

Chapter 10: Rome: From City-State to Empire: 10-6a Slave and Free
Book Title: World Civilizations
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10-6a Slave and Free

The number of slaves climbed sharply in the first century B.C.E. Roman legions took over one province after another and made off with the human booty. The alien slaves were often more educated and better skilled than the native Italians, and slaves from Greece, in particular, brought high prices in the market. Augustus tried to protect the free citizens by banning the importation of additional slaves into Italy, but his measures were evaded and later revoked.

Roman slavery was harsher than had been the case previously. The large merchant fleet and the navy depended on galley slaves. The extensive Roman mining industry also depended on slave labor; this job was so dangerous that few freemen could be lured into it. Slave families were broken up and sold to the highest bidders.

Slaves supposedly could own no property of their own; nor could they inherit or bequeath property. The children from a marriage of slaves were automatically the property of the parents' owners. Rape of another's slave was considered an injury to the slave owner, not to the slave, and was paid for accordingly. The rape of a slave by his or her owner was not an offense at all.

Despite such treatment, by the third and fourth centuries C.E., free persons were increasingly selling themselves into voluntary slavery, which promised them a better material life than freedom could. Sometimes, too, the self-sale was a dodge to avoid taxes, which a free person had to pay but a slave did not. It is not possible to know which motive predominated.

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