adults captured through military conquest were therefore the most sought after **slaves**. However, when the supply of **slaves** dropped significantly between 27 BCE-180 CE, a time of relative peace and little expansion known as Pax Romana (Roman Peace), the Romans turned to breeding **slaves**. Consequently, the number of child **slaves** increased.

Slaves born into households were called vernae, and their experiences differed markedly, depending on the wealth and kindness of their owners. Many child **slaves** lived much like free Roman children, and may have been educated or trained

in a particular skill or trade. However, a **slave** owner could then sell the **slave** and make a profit. Others learned the responsibilities that would eventually be required of them to take care of their households. Child **slaves** who lived on rural farms generally had more difficult **lives**. Opportunities were scarcer and their social experiences were considerably limited. For the most part, child **slaves** on farms spent much of their time as adult **slaves**, working at the variety of jobs necessary for the farm to operate.

Education

Most **slaves** born into slavery in **Ancient Rome** were not educated and did not attend school. They were simply taught the skills and duties necessary to carry out the responsibilities of the environment in which they lived. For example, household **slaves** learned to cook, sew, and attend to their masters, while farm **slaves** learned the responsibilities of herding livestock and planting and harvesting crops. Other **slaves** who neither worked in a household nor on a farm learned specific trades or crafts, such as pottery, baking, carpentry, and metalworking.

Many household **slaves** born into certain wealthy families received quality educations at the master's expense. It was not uncommon for many trusted household **slaves** to be placed in charge of their master's financial affairs or to hold other positions that required a high-level of skill and education. Because of the complex organization of the household, it was also possible for **slaves** to move up from one job to another, which often required enhanced education and training.

Many **slaves** were educated before their enslavement. Greek **slaves** captured after Roman war victories were in high demand and very valuable. Many served as teachers, doctors, and philosophers.

Personal Relationships & Family Life

The personal relationships formed by Roman **slaves** were greatly determined by where they lived, the jobs assigned to them, and the personal qualities of their owners. For the vast majority of **slaves**, their closest friends were their fellow **slaves**. It was not uncommon for some **slaves**, however, to form friendships with their owners, pupils, and owners and managers of the shops and businesses in which they worked. These relationships were mutually beneficial, in that an owner or manager was reliant on good workers to operate their businesses, and **slaves** were completely dependent on their owners. This type of relationship was most common in the case of *vernae* (**slaves** born into a household). Many *vernae* eventually were viewed by their owners as sons and daughters and became indispensable members of the household.

By law, **slaves** were not allowed to marry. In reality, however, many **slaves** developed relationships and started families. This unofficial marriage was called a *contubernium*, or cohabitation. Most of these relationships were between **slaves** within the same household. The state did not recognize these relationships, however, and **slaves** had no legal protections. In addition, any children born from such a relationship became the property of the **slaves'** owner, who was free to do with the children as he wished.

Living Quarters

The vast majority of household **slaves** lived within the urban homes of their owners. Although many **slaves** were treated well, archaeological evidence suggests that personal living quarters for these **slaves** were almost nonexistent. Most likely, **slaves** slept where they worked or where they could find space to place a cot or blanket. For example, **slave** cooks slept in the kitchen and stable **slaves** remained in the stables at night. Some **slaves** would have slept in the rooms of their owners or just outside the chamber door. In addition, **slaves** within a household were often encouraged to start families to meet the never-ending demand for **slaves**. These **slave** families would most likely have had a small room or area in which to sleep and interact. Highly trusted **slaves** were often allowed to keep a separate residence located near their owners' homes.

The living quarters for farm **slaves** differed from their urban counterparts in that most farms and villas had separate **slave** quarters. These were generally barrack-like buildings containing small cells with earthen floors. Slits were cut into the exterior walls for windows and there might be a ledge or niche within a wall on which to place a lamp. For farm **slaves** who work and slept in chains, living quarters were often underground cellars or prisons called *ergastula*. Some *ergastula* contained slits in the walls to allow light. However, these slits were placed high enough to make escape impossible.

Typical Appearance

Slaves held the lowest status of all classes in Roman society, and their appearance generally reflected their lowly conditions. The clothing a **slave** wore was primarily determined by occupation. **Slaves** who worked on farms, in mines, or in other menial jobs usually wore a simple loose-fitting tunic made of course wool, wooden shoes, and perhaps a cloak. It was

also not uncommon for farm workers to have their heads shaved. Their hair would then be used to make wigs for wealthy Romans. **Slaves** of wealthy owners, and those who were required to travel or conduct business for their masters, wore much finer garments. However, **slaves** were forbidden to wear a toga, which was reserved only for official Roman citizens.

Typical Meals

The diet of most Roman **slaves**, like the majority of Romans of the lower class, was bland and cheap. **Slaves** ate very little meat and most often uncooked foods. Their meals consisted of primarily grain-based foods. Breakfast (ientaculum), if eaten at all, might be a piece of bread. Boiled wheat was often made into porridge. **Slaves** living on a villa or farm might supplement their meals with olives, figs, or other scraps or leftovers from their owners' meals. Household **slaves** with wealthy owners ate better than **slaves** living on farms or in other less desirable situations. However, their diets were never as varied or substantial as their owners'.

Because a **slave's life** revolved around work, most had time for only one meal, and perhaps a second light meal later in the day. Some farm **slaves** who worked under a ruthless farm manager (vilicus) and those that worked in the mines were fed very little. Some ate little more than gruel with water or cheap sour wine. In fact, several farm manuals written at the time advised farm owners to feed their **slaves** nothing but grain or bread, low-grade wine from grapes skins, and the least flavorful olives.

Perhaps the best-fed **slaves** of all were gladiators. Most gladiators ate three meals a day and consumed a high level of proteins, chiefly from roasted meats, dry fruits, fresh cheese, goat milk, and eggs. Onions and garlic were also staples of a gladiator's meal. The final meal before a fight (coena libera) often lasted several hours, during which the gladiator gorged himself.

Typical Earnings

Although **slaves** were considered the property of their owners, the work they performed was most often not for free. **Slave** owners allowed their **slaves** to accumulate a peculium. A peculium usually consisted of money or property given to the **slave** by the owner. It also consisted of wages a **slave** earned outside the home. Technically, the peculium belonged to the **slave's** owner. In reality, however, owners gave **slaves** complete control over individual peculia. A **slave** could earn a peculium in a variety of ways, including through a regular allowance, payment for extra or particularly good work, freelance work for other owners, or even selling the leftovers from large household meals or celebrations.

The size and value of a **slave's** peculium was primarily determined by the wealth of the household in which they were employed. Since most **slaves** worked for families of average or modest wealth, the majority of Roman **slaves** had relatively small peculia. **Slaves** of wealthy upper-class Romans could amass a substantial peculium. It was not uncommon for some **slaves** to buy their freedom with savings held in a peculium. In addition, business-savvy **slaves** were known to have started businesses, which continued to add to the value of their peculia.

Typical Day

A **slave's** day began before sunrise. Once the owner's were awake, **slaves** helped to dress them and prepare them for the day. A typical day for household **slaves** then included performing daily routines such as cleaning the home, washing clothes, and gardening. Cooks would begin work on preparing the day's meals. Other daily tasks included walking children to school, sewing the family's clothes, or performing the special duties of the family hairdresser, doctor, secretary, and even accountant.

If guests arrived for a visit, **slaves** opened doors, looked after cloaks, and served food and drinks. **Slaves** also were charged with escorting visitors when they left, especially at night. In addition, when **slave** owners left their home to attend to business or pleasure in town, it was common to take along a large contingent of **slaves**. **Slaves** often would carry their owners on a litter, or human-powered vehicle such as a mounted chair. At night, **slaves** held torches to light the way through the dark streets.

Farm **slaves** also began their days in the early morning. **Slave** jobs on farms were usually considerably harder than those performed by household **slaves**. Most farm **slaves** worked in a state of monotonous routine. Daily responsibilities included tending to livestock and crops, plowing, excavating furrows, and gardening.

Societal Standing

Slaves occupied the lowest position in the class structure of **ancient Rome**. Above **slaves** was the upper-class, which included the nobles (patricians), the senatores (senatorial class), and the eques romanus (equites or equestrian class). Below the upper-class were the plebeians, or common citizens, who formed the bulk of Roman society. The peregrini

(freeborn), men and women from foreign lands, and the *liberti* (ex-**slaves**) also held higher social status than **slaves**.

Because the Roman Empire was dependent on **slave** labor, **slaves** worked in and associated with all strata of Roman society. As a result, **slaves** blended in with the rest of the Roman population on a daily basis. This interaction and interdependence between people of such diverse backgrounds contributed to **Rome's** unique society.

Slaves were not always enslaved for **life**. It was quite common for **slaves** to be set free (manumission). However, while they were considered legally free, they could not, in reality, reach the same social status of Roman citizens. In addition, they were generally not accepted as equals by free Romans. Until the later centuries of the Roman Empire, **slaves** had no legal rights. They were considered the property of their owners, and could be legally sold, beaten, and even killed by their owners.

Personal Time

Slavery, by its very nature, denies the existence of personal rights, property, and personal choices. **Slaves** were at the mercy of their owners and worked or performed services for them whenever called upon. Consequently, **slaves** had very little, if any, personal time. Exceptions would have been the popular religious festivals, such as Saturnalia, when **slaves** were allowed to celebrate with their owners. Personal time for farm **slaves** would have been even more limited, especially for those who were constantly chained.

Religious Life

The majority of household **slaves** (*familia urbana*) were allowed to worship freely. They could visit and worship in most temples outside the home. Because many **slaves** were considered part of an owner's family, it was common for them to be included during religious services at the household shrine, called a *lararium*. A *lararium* was a shrine to the household's *lares*, which were the spirits and deities thought to keep a home safe. Evidence suggests that many Roman houses had a *lararium* in the kitchens that were used only by **slaves**. Saturnalia, the December festival dedicated to the god Saturn, was one of the most important religious festivals. During this festival, **slaves** and their owners celebrated together.

Romans placed great emphasis on the funerals and burial of the dead. They believed that a person's soul could find rest only when the body had been properly placed in a grave. Roman law recognized a **slave's** burial to be as sacred as that of a free Roman citizen's. **Slaves** were allowed, with their owners' permission, to join a *collegia funeraticia*, which were clubs that paid for the funeral expenses of their members.

Political Life

As a member of the lowest class in Roman society, **slaves** held no political standing or influence. **Slaves** were legally prohibited from holding offices of high power in the empire. However, public **slaves** (*servi publici*) held positions of considerable responsibility and authority, and often held more influence than most free Roman citizens. Public **slaves** were owned by and performed work for the state, individual towns, or the emperor. They worked in almost every aspect of state and local administrations. Their responsibilities included overseeing the public markets, handling mail, managing the state treasury and libraries, and running the daily operations of the Roman Empire's waterworks.

Quite a few **slaves** who either earned or paid for their freedom through manumission rose to wield considerable power in their **lives** as freed men. Many **slaves** were very literate, knowledgeable in Greek, and experienced in financial matters. These skills were highly valued by those in power and could lead to positions of great influence.

Bibliography

Barrow, R. H. *Slavery in the Roman Empire*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996.

- A scholarly examination of slavery in the Roman Empire, drawing from the works of **ancient** Roman writers.

Bradley, K.R. *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987

- An in-depth look at the **lives** of Roman **slaves**, with particular focus on family **life** and harsh realities or enslavement.

Hopkins, Keith. *Conquerors and Slaves: Sociological Studies in Roman History*. Vol. 1. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

- Hopkins examines how **Rome's** military conquests and captured **slaves** impacted the Empire's political, social, and

economic spheres.

Nardo, Don. *Life of a Roman Slaver*. San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, 1998.

- *This book offers an accessible introduction to the **lives** of Roman **slaves** and includes black and white photographs, illustrations, and informative sidebars.*

Shelton, Jo-Ann. *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

- *This sourcebook is thematically arranged and discusses daily **life** and social activities in all strata of Roman society. With maps, timeline, and bibliography.*

Wiedemann, Thomas. *Greek and Roman Slavery*. London: Routledge, 1989.

- *This source offers a collection of thematically arranged translations of **ancient** Greek and Roman texts, describing **ancient** Greek and Roman slavery.*

~~~~~

By Michael R. Carpenter, Harvard, Illinois

---

Copyright of Ancient Rome: Life as a Slave in Ancient Rome is the property of Great Neck Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.