

WORLD HISTORY

Roman Slavery Gladiators Spartacus Revolt

ROMAN SLAVERY



The subjugation {total control} of the Roman slaves was a result of the territorial conquests of the empire. As new land was acquired, the population of the area became the property of the Roman Empire as well. The captives of the land joined the other slaves of the republic who had been stationed in this position by the same situation as the captured slaves, or because they had failed to enlist in the army or register in the census. Slavery was either a result of captivity or punishment for a rejection of governmental rule.

Once the slaves were acquired, they were sold at slave auctions under the jurisdiction of *aediles*.¹ Slaves with special talents were sold for higher prices, and female slaves were cheaper than males. It was cheaper to purchase new slaves than to breed more, and so the slave auctions were always highly populated and well attended.

The Roman slaves were treated as members of the family unit in the earlier days of slavery; their punishments were mild, and they were given holidays from their regular duties on certain occasions and festivals. On the Festival of Saturn, the slaves were allowed to wear the badge of freedom for the day, they were given freedom of speech, a banquet where their masters served them, and they were given the clothes of their masters to wear. Slaves were often buried in the familial plots of their masters, and masters would be punished severely for the murder of their slaves. Families of slaves could not be separated, but there was no legal relation between a father and his son. The children born to a slave mother were also slaves, and slaves could hold no property as all their possessions belonged to their master.

Runaway slaves, *fugitivi*, were branded on their forehead, and the later treatment of slaves included whippings, requirement of the slaves to work in fetters, and beatings with sticks. Their food was rationed. The manumission {freeing} of slaves was both a personal and governmental issue. The slaves could be freed as a reward for a great feat of bravery or service, as a punishment to the master of the slaves, or if the slave was extremely aged, as it was cheaper to buy a new slave rather than to feed them. Slaves then joined the rest of society as their social ranking was raised by this freedom, and they would not be at all limited or hindered because of their previous status.

Although some information survives to us about Roman slavery, and due to archaeological conquests, a great deal of knowledge can be gathered about the general slave system, little is known about the everyday lives of slaves. However, enough is known to give a general overview of the slaves' lives. It is understood that slaves performed a wide variety of different jobs, ranging from economic to field labor roles, to being forced into gladiatorial combat like Spartacus. (The latter, of course, could bring a comfortable life if the gladiator was skilled enough, lucky enough, and wise enough with his finances. On the other hand, an unfortunate

¹ In ancient Rome, *aediles* were government officials involved in public works and the maintenance of cities.

gladiator could end up being eaten by lions!) With this span of employment also came great differences in living conditions. Before delving into this topic, it is important to divide slaves into two categories: field slaves (rural) and domestic (urban) slaves. This will become vital, for there was a strict hierarchy that was understood by both slaves and their owners, and was directly reflected in the way that they were treated. This division was one of vital status as it was considered punishment or degradation for a house slave to be sent to the fields.

Slaves in Roman society were given tasks that we today may think of as strange. Many were able to purchase things in the names of their masters, to navigate their master's ships, etc...Making up the largest percentage of the slave population were the field hands who constituted the major work force on the large agricultural and mining farms of the Roman aristocracy. On one estate alone, as many as 40,000 slaves could be kept, forced to work in extreme conditions. As a result of this, however, field slaves provided Rome with its greatest source of economic wealth. This was especially crucial in the later republic as expansion became less and less profitable.

For at least two reasons, the life of a field slave was a very strenuous and difficult one. First, because aristocratic owners rarely visited their estates, and only spoke with their paid men when they did, the common field slave almost never came into contact with his owner. As a result of this, these slaves were not given the opportunity to befriend their masters as house slaves were, which made the possibility of a better job or manumission much less likely. There were, however, chances for a slave to advance in his rural station to a more prominent and, consequently, beneficial situation. The majority of positions for rural slaves were in the fields, the most stressful that could be obtained. There were some however, such as a *diaetorius*, or valet, who was present solely to attend to the master's materialistic needs.

Secondly, field (rural) slaves were forced to do work that was both physically and emotionally straining. Field hands were given a life expectancy of about ten years due to the physical exhaustion they encountered on a daily basis. Among the jobs they were expected to perform were as ploughmen, hunters, ditchers and forester. Slaves were expected to work all day on very little food and water, and were whipped or beaten when they did not. The extreme nature of the environment in which rural slaves lived is best exemplified by the number of slave revolts which resulted from rural area as opposed to urban areas. Urban slaves had very little to complain about, as will be discussed later, and revolt only would have led to their execution, whereas for rural slaves death was the outcome no matter which route they chose to exercise.

If one was to be a slave, to work in the household of an upper-class aristocrat was ideal. Under many circumstances, the oldest and most trusted slaves were considered to be a part of the family. Furthermore, urban slaves were given better food and clothing in addition to their daily tasks being much less demanding. Urban slaves were chosen for several reasons, but many for their skills such as sculpture or cobbling. There were, however, slaves, especially young boys, who were employed only for their looks as it was considered a symbol of wealth and status to keep beautiful children as slaves. There were, of course, many other jobs for domestic slaves such as cook and footman. Some households were known to have as many as fifty different types of slaves, who would perform duties sometimes as specific as servant in charge of purple garments.

From all stand points, house slaves were given many more opportunities than those of the field capacity. Cooks were allowed to take home leftovers from their master's table, children were given clothing made of fine materials, etc...simply because house slaves were considered, for the most part, to be a reflection of the master himself, and offered a prime avenue to further display his status.

All urban slaves, however, did not experience the surroundings of luxury that the fortunate were able to enjoy. Many slaves that lived in urban areas were the property of the government, kept to aid in the erection of public buildings and roads. The atmosphere in which these slaves were kept rivaled that of rural slaves in work expectancy and living conditions.

GLADIATORS

Gladiators² were usually recruited from criminals, slaves (especially captured fugitives), and prisoners of war. Criminals, having lost their citizen rights and slaves and prisoners of war having none, had no choice about becoming a gladiator, if they had the physical and emotional make-up necessary for the profession. Some free-born men, however, although they had not lost their citizen rights, voluntarily chose the profession and bound themselves body and soul to the owner of a gladiatorial troupe (*lanista*) by swearing an oath "to endure branding, chains, flogging or death by the sword" and to do whatever the master ordered. It has been estimated that by the end of the Republic, about half of the gladiators were volunteers (*auctorati*), who took on the status of a slave for an agreed-upon period of time.



But why would a free man want to become a gladiator? When he took the gladiator's oath, he agreed to be treated as a slave and suffered the ultimate social disgrace (*infamia*). Seneca describes the oath as "most shameful" (*Ep.* 37.1-2). As unattractive as this may sound to us, there were advantages. The candidate's life took on new meaning. He became a member of a cohesive group that was known for its courage, good morale, and absolute fidelity to its master to the point of death. His life became a model of military discipline and through courageous behavior he was also now capable of achieving honor similar to that enjoyed by Roman soldiers on the battlefield. There were other advantages. For example, an aristocrat who had suffered a great financial setback in a lawsuit or who had squandered his inheritance would find it extremely difficult to make a living. After all, he had spent his life living on inherited wealth and was not used to working for a living. He could enter the army or become a school teacher, or take up a life of crime as a bandit. In comparison with these occupations, a career as a gladiator might seem more attractive. He would not fight more than 2 or 3 times a year and would have a chance at fame and wealth (with which they could buy their freedom), employing those military skills that were appropriate to the citizen-soldier. In the arena, the volunteer gladiator could indulge his fantasy of military glory and fame before an admiring crowd. As a gladiator, he could achieve the kind of public adulation that modern athletes enjoy today.

² The word *gladiator* means 'one who wields a sword (*gladius*)'.



SPARTACUS & THE SLAVE REVOLT

Spartacus was born in Thrace (an ancient country, now part of Greece and Turkey.) When he was young he worked in the fields of his homeland. Somehow, he ended up serving as a Roman auxiliary in the legions. There is no clear evidence but it is believed that he deserted the Roman army and as a result of that was sold into slavery.

Slavery became an important part of Roman life. As nobles became richer and lazier they began using slaves as gladiators for entertainment. Gladiators were trained slaves who were forced to fight wild animals and other slaves in huge arenas in front of thousands of people. It was a brutal and ugly sport and it was becoming very popular. While being enrolled in a training school in Capua in 73 B.C.E., Spartacus led a group of several other gladiators and fled the gladiatorial college capturing Mount Vesuvius. When other slaves heard about Spartacus they were motivated by his courage and readily joined him in the fight against the Roman nobility.

Spartacus hoped that in search for freedom his soldiers would attempt to cross the Alps, after which they could seek their own homelands. However, his plan didn't materialize as they preferred to plunder the rich Italian countryside. Within the space of two years they defeated no fewer than four Roman armies. With his huge army of 70,000 Spartacus' force overran much of Campania and Lucania defeating all the Roman opposition. Inside, however, Spartacus knew that if Romans really decided to make an effort his army stood no chance because "the well-equipped and numerous Roman legions would easily suppress his ragtag band."

By 72 B.C.E., the Senate realized that Spartacus and his army were an internal threat to security and ordered the consuls to crush the slave revolt. It turned out to be harder than they thought. Surprisingly the Roman army was defeated three times. On numerous occasions Spartacus tried to persuade his men to leave Italy and move northward towards Gaul but they refused. Eventually, he decided to turn southward and go to Sicily. However, that was a turning point of the slave war. The Senate placed Crassus, an able and competent general, in command of six legions. Although his initial attempt to crush the revolt failed, at Brundisium (now Brindisi) in 71 B.C.E., his army defeated the slaves and gladiators. Spartacus was killed in the battle and 6,000 captured slaves were crucified. That was the end of the last of the series of slave wars extending back to the previous century.
