

Slavery: Relationships in Roman Society and Effects on Roman Economy

Joseph Barbieri

History 3482: Rome: City and
Empire

April 8, 2020

Slavery was an undeniably important part of both the Roman Republic and the Empire that followed. During the century of 50 BCE—150 CE, it is estimated that roughly 500,000 slaves were needed per year in the Empire.¹ Though these numbers fluctuated with the time period, reliance on slavery remains a constant in the history of the Roman Empire. Slaves had a major impact on both societal and economic structures of the Roman Empire. Slavery and the relationships that came with it were complex in Rome. Slaves had the chance to become free and make a name for themselves in Roman culture, something many slaves throughout history could not do. Yet they also were sometimes met with difficult legislation, horrendous working conditions, or outright cruel masters. In a sense, being a slave in ancient Rome was both more and less advantageous than being enslaved elsewhere throughout history. Due to a lack of slave writings², it is hard to determine the personal feelings of slaves at the time. Uncertainty for the future was a major part of slave life, and Bradley argues that it was used as a tool by crueler masters to create fear and keep slaves in line.³ This is just one glimpse into the relationships between masters and slaves, which were often completely random. Some masters were benevolent and rewarded their slaves with freedom or high standing positions in family business while others were heartless overlords that used slaves for sadistic purposes.

Manumission and harsh punishment were the extremes that many slaves either desired or dreaded when sold into bondage. On one hand, Rome had many freedmen and freedwomen that were once slaves but attained their freedom via manumission granted by a master. This reality of freedom gave slaves something to live for,⁴ a sort of light at the end of the tunnel. On the other hand, were punishments reserved for slaves and other ‘undesirables’ in Roman society.⁵ Masters

¹ Keith Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1994), 32.

² Keith Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

³ Ibid., 111-112.

⁴ Ibid., 81.

⁵ Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 65-66.

could get away with brutalizing their slaves oftentimes with few or no repercussions.⁶ As expected, slaves were completely at the mercy of their owners. Under Roman law, slaves were technically considered property. Thus, a master could often do as he or she pleased with their slaves. Some slaves were taught trades or skills, and if they became free, they often continued working in the fields that they'd been trained in.⁷ Slaves working in homes of higher standing Roman citizens might be doing more educated labor and some formed positive relationships with the people they were forced to work under. Interestingly, it was this expectation of slaves to know how to work that gave them an advantage over some freeborn Roman citizens. Ward writes, "Many freedmen became successful and even wealthy in business."⁸ In the same vein of irony, freedwomen who were taught a skill as a slave had more opportunities than many freeborn women in Rome.⁹

Continuing with positive relationships, some women would help raise and nurse their slaves' children¹⁰. In fact, some families would encourage their slaves to have children.¹¹ This would increase the slave population for the owner which offered several opportunities. The master could sell the children or leave them as part of a legacy for his/her own children. Bradley writes extensively about Columella, a Roman slaver owner who freed multiple slave women based purely on their ability to bear and raise children. There is also evidence to prove that some families integrated slaves into their own family structures. Freedman Q. Caecilius Spendo, a

⁶ Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 119

⁷ Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 65-66.

⁸ Allen Ward, Fritz Heichelheim, and Cedric Yeo, *A History of the Roman People* (New York: Routledge 2016), 237.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 239-240.

¹⁰ Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 41.

¹¹ Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 83.

tailor, built a tomb that house not just his immediate family, but also 18 ex-slaves that lived with him.¹²

This shows that some families treated slaves less like pieces of property and more like human beings who were let into the regular familial structure. It should be noted that cases like this do happen but are by no means the normality. Most slaves in Roman culture have become nothing more than numbers in history. Most died with no recognition and nothing to their name. These examples simply show Rome's unique social structure that allowed slaves to become free and move up in society. Oftentimes, slaves are never allowed anything close to this. In some ways, this trend was a bit abnormal. As stated before, cases like these were not the norm. Most slaves faced years of backbreaking labor, separation from loved ones in a foreign land, and no chance at moving up through Roman society.

Some of the unluckier slaves would be forced into a life in the Spanish ore mines, or any other Roman mine. With limited technology and little care for human life, the Romans turned the mines into a deathtrap for criminals and slaves that were condemned to working in them. Most who worked in the mines didn't live long enough to ever work towards better opportunities. Unfortunately for them and many other slaves, manumission was being abused by powerful slave owners to gain mass amounts of support. They would free slaves as a reward for information on a political rival or free slaves just to have more support from people with Roman citizenship. Thus, in 4 CE a regulation was passed that restricted the age of manumission to 30 years old or more.¹³ With this new law in place, slaves could not be freed until they had reached the legal age of 30 years.

¹² Ward, Heichelheim, and Yeo, 233.

¹³ Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 87.

Most slaves didn't live that long. This is especially true of slaves working in mines and slaves working dangerous manual labor jobs. Now, slaves were faced with dangerous work, limited protection from the state, and a barrier to freedom in the form of an age restriction. Many poor Roman citizens living in the countryside would be lucky to live to 30, so the prospect of a slave making it to that age was dismal. Revolt was an option, but the Romans had already stamped out several revolts in the past, many in brutal fashion. The slave rebellion led by Spartacus ended with Roman military leader M. Crassus crucified any servile supporters of Spartacus.¹⁴ Afterwards, crimes committed by slaves that were much less severe than a rebellion were often punished in a similar fashion.¹⁵

Perhaps the constant influx of slaves lowered the Roman state's care for them. After all a few dozen dead slaves could easily be replaced in the bustling slave market. Rome's near constant military conquests provided the largest source of new slaves.¹⁶ This was closely followed by servile reproduction.¹⁷ Slaves that had children with other slaves bore new slaves into the system, skipping past the capture and transportation stages of slaves taken through conquest. These children, called *vernae* were highly prized in Roman culture because they were easier to control as a result of being born and raised in slavery—they did not know any other way of life.¹⁸ More slaves came from abandonment and piracy. Children who were abandoned at Roman temples or elsewhere were often made into slave children, the equivalent of *vernae*. Many families desired sons because of Rome's patriarchal structure, so infant girls were often abandoned.

¹⁴ Ibid., 131-132

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 31-33.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 34-35

Pirates brought large numbers of slaves to Rome. They came from both land and sea and sometimes even captured Roman citizens and sold them into the disorganized and corrupt slave markets. Slaves would be taken from anywhere in the Empire. There were British slaves, Syrian slaves, Greek slaves, slaves from Gaul, and more. Both the Romans and pirates would often take whoever they could as slaves. There is evidence that shows that the Romans thought some peoples were “born for slavery.”¹⁹ Some of the people that faced this prejudice were Jews, Asiatic Greeks, and Syrians²⁰ Slaves were coming into Rome from all sections of the Empire and when combined with natural reproduction in slave families, Rome had a near constant supply of slaves. Though slaves were legally barred from marriage, there is still evidence to show that they tried to maintain families when they could.²¹

Evidence of slave marriage has been commemorated in Roman writing even though it was legally impossible.²² Some masters would allow relationships and families among their slave population. Part of this is because *vernae* were so prized, but as previously discussed, some Roman masters saw their slaves more like people and less like property. Slave families still struggled to stay together though. At any time, members of their family could be sold away or traded out. The Emperor Constantine alleviated some of this pressure early in the fourth century by banning compulsory division of families in Sardinia after forced land redistribution.²³ The servile populations of Sardinia were given at least a small blanket of protection from separation.

Bradley writes, “...Roman slave-owners recognized the principle that permitting marital and familial associations among their slaves could contribute to the preservation of social and

¹⁹ Ibid., 65.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 47.

²² Ibid., 49.

²³ Ibid., 48.

economic order.”²⁴ Masters who allowed their slaves to have families were often doing so for an economic reason. The best evidence to show this is that the highest demand for female slaves existed in women aged 14-35. Presumably, these slaves would be ordered to have children either with other slaves or a member of the household they were being sold to.²⁵ In this sense it can be seen that slave women were often forced into having families, whether they wanted them or not. Afterall, the master had near complete control over what the slaves did. Raising a family would often be a better choice than dying to any number of sadistic Roman punishments.

Slave families were most notably different from free Roman families because at any moment they could be broken up by being sold. In a traditional Roman family, the biggest threat of the family breaking up was with the father dying during military service. Slave families were always at risk of being split apart and sent to foreign lands. Bradley writes, “The possibility of being sold away from family members always then threatened to disturb the personal lives of slaves.”²⁶ Slave families were also at risk of being split apart with the death of an owner in the family. There are cases of slaves who lived together being split apart into two or three new families after the original owner died, and it is safe to assume that some families were broken apart this way.²⁷ Thus, much like the treatment of slaves, servile family stability was dependent on the Roman slave-owners. More benevolent masters would live with their slave families and allow them to almost integrate into their own family,²⁸ but more often slaves were left living in uncertainty. Some didn’t risk starting families while others (particularly slave women) were forced to start families. Again, the master oftentimes controlled the slave’s behavior. He controlled whether they could have families, what jobs they did, and how long they would be

²⁴ Ibid., 51.

²⁵ Ibid., 55.

²⁶ Ibid., 59.

²⁷ Ibid., 66-70.

²⁸ Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 41.

enslaved. As seen with the relationships and family structures detailed above, slaves had a large impact on Roman social structure. They also fundamentally drove parts of the economy.

The Roman economy, like any successful economy, was driven by wealth. Rome was constantly rich in raw resources that they could bring from all over the Empire. Rome controlled massive sources of raw metals. They had mines running nearly nonstop, and many of these mines were worked by via slave or condemned criminal labor.²⁹ Mines were incredibly dangerous and countless slaves died working in them. The mining work fueled the Roman war machine and allowed the creation of currency used for trade inside the Empire. Slaves weren't relegated to manual labor jobs. They would work essentially wherever they were required to by their masters. Slaves couldn't work in public office but they would work in construction, medicine, weaving, cleaning, sales, and more depending on the owner's wishes or responsibilities.³⁰ Though slaves would work in the cities and some would work under high standing members of Roman society, it should be noted that they were laborers and did not have control over any legislative decisions in the Empire.³¹

Unlike other workers, slaves couldn't move up the chain of labor to a better position. They were often stuck wherever they were ordered to be working. Some slaves who worked the farmlands and agricultural parts of Rome were secluded from city life entirely and had little chance of being sold into a better household.³² Slaves worked in nearly every sector of the Roman economy. They were so widespread that communication among them was often difficult. Even if the slaves had wanted a consolidated rebellion, there were so many across the empire in

²⁹ Walter Scheidel, *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), 133-134.

³⁰ Mark Cartwright, "Slavery in the Roman World," Ancient History Encyclopedia, last modified November 1, 2013, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/629/> (4/9/20).

³¹ Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 77.

³² Ibid., 71-72.

different fields that a unified movement would have been nearly impossible. Bradley theorizes that this separation was an intentional form of control that Roman masters used to keep the massive slave populations in line.³³ The Roman economy was massive and the reason it grew so much was partly due to widespread use of slave labor. While Rome had plenty of regular paid workers, slaves acted as a secondary *unpaid* workforce that never stopped. Rome was able to always be expanding and working because the ceaseless slave labor it employed.

Slavery was an integral piece of the Roman Republic and Empire's society and economy. With thousands upon thousands of slaves pouring in from conquered lands, slave families, and piracy, Rome had a near constant supply of labor. When workers died, more could be thrown forward. These slaves lived often horrible lives that were dominated by fear, control, and uncertainty. Some slaves were granted freedom, and some of these freedmen and freedwomen moved on to become wealthy members of Roman society. Traditionally speaking, slaves were seldom granted this opportunity in other cultures and empires. On the flipside, many slaves in Rome never had the chance of winning freedom and were tortured by cruel and sadistic masters. The slave population had an incredible impact on the Roman economy and acted as a nameless catalyst for Rome's economic and cultural dominance. They were an undeniable factor in both Roman social structures and economic structures, and their contributions to the rise of the Roman Empire should not be forgotten.

Bibliography

Bradley, Keith. *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

³³ Ibid. 72-73.

Bradley, Keith. *Slavery and Society at Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1994.

Cartwright, Mark. "Slavery in the Roman World." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. Last modified November 01, 2013. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/629/>.

Scheidel, Walter. *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Ward, Allen with Fritz Heichelheim and Cedric Yeo. *A History of the Roman People* New York: Routledge, 2016.