

## Slavery in Ancient Rome

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History is viewed as a progress through a number of stages, each genetically-determined within its predecessor and each founded on a particular mode of production, one of which is slavery. The slave mode of production was the decisive invention of the Roman world and provided the ultimate basis of both its accomplishments and its eclipse. The originality of this mode of production must be underlined in slavery itself. It had existed in various forms through near Eastern Antiquity but only as a residual phenomenon which existed on the edges of the main rural work force. It is generally agreed that Rome is the classical example of a slave mode of production. However, it is essential to clarify one important point that although Roman Italy had a slave mode of production, Marxists in particular, have been keen to think that slavery predominated through the Roman Empire. However, today the uneven character of slavery in Roman Empire is normally accepted.

There are two major examples of a system of slavery: the societies of the ancient world, based upon slavery, especially Greece and Rome, and the southern states of the U.S.A. in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It was the Roman city state which transformed slavery from an ancillary facility into a systematic mode of production. Free peasants, dependent tenants and urban artisans always co-existed with slaves in varying combinations.

However, the use of slavery became general in Rome, its nature correspondingly became absolute and it was no longer one relative form of servitude among many.

Moreover, slavery is that mode of production in which the owner extracts total labour from the producer, guarantees his life in return and can be virtually identified with the instrument of production. It had itself existed in various forms, like debt-bondage or penal labour among other mixed types of servitude, forming merely a very lone category in an amorphous continuum of dependence and unfreedom that stretched well-up the social scale above it.

This leads us to the discussion of slave society. The first question which arises in our mind is why and how did the slave society come into being? The political and social conditions and the psychology of the prevailing period left an indelible mark on the minds of the elite, who had lost their older forms of involuntary production, and turned to slaves, the outsiders. There was no jealousy of slaves, no competition with them, either in the early stages or in the peak periods. On the contrary, the dream of the man who could not afford a slave was to be able to do so one day. The creation of this kind of a free man in a pre-industrial and pre-technological world led to the establishment of a slave society. But only a handful of human societies can properly be called slave-societies, if by it we mean a society in which slave plays an important part in production.

Four important aspects of Roman slavery were the high status of an important body of professional skilled slaves in Rome, the high rate of slave manumission, and the assimilation of former slaves into citizen society on terms of near equality with native-born Roman citizens. The fourth factor is more complex: the Romans imported a massive number of agricultural slaves into Italy in order to cultivate land which was already being cultivated by citizens.

Before we get enmeshed in the different features of slavery, we are confronted with different views regarding the procurement of slaves. It is believed that slavery follows as a consequence of war. The slave is one who should have been killed and who survives by the grace of his master. The experience of death precedes servitude and slave is one who has preferred life to liberty. Historians of antiquity have insisted on war and conquest as the necessary condition for the creation of a slave society.

M. I. Finley very aptly says that all vigorous new institutions develop and expand, but that process follows their introduction and cannot be confused with the latter. The 'conquest' theory helps to explain the specific character of the Roman slave society, not its emergence. War produces captives, not slaves, and consequently captives are transformed into slaves by the consumers who obtain them through the agency of slave traders. Therefore, war and conquest were the important contributing factors to the establishment and preservation of a slave society. It is also seen that the demand for slaves precedes the supply and for the existence of a sufficient demand, at least three conditions are required, i.e., private ownership of land, sufficient development of commodity production and markets, and the unavailability of an alternative internal labour supply.

In his view, there are a number of significant evidences which point to the existence of wealthy Roman landowners in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. Prior to a major war, the patrician nobility had been striving to concentrate on landed property in its hands, reducing the poor, free peasantry to debt-bondage. Finley further argues that if there was evidence of large, landed estates then the basic question of the method of cultivation arose. Their lands could either be

worked by clients and the hired labour on the one hand or by the slaves on the other. Slave labour in all probability was more advantageous than free peasant farmers.

According to another school of historians, led by Keith Hopkins, it was perceived that mass slavery in Rome was a product of conquest and that slavery was more directly a product of war and booty capitalism instead of industrial capitalism. Further, large estates of big landowners were cultivated by surplus labour of impoverished peasants. But with the increasing incidence of military service, free labour was taken away and became unreliable. In this context, the slaves who were captured or imported by force became the basis of agrarian production. So, the immigration of free labour into the army and the immigration of agricultural slaves were complementary.

The two words 'stranger' and 'outsider' for slaves have been aptly used, and in the same sense. Pierre Dockes used the word 'stranger' for a slave because he has not only been reprieved physically but also because his ties to his native soil, his family and his community has been broken. Thus, he is a stranger to every community and deed because he is cut off from the cults of family worship.

M.I Finley says that slaves in Rome were outsiders in a double sense as no Athenian could be a slave in Athens and therefore, they had to be imported from outside the state or had to be born within to a slave mother. Secondly, slave is brought into the new society violently and traumatically, is cut off from all traditional human ties, and is prevented from creating new ties except with his master. The final proof of non-status is the free sexual access to slaves which is a fundamental condition for all slavery.

Slave was both a producer of object as well as an object himself and therefore, regarded as a peculiar property. The slave owners' rights over slave-property were absolute in more than one sense. The slave by being a slave suffered not only total loss of control over his labour but also over his personality which extended to the infinity of time unless the owner broke the chain through unconditional manumission. They were also regarded as the moveable commodity as they could be shifted from one region to another.

The Roman society, in any case, witnessed the influx of slave labour in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. By the time of the late Republic, not only was Italian agriculture recast by it, but the trade and industry was also overwhelmingly invaded by it. According to one study, perhaps 90% of the artisans in Rome itself were of slave origin.

According to Parry Anderson, the nature of the gigantic social upheaval that Roman imperial expansion involved and the basic motor force that sustained it can be seen from the sheer demographic transformation that slaves brought about.

According to P.A. Burnt, there were some 4.4 million free persons to 6.6 million slaves in 295 B.C in Rome. In 45 B.C, there were perhaps 4 million free persons to some three million slaves. Thus, while the number of free persons remained more or less constant, there was five-fold increase in the number of slaves coming to Rome. Never in the ancient world had anything like this happened. The full potential of the slave mode of production was for the first time unfolded in Rome, which was organized and took it to a logical conclusion that Greece had never experienced. The final result of such a development was the emergence of slaves who worked agrarian properties of a hither-to unknown immensity.

Prominent nobels like Lucius Domitius could own over 200,000 acres in the first century B.C. These lands were not necessarily farmed as one single unit. They were often widely dispersed throughout the country. The big landed nobility usually possessed a large number of medium-sized villa estates which were supervised by the various bailiffs and agents. However, such holdings were also much larger than their Greek predecessors. The normal estates of Roman aristocracy often exceeded more than acres while some of these were as big as 3000 acres. In Greece, the average size of such land holding was not bigger than 30 to 60 acres. Thus, the chief characteristic features of Roman agrarian life from the third century B.C onwards was the rural institution of the extensive slave latifundium and a relative absence of small and medium sized peasant holdings. It was this management of Roman agrarian interests that gave the aristocracy the leisure and money to create the superstructure of Roman urban magnificence.

Here we must keep at least one thing in mind, that the slave societies were distinct from societies in which slaves were not to be found in parts of what eventually became the Roman Empire. What we accept as a political unit was in a sense a cultural unit, not IPSO facto an economic or social unit. In a way, it was a 'world empire' not a 'world system'; a structure in which different labour regime of production co-existed and were tied together politically rather than economically.

The Roman Empire did constitute free peasants, tenant farmers and debt bonds - men but all this cannot minimise the peculiar importance of slavery for the Roman society's economy. One more observation can be made here. As a general rule, the freeman dominated small scale farming, much of subsistence farming, as well as petty commodity production and small-scale

trading in cities. Slaves, on the other hand, dominated and virtually monopolized large-scale production in both countryside as well as urban sector.

It was not agriculture alone where slaves were employed on a very large scale. In a way slavery was a characteristic of many aspects of Roman society which involved labour. The Romans had Greek slaves who were more intelligent than others. They were generally employed as doctors, tutors, librarians and artists in rich Roman houses. In addition, there were also large number of slaves employed in these houses as cooks, barbers, waiters, doormen, porters, letter-bearers etc. In the period when Roman imperial greatness was at its height, some of the slaves would be highly specialized and skilled as hairdressers, perfumers, dressmakers and so on. There were large number of public slaves who were employed both in the republic as well as in the empire for the maintenance and construction of roads, bridges and buildings.

The periods beginning with the late Republic witnessed another increasingly common practice in Roman Italy. Powerful and well-off men started employing slaves as agents or establishing them in a business or crafts on their own. The master would encourage him in the business and leave for him a part of the earning. This or other property that the slave acquired legally through his masters was in practice treated as his own (Peculium). This system of peculium was a powerful force in encouraging the slaves for efficient and honest working. Thus, in course of time, such slaves were able to purchase their freedom from the masters and became Roman citizen. The practice of manumission was possibly a logical and further extension of the peculium system where by the owner wanted to retain the loyalty of his slave for himself.

Many authors relate the system of manumission with the decline of slavery. However, Hopkins maintains that manumission really served to strengthen the slave system. The master out

of the manumission got a lot of money to replace the old slaves with new one. Further, even if a slave was freed, he still had to keep many obligations and had to serve in various forms. All these obligations were performed till the death of the master and his children. Likewise, when a slave died, his children had to serve the master. Moreover, manumission tempted the slave to increase his productive capacity and also recapitalized his value. Thus economically, manumission did not disturb the allocation of slavery as a basic source of elite income.

The concept of hereditary slavery which was prevalent in Rome was absent in Greece. Only in Rome, there was a provision of conditional release of slaves which weakened the master's control over the slave, and the slave paid considerably less for the change of juridical status than those who bought immediate and complete freedom.

The consequence of all this was that in course of time, there developed professional categories among the slaves themselves. Those who were employed by the government were higher in status than those employed on landed estates. Thus, we have slave-gangs on Italian estates, the slaves in the imperial civil service, the slave overseas and stewards on land. The urban slaves conducted their own commercial and manufacturing establishment in Rome and other cities of Italy through the device of the peculium. The slaves, in other words, constituted a type within the larger class of involuntary labour but they were, at the same time, significantly divisible into sub-types. Stated differently, the slaves were a logical class and a juridical class but not in any usual sense of the term, a social class.

The slaves were, however, considered nothing more than mere objects in the eyes of the Romans. They were a form of property for the slave owner and were deprived of any semblance of social rights. The slave owner sold and purchased these slaves as he wished, and in this form



slavery represented the most degraded form of labour. They were not only instruments of production and beasts of burden but were themselves a highly commercialized object to be sold and purchased in the urban markets of commodity exchange. It is in this context that we can appreciate the Roman division of forms of property into instrumentum vocale (slaves), instrumentum semivocal (animals) and instrumentum mutum (instruments).

The slave mode of production was by no means devoid of technical progress but its dynamics was a very restricted one, since it essentially rested on the annexation of labour rather than the exploitation of land or the accumulation of capital. It possessed minimal objective impetus for technological advance as it kept adding labour which ultimately resisted technological innovation but was not exclusive of it.

Moreover, Roman literature reveals cruelties inflicted over slaves. There are instances of providing severest punishments over petty matters. Killing of slaves in gladiatorial games for the fun of public was also common. The hostility between the master and slave can be measured by the accounts of rebellion of slaves.

Frequent harsh punishments and constant fear of tortures, mutilation and death drove the slaves to try to escape, mutiny and to murder their oppressors. This is not to suggest that all slave-owners gave similar treatment to their slaves. We have Cicero, for example, who had great degree of love for his slaves. However, the general treatment to slaves emerged from the very nature of this social and legal standing. The Roman slave-owners were only too aware of this danger. Legally, a runaway slave was himself a thief, for he had stolen his master's property. In course of time a private detective agency made a business of tracking down and capturing slaves who had escaped. Augustus took credit early in his career for having returned 30,000 escaped

slaves to their masters for punishment. If a slave murdered his master, all the other slaves in the household were liable to be put to death as accomplices. In this atmosphere of hate and fear, it is not surprising that one of the ways political conspirators usually collected their forces was to promise freedom to any slave who would fight for him.

One of the most common reasons for slave revolts was thus obviously the treatment meted out to them. The philosopher-historian Posidonius pointed out that ill-treatment of some slaves have been the cause of the Great Revolt which desolated Sicily from 134 B.C to 132 B.C. This revolt was encouraged by the use of gang-slavers on the estates which made possible the conspiracy of mass action. This Sicilian slave revolt is the first great slave outburst against their masters. The condition of slaves working on these estates was very pathetic. The produce of these estates was intended for the commodity market and the slaves who worked with them were treated strictly as capital investment, exploited as thoroughly as possible and written off in a relatively short period. There was little hope of manumission and the slave could only look forward to a short life of hard-driven labour. Among the slaves were many educated and often previously free men netted in through the kidnapping of pirates and also a large number of men of the same nationality and religion. The machinery of repression prior to the revolt was very weak. Roman first-line troops absent on the regimes of states, while harsh, depended upon very few overseers.

The second revolt was led by Eunus, a slave of Syrian origin, who claimed to have the power of prophecy and to be in contact with the Gods. This revolt was particularly successful. The slaves occupied large parts of the island and it took several years and large military forces to suppress them. In the areas captured by the rebels, a state was established.

In no sense, however, could this revolt of Eunus be described as a revolt against slavery or a social movement based upon a popular programme. In the words of Green, the first Sicilian slave war was not a revolution against slavery of any kind of socialist or left-wing economic revolt. It was sparked off by the presence on the latifundia of intelligent Syrians and Sicilians – often freemen by birth who had nothing against slavery as an institution, but objected violently against being enslaved themselves.

The next great slave revolt came in 73 B.C when 90,000 slaves, under the leadership of a Thracian gladiator called Spartacus, had revolted and were not finally defeated before they had indicted fearful suffering upon their former masters. In this revolt also there is no evidence to support the notion that the revolt was sustained by a primitive form of communist ideology. There was also a lack of support for the revolt among the common masses. This was spearheaded by Lucius Surrigius Catilina, who freed a large number of slaves to increase his band of supporters, was declared as the enemy of Republic and was defeated by a Roman army in a pitched battle.

Thus, one of the most common reasons why some slave masters treated their slaves relatively better was the very fear of slave revolts. There was also a gradual growth of public opinion, possibly influenced by the stoic philosophy which opposed cruel treatment to slaves. All this resulted in some progressive measures to limit the maltreatment of slaves.

The state itself met the danger of their revolts by a system of rewards and punishments, by rewards paid to slaves who might give advance information of threatened uprising and by the lingering death on the cross as punishment for those who revolted.

Pierre Dockes is of the view that the slaves wanted to win back their freedom. They wanted a community of their own in their homeland and the land to cultivate and re-establish ties with their families and their religion. Finley adds another clause where Hopkins and Westermann agree with him when he says that slaves as slaves showed no interest in slavery as an institution but wanted to reverse the position of the master by putting themselves on top and the Roman master underfoot. This could have been an astute propaganda, evoking anxieties which were the inverted counterpart of the desires of the slave, thus disabling them to achieve coalition with the lower strata of freemen. Hence, the rebellion itself helped to give a concrete shape to the social foundations of the new type of state.

The outcome of the revolt was that slaves, out of necessity, were divided up into gangs and an uprising in any villa was met very quickly not only by the private guards on the estate but also by the police and army, agencies of the state in its role as the co-ordinator of repression. Thus, there was no central organisation of slaves and all contact between one gang and another was forbidden. It was seen that slaves of one stock and as far as possible of one speech were not put together.

Large number of slaves were kept in the villas where they worked in small groups on varied and specialized tasks, coordinated by a steward and overseer. The slave ate in refectories and lived in barracks. These slaves worked in conditions not unlike those of chain-gang labourers. Thus, the owners made sure that there would be no mass revolt again. Unlike Rome, in classical Greece there is absence of serious slave revolts and the reasons could be the mild treatment of slaves during that time.

Another distinguishing feature which was prevalent in Rome is that the social pleasure clubs or associations of other kinds, which received slaves and freemen in their membership, attained a high stage of development on Roman soil. They could attend the theatres, the gladiatorial games and the races.

The slaves of Italy enjoyed both social pleasures while living and an assurance of honourable funeral sites after death in funeral clubs.

Unlike Greece, slaves of the imperial family under the Roman empire got great importance. The importance attained by them while in slave status was in many instances continued throughout the rest of their lives as imperial freemen.

The institution of slavery also found its clearest expression in the growth of Roman law. The Roman private law reflects chattel slavery in the clearest and most developed legal form. This law differentiates two classes of phenomena, i.e., things and persons. In Roman law, the slave is unquestionably the property of his owner who may treat him as he would any other items, of property; in particular, he is alienable. In case of chattel slavery the law defines a human subject as a legal non-subject, a being who may be treated by its' owner as a thing and who therefore, may be treated as a non- subject in practice. Slavery reduces a human being to the status of a thing, an alienable attribute of persons.

The contradiction of the Roman law, however, emerges, when the criminal law held the slaves responsible for his action as it dealt with him when he murdered his master or committed criminal offence against a third party. It thereby, and contradictorily, recognizes the slave as a subject. Thus in Rome and elsewhere, pure chattel slavery never existed. In fact, the law recognized elements of personality in the slave and corresponding limitations on his master's

rights. However, whatever the contradictions and inconsistencies, it was predominantly as property and not as a man that a slave was regarded in law and in fact.

Before we conclude our discussion on slavery, we can pause for a while and see if slavery as an institution was really an unproductive and inefficient labour system. Most of the utilitarians and many Marxists have argued in favour of this view. Slavery is an inefficient labour system based as it is on reluctant, unskilled and inflexible labourers. This must be a general and necessary feature of all slave labour systems. Some orthodox Marxists have also argued that slavery limited the development of technique and knowledge in the ancient world because it made labour a curse and separated thought and action.

To what extent are these observations correct? Barry Hinders and Paul Q. Hirst argue in their text 'Pre-capitalist modes of Production' that the above analysis is not correct. In ancient world, the slaves that worked on estates and manufacturing workshops were the most developed forms of forces of production. Slavery stood in comparison with the other current terms of production, with free peasants, proprietorship with share cropping tenancy, with independent handicraft workers as more productive and efficient system.

According to those authors, it is the inefficiency of free labour in contrast with slave labour which is the most neglected aspect of the economics of classical antiquity. The peasant or artisans lack cultural background and the capital to develop new techniques of working and new instruments of production. Added to these general limitations in such forms of production is the particular limitations imposed by the conditions of the ancient world, the burden of military service, taxes, debts and harsh laws against debtors, etc., and the difficulties of the peasant or artisan are correspondingly magnificent.

Thus, it is not on the ground of slavery as an inefficient and unproductive system that we should look for its weaknesses but rather in the limitations of the dominant forms of free labour in the ancient world, independent peasant production and independent handicraft production. Far from conferring the benefits and innovations which are ascribed to them by utilitarians and orthodox Marxists alike, these forms of free labour were the real break on the ancient economy, slave production overcame these limitations. Slave labour supplemented but never supplanted these free labour system-peasant and artisan production remained the dominant forms of social production, and it was these forms which set definite limits to the development of the ancient economy.

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