

# Slavery and Manumission in Ancient Rome

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Slavery played a huge role socially and politically in the ancient Roman world. We will examine daily life for both slaves and their masters, how slavery was affected by the growth of the Empire, the laws and rituals surrounding manumission (freeing of slaves), and subsequent changes in social status. Please note that I DO NOT condone slavery or any other nonconsensual control of human lives.

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## Why study it

- Jewish perspective: Actively teaching to retain tribal memory, good and bad, instead of whitewashing history

- Understanding Roman mindset

- Applying knowledge to modern world

## Where slaves came from

- Spoils of war (income for soldiers), debtors, sold by family, born to a slave

Percentage of population: 10-40% (changes over time, difficult to find good numbers, underreporting to save taxes)

Most were owned by the elite 1%: Rich families had hundreds of slaves.

- Pliny the Younger owned 4,116 (farm owner)!

- Middle class families had 1-3.

## Slave markets

- Slave traders had sleazy reps (used car salesman)

- Slaves marked with signs listing geographic origin (stereotypes), age, skills, etc.

- Newly imported: Chalked one foot

## Daily life

- Average life span 17.5, vs. 40 for citizens.

- Clothing reveals status (very important in Roman culture)

- Imagery - slaves are smaller

- City vs. farms

- Status levels – continuum from mines up to trusted assistant.

- Educated Greeks – tutors, doctors

- Gladiators (mostly slaves): weird mix of low status and fame/wealth for the best

- Higher status slaves could earn money, buy their freedom (*Peculium*), or their own slaves.

## Concept of will and agency as proof of morality

- Losers in war / poor deserve to be slaves

- Suicide

## Economic factors

- Allowed the building of an Empire

- Growth → more conquering → more slaves imported

- Price of slaves decreased, more manumissions, more integration

- See *Mary Harrsch's article for details on taxes and manumission rates.*

Pax Romana – 2<sup>nd</sup> century – decreased conquering, new laws to slow manumission

1<sup>st</sup> Servile revolt due to poor treatment

2<sup>nd</sup> by accident

3<sup>rd</sup> Servile revolt (maybe due to enslaving former soldiers):

Spartacus: Personal freedom, not opposing slavery as an institution

70,000 men, up to 120,000 total followers – lasted 3 years

When defeated, 6,000 were crucified along the Appian Way

Why not more revolts?

1) Owners self-regulated and pressured to be decent (out of fear?)

2) Slaves isolated linguistically, financially, by clothing

3) Difficult to plot (all slaves responsible for a crime)

4) Slavery as the norm: Practiced in literally the known world.

5) Hope for freedom as reward for good service

6) Christianity encouraged (reward after death)

*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear. Serve them sincerely as you would serve Christ (Ephesians 6:5).*

Self-purchased freedom:

Manumission – see attached handout from Drusa's ceremony at Sport of Kings, 8/18/17.

"Greek commentators on Roman customs thought that the extent to which the Romans practiced manumission was highly peculiar; but although they refer to the number of slaves the Romans freed, what really surprised them was that such great numbers of persons of servile origin should be integrated into the Roman state as citizens."

Thomas, E. J. Wiedemann, "*The Regularity of Manumission at Rome.*"

Downside of freedom: Old, sick, infirm sold / freed to save Master \$ (Varro)

Freedmen barred from holding office, but can vote, children are citizens

Pilius (Freedman's cap) as symbol

Saturnalia – role reversals

Some freedman achieved wealth (House of the Vetti, Ctesippus, Narcissus)

Augustales: Elite freedmen, like a guild. Substitute for forbidden municipal offices

Social stigma continues: Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyricon*

Continued Freedmen/ Master relationships

Freedmen take the Master's last name

Often remain in business together

Mausoleums for family included freedmen

Maintained legal rights of Master similar to father & son.

Freedman unable to take legal action against former Master.

Owed both *obsequium* (general respect) and *operae* (tasks of labor) to Master

Epitaphs due to true affection or social pressure?

Living history – lessons from playacting in the SCA

Upper status clothing requires hands to hold it / slaves to maintain it

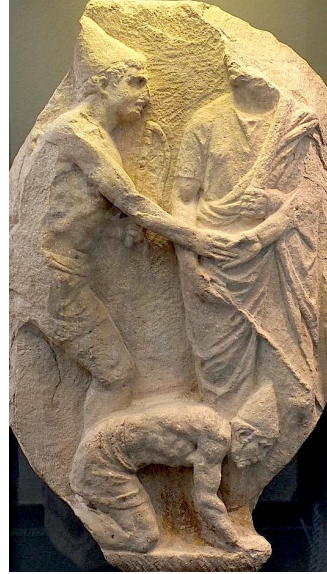
Pockets

Dining



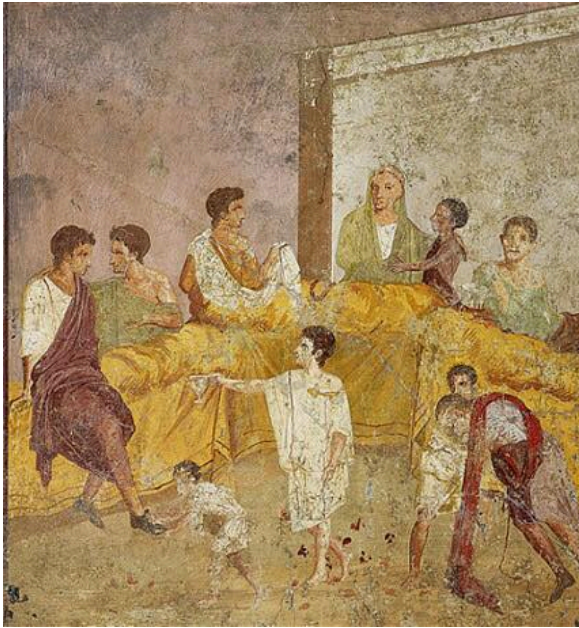
A Roman slave medallion at the Baths of Diocletian venue of the National Museum of Rome. Photographed by Mary Harrsch © 2005

The tag reads “I have run away – seize me. Return me to my master, Zoninus, for a reward.” These collars were used in the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries. Forehead tattoos were also used in the later Empire to mark rebellious slaves.



Mariemont manumission relief, marble, 1st century B.C. Musée Royal de Mariemont

Note the change during the ceremony: At first he is small, and on his knees. Then he is the same size as his former Master, with whom he shakes hands, and he now holds a whip. He may have been given a job as Slave Manager. The magistrate, holding fasces, is there to bear witness and declare the slave legally free.



A dinner party is breaking up. Note the tiny slave putting shoes on a master, and helping a lady put on her green palla (a shawl that protected her modesty when outside). Another mini slave supports his falling-down-drunk owner (right). This last bit is a theme I've seen a few times.

A fresco painting of a triclinium (dining room), from Pompeii, now in the Naples Archaeological Museum.

A couple gets it on while a diminutive slave stands by with a glass of water. Is his head turned to give them privacy, or is he sharing a bored stare with the viewer?

From the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme in Rome; Villa della farnesina, cubicolo D



Side note: As shown in these two frescos, the Roman world was racially diverse. We have skeletal evidence of people from all over the known world living in Pompeii and other cities.

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# Roman History Timeline

## ROMAN MONARCHY

- 753 BCE Village of Rome founded  
Romans revolted against the Etruscan kings and  
509 BCE created a  
system of government by the Senate and the Assembly

## EARLY REPUBLIC

- 494 BCE Disputes between patricians and plebeians  
**"Law of the 12 Tables" provides written Roman law including distinguishing differences between slaves / free men.**  
450 BCE  
390 BCE Gaulic invasion sacked Rome  
282-272 BCE War with Pyrrhus  
265 BCE Rome completed the occupation of the Italian peninsula

## MID REPUBLIC

- 264-241 BCE First war with Carthage (First Punic War)  
**75,000 slaves taken**  
218-201 BCE Second Punic War (Hannibal crossed the Alps)

- 149-146 BCE Third Punic War and final defeat of Carthage

## LATE REPUBLIC

### 135-132

- BCE First Servile War (slave revolt due to poor conditions)**  
**100 BCE Second Servile war (started by mistake)**  
88 BCE Sulla became the first Roman general to seize power  
88-82 BCE Civil war in Rome  
**73 BCE Third Servile revolt (Spartacus)**  
**Pompey crushes Mediterranean piracy, reducing influx of slaves**  
**67 BCE**  
58 BCE Julius Caesar appointed governor of Gaul  
58-49 BCE To forestall another military revolt, the Senate yielded power to the First Triumvirate composed of Pompey, Crassus, and Julius Caesar  
54 BCE Invasion of Britain  
Julius Caesar defeated Pompey and became the first dictator of Rome  
45 BCE  
44 BCE Julius Caesar assassinated on orders of the Senate  
44-31 BCE The Second Triumvirate of Marc Antony, Lepidus, and Octavian

## THE ROMAN EMPIRE

- 27 BCE-14  
CE Octavian became Caesar Augustus, the first emperor  
**Augustus imposes slave sales tax, forbids manumission under age 30, forbids freeing >100 in a will**

14-68 CE	Julio-Claudian dynasty continues (Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero) <b>Roman Empire expands, captures lots of slaves</b>
66-70 CE	Jewish revolts in Judea (Palestine)
69-96 CE	Flavian dynasty (Vespasian, Titus, Domitian)
70 CE	Expulsion of Jews from Palestine
77-84 CE	Conquest of Britain
79 CE	Eruption of Mt. Vesuvius
96-180 CE	The period of the "Five Good Emperors" (Pax Romana) <b>Fewer captives, changes in laws to retain slaves</b>
180 CE	Imperial power began to decline
211-285 CE	Numerous emperors killed by revolts and assassinations
259-270 CE	German invasions force Romans to yield territory
285 CE	Emperor Diocletian divided the empire and moved his capital to Byzantium (in Anatolia, later Constantinople)

Adapted heavily from <http://courses.wcupa.edu/jones/his101/web/t-roman.htm>

TULLIA SATURNINA, WIDOW OF MARCUS JULIUS SATURNINUS, DECLARES IN THE PRESENCE OF HER FRIENDS THAT DRUSA, AGE ABOUT 34, HER SLAVE PURCHASED LEGALLY BY MARCUS JULIUS SATURNINUS, AND INHERITED BY HER UPON HIS DEATH, IS NO LONGER TO BE A SLAVE AND TO NOW BE FREE. MANUMISSION IS GRANTED AS REWARD FOR YEARS OF FAITHFUL SERVICE, AND NO CLAIM WILL BE MADE AGAINST HER. DONE AT THE FESTIVAL OF SPORT OF KINGS IN THE BARONY OF DRAGON'S MIST, ANCIENT AND SPLENDID, ON THE FOURTEENTH DAY BEFORE THE KALENDS OF SEPTEMBER, IN THE THIRD YEAR BARON FINN GRIMM WAS CONSUL.

NOTE: THIS WAS PRINTED ON HEAVY IVORY PAPER, SIGNED, AND STAMPED WITH MY BADGE ON A WAX SEAL. IT WAS BASED ON AN EXTANT DOCUMENT CITED IN "INVISIBLE ROMANS" (PAGE 168).



## DRUSA'S MANUMISSION CEREMONY

### THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

Slavery in ancient Rome was not necessarily for life. Slaves were commonly freed for particularly good service. They might also be liberated as a means for the master to show off, or at the master's death, via his will. The freedman usually took the master's family name as his own.

Freed slaves often maintained a business relationship with their former masters. In fact, tombstones erected by freedmen for their former masters, and vice versa, show that genuine affection existed between them at least in some cases.

Most sources mention "freedmen" without any reference to what happened with freed female slaves. Presumably, given the state of women's rights at the time, they were immediately married. Sometimes their husband was their former master (we do have evidence of this happening).

### THE CEREMONY

A slave could be freed in a court of law, as a result of a will, or a property sale, etc. but was often done by a social ceremony. This might take place in a temple for Libertas or one for Feronia, the Goddess of Freedmen.

There are many rituals mentioned regarding freeing slaves. One was to seize the slave by the hand, whirl him around once, and give him a slight push. The word "manumission" (sending by the hand) is supposed to have been derived from this ceremony.<sup>i</sup> Touching with the hand was a symbolical act in all transfers of property, including manumission of slaves.<sup>ii</sup>

Then a consul<sup>iii</sup> or a praetor (a magistrate ranking below consul) touched the slave with a rod called a *vindicta*<sup>iv</sup> and pronounced him to be free.<sup>v</sup>

"[T]he kindness of their masters frees our slaves from the fear of all these punishments with one stroke of the staff of manumission."

-Cicero

The slave's head was shaved and a **pileus** was placed upon it. The pileus was a brimless felt cap of undyed wool. Based on frescos, sculptures, and coins, it ranged from a short cone to a gumdrop shape. It was the identifying garment of a freedman, although everyone wore them during Saturnalia (a December holiday featuring switched social roles and whimsical pranks).



After the assassination of Julius Caesar, Brutus minted the coin on the left, visually claiming that he had freed Rome from slavery to a tyrant. Right: 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, from Apulia, now at the Louvre Museum.



Both the *vindicta* and the cap were considered symbols of Libertas, the goddess representing freedom and liberty (Note: The Statue of Liberty is based on her, and bears her identifying attributes of a torch and a tablet inscribed with law). Left: Nerva's silver denarius, minted 97 CE, which reads "LIBERTAS PUBLICA."

Please wish Drusa well in her new life as a free-roamin' Roman by saying **"QUOM TU ES LIBER(A) GAUDEO"** - "You are a free (wo)man, I rejoice!"<sup>vi</sup>

Yours in service,  
Domina Tullia Saturnina, JdL

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<sup>i</sup> *The Civil Wars*. Horace White, London. MacMillan and Co., LTD. 1899. Chapter XVII, Verse 135

<sup>ii</sup> Livy, *History of Rome*. English Translation by Rev. Canon Roberts. New York, New York. E. P. Dutton and Co. 1912. Book 2, Chapter 8

<sup>iii</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses*, book 2, chapter 1

<sup>iv</sup> Livy. *Books I and II With An English Translation*. Cambridge. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann, Ltd. 1919. Book 2, Chapter 5

<sup>v</sup> M. Tullius Cicero, Speech before Roman Citizens on Behalf of Gaius Rabirius, Defendant Against the Charge of Treason (ed. William Blake Tyrrell), Chapter 5, verse 16.

<sup>vi</sup> T. Maccius Plautus, *Epidicus, or The Fortunate Discover* Henry Thomas Riley, Ed. Act 5, Scene 2