

# ROMAN SLAVERY



A UNIT OF STUDY FOR GRADES 6-12  
INGRID DE HAAS

## World History

Era Three: Classical Traditions, Major Religions, and Giant Empires, 1000 BCE–300 CE Era

Era Four: Expanding Zones of Exchange and Encounter, 300-1000 CE



NATIONAL CENTER FOR HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS

University of California, Los Angeles

*with*

WORLD HISTORY FOR US ALL PROJECT

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# INTRODUCTION

## I. WHY THIS UNIT?

Enslaved people made up a substantial part of the population in Imperial Rome. According to some estimates, during the first century CE, they may have comprised one-third of the population of the empire. Wealthy Romans owned hundreds or thousands of slaves, but even the average person could own a few. Some slaves even had their own slaves (*vicarii*).

Slaves performed a wide variety of jobs in Rome. Although some tasks, such as domestic service, did not generate revenue for the master, there were many others, such as farming and mining, that did. In some cases, slave labor brought the owner considerable financial gain. In all cases it was a sign of special prestige.

In this unit students will learn about the ways in which the Romans acquired slaves. They will also learn about the life of enslaved people and about the ways in which they could escape slavery, both through manumission (legal freeing of slaves) and through various forms of resistance.

## II. UNIT OBJECTIVES

Upon completing this unit, students will be able to:

1. Identify where and/or how slaves were obtained in Imperial Rome.
2. Describe what kind of work slaves had to do and the economic importance of some of their jobs.
3. Detail the treatment enslaved people received at the hands of their masters.
4. Analyze the reasons and forms of slave resistance.
5. Assess the reliability of primary sources as historical evidence.

## III. TIME AND MATERIALS

This unit will take 5 to 7 class periods to complete.

An LCD projector is required for showing the PowerPoint presentation associated with this unit. Students will also need access to world history textbooks for the extension activities.

### III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR WORLD HISTORY

**Era 3:** Classical Traditions, Major Religions, and Giant Empires, 1000 BCE–300 CE.

**3A:** The student understands the causes and consequences of the unification of the Mediterranean basin under Roman rule.

*Therefore, the student is able to assess ways in which imperial rule over a vast area transformed Roman society, economy, and culture.*

**5A:** The student understands major global trends from 1000 BCE to 300 CE.

*Therefore, the student is able to compare institutions of slavery or other forms of coerced labor in the Han Empire, the Maurya Empire, the Greek city-states, and the Roman Empire.*

### IV. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Evidence indicates that there were already enslaved people in Rome in the early first millennium BCE, although at first their numbers were small. This changed with the third century BCE wars of conquest, when the Roman Republic became a slave society and began using the slave mode of production.



**Four female slaves dressing a woman's hair.  
Relief from a family tomb in Neumagen, Germany.  
Undated.**

Landesmuseum Trier. Source: The VRoma Project,  
[www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus\\_images/toilette2.jpg](http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/toilette2.jpg)

Many citizens lost their farmland because they were away for extended periods fighting in the Roman legions. Aristocrats then bought up their land with the profits of war. They needed workers for their increasingly larger holdings, but they did not want to employ free citizens who might be more useful if they remained available for the army and future wars. In addition, free citizens did not want to work for others. It appears, then, that their only alternative was to use larger numbers of slaves to work the land.

Quantifying slaves in the Roman Republic and Imperial Rome is a difficult task. Not only are the sources unreliable, but the numbers of slaves varied by region and over time. During the second century BCE, regions more dependent on agriculture, like Italy, would have required, and obtained, more slaves than those less dependent on agriculture. By the second century



**Mosaic with two slaves serving wine to a man.  
Bardo Museum, Tunis. Undated.**

Source: The VRoma Project ([www.vroma.org](http://www.vroma.org)),  
[www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus\\_images/man\\_slaves.jpg](http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/man_slaves.jpg)

CE, there were fewer slaves working the land empire-wide. Some scholars believe that, for reasons not fully analyzed, landowners switched from viticulture (cultivation of grapes, especially for wine-making) to cereal production. This ended the slave-mode of production, but not slavery. In addition, the supply of slaves, discussed below, could not have remained constant. But although numbers are elusive, scholars,

using a variety of methods, have come up with estimates that range from 10 to 35 percent of the total population in the first century CE.

Besides the difficulties involved in the quantification of slaves in Rome, an investigation of the slave supply is also complicated. Scholars disagree on how to interpret the evidence, and the supply fluctuated over time. It is clear, however, that the Romans owned and used slaves during the Roman Republic and that the demand for slaves increased as their empire expanded. That demand, as well as slave deaths and manumissions, meant masters needed to acquire new slaves.

War was a common source of slaves. Before the early third century BCE, the victor in a war could take some or all the enemy captive. But the market for slaves at Rome was not large, and the captives were often ransomed by their families, exchanged for the other side's prisoners, or sold to dealers who resold them elsewhere. This changed during the third century BCE, when the victorious Romans began to enslave and sell many of the captives because of the demand for slave labor in agriculture.

The Romans did not depend only on war as a source of slaves. There were also internal sources. New slaves could also be obtained through natural reproduction among the existing slave population, infant exposure, piracy, kidnapping by brigands, the sale of one's children or of oneself, and long-distance trade with communities beyond the frontiers.

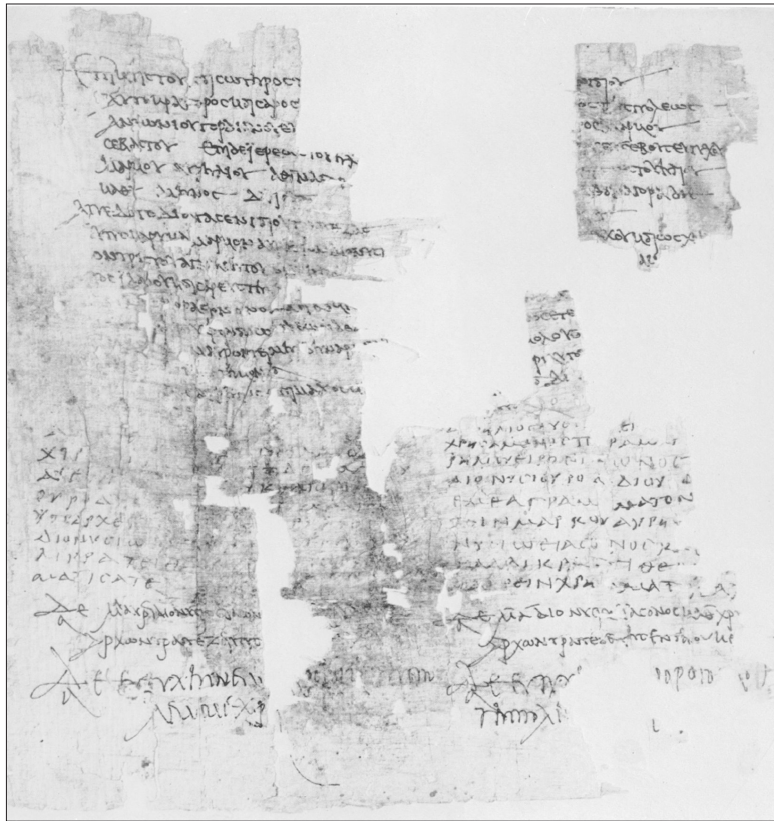
Concerning the economic importance of slavery by the late Roman Republic and during the Roman Empire, some masters generated substantial income from the labor of their slaves. These slaves performed a large variety of rural and urban jobs, often working side by side with free people. But the services of many others, such as messengers, entertainers, and personal attendants, cannot be measured in economic terms. Some masters owned many non-economically-productive slaves simply to show off their wealth.

The lives that enslaved people led differed greatly depending on who owned them and what kind of work they did. Some owners felt affection for their slaves and treated them humanely. Other owners abused their slaves by beating them,



torturing them, and even killing them. It is known that many slaves responded to their master's abuse by running away. Others sought supernatural help, and a few killed their masters or started a rebellion, as in the case of Spartacus.

There was never an attempt to abolish slavery in Rome. Even former slaves did nothing to eliminate slavery and even sometimes became slave-owners. But it is known that Rome was unique among slave-owning societies in that slaves were regularly manumitted. If this was done following certain formalities, the ex-slave became a Roman citizen. Although some public offices were closed to them, a freedman or freedwoman's child had, at least in theory, the same opportunities as other free-born citizens.



**Papyrus found at Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, recording the sale of a slave girl on the island of Rhodes  
First half of the third century CE**

Source: John F. Oates, "A Rhodian Auction Sale of a Slave Girl,"  
*The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 55 (1969), 195.  
Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society

## V. INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY

Before viewing the PowerPoint presentation (Resource CD), distribute the hand-out "Introduction (Graphic Organizer)." Ask students to list everything they already know about each topic. Tell them that if they know very little, or nothing, it is all right. Ask them to save their organizers and, after they finish working on the unit, have them write in the last column what they found out about each topic.

# LESSON TWO

## THE LIFE OF A SLAVE

### I. PREPARATION

Make one copy of Student Handouts 2.1-2.3 for each student.

### II. INTRODUCTION

In this lesson students will learn about the life of a slave in Imperial Rome. Divide the students into small groups. If time is limited, the teacher may assign only a few of the documents in Student Handout 2.2 to each group. In this case, students may share their findings with the other groups.

### III. ACTIVITIES

1. Distribute Student Handout 2.1 (The Life of a Slave: Introductory Essay). Ask students to read the essay and discuss it as a class. If this is assigned as homework, the discussion can take place the following day.
2. Distribute Student Handouts 2.2 (The Life of a Slave: Primary Source Documents) and 2.3 (Vocabulary Words and Terms), which define the terms that appear in boldface in Student Handout 2.2. Ask students to analyze the primary sources and then answer the following questions:
  - a. Who wrote the selection? Were they an eyewitness to what they wrote or is it something they heard from someone else?
  - b. What is the purpose of the document?
  - c. Who is the “audience” for the document? (Who was it written for?) Was it intended to be private or public?
  - d. What facts are included in the document? What facts are left out?
  - e. Based on your answers for a-d, do you think the selection is reliable historical evidence?
3. Extension Activity: Ask students to research enslaved peoples in the United States, Brazil, or the Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and then create a Venn diagram showing the similarities and differences between Roman and modern slavery. Instead of using the diagram, you may ask students to write a three-paragraph essay comparing slavery in the Americas to slavery in Imperial Rome. Have students share their work with the class.



#### **IV. ASSESSMENT**

Have students write a diary entry in which they describe their activities in the urban or rural job of their choice. Explain that some enslaved people were literate (could read and write). Make sure they choose from the jobs that appear on Student Handout 2.2.

## The Life of a Slave: Introductory Essay

An enslaved person in Imperial Rome did not have any rights, and they were considered inferior to free citizens. Their lives belonged to their masters, who chose their slaves' names (even if they already had one), decided what kind of work the slaves had to do, how many hours a day they had to work, what they could wear, and if, when, and what they could eat. Because they were considered objects, they could be bought and sold.

Almost everyone in Rome could own slaves. The very rich sometimes had several thousand, the common people could have a few, and even slaves owned slaves (*vicarii*). Nearly every slave had to work, even if she or he was very young.

Not all slave labor could be measured in economic terms. Some domestic slaves provided services that did not generate revenue. We know that some Romans owned private secretaries, table attendants, and messengers, as well as dancers, singers, and jugglers to entertain them and their guests. A single wealthy matron could have dozens of personal slave-attendants. Her children could have nurses who had to feed them, as well as sing to them and tell them stories. Yet even these slaves, if they had been purchased in the market, would have generated an income for a slave-dealer.

In some instances, the same job could be seen both as economically and non-economically productive. Wet-nurses were sometimes rented out by their owner to the parent of an infant, thus producing an income for the owner; but they could also nurse the owner's child, or the children of the owner's female slaves.

There were many other cases in which slave labor led to economic gain (sometimes considerable) for the master. Some wealthy landowners invested heavily in slave labor to produce cash crops that would achieve marketable surpluses. Agricultural labor ranged from plowing and hoeing to harvesting. But the Romans also employed slaves for other tasks. For example, they could manufacture goods, such as pottery. They could spin, weave, or dye woolen or linen cloth, extract gold, silver, or lead from mines, and build temples and houses.

How did enslaved people get their skills? A child might learn from a shepherd, a baker, a weaver, or a midwife. Some masters even sent their young slaves to "public schools" so that they could learn to read and write, both Latin and Greek. Later, tutors, possibly also slaves, trained them in Greek literature so that masters could show them off at dinner parties by having their own slaves read or recite Greek literature.

## The Life of a Slave: Primary Source Documents

### Document A

The *Digest* was a compilation of more than 700 years of Roman legislation enacted under the emperor Justinian in the early sixth century CE. This selection shows that enslaved people were considered property:

The first chapter of the *lex Aquilia* provides as follows: "If anyone kills unlawfully a [male] slave or [slave-girl] belonging to someone else or a four-footed beast of the class of cattle, let him be condemned to pay the owner the highest value that the property had attained in the preceding year. . . ."

Source: *The Digest of Justinian* 9.2.2, Vol. I, trans. Alan Watson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 277.

### Document B

Varro was a Roman writer in the first century BCE. This selection shows that masters chose names for the people they enslaved:

. . . when three men have bought a slave apiece at Ephesus, sometimes one derives his slave's name from that of the seller Artemidorus and calls him Artemas; another names his slave Ion, from Ionia the district, because he has bought him there; the third calls his slave Ephesius, because he has bought him at Ephesus. In this way each derives the name from a different source, as he preferred.

Source: Varro, *De Lingua Latina* 8.21, trans. Roland G. Kent (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), 389.

**Document C**

*ILS* 1514 is a funerary inscription from the first century CE that shows that the slave Musicus Scurranus owned sixteen slaves:

To Musicus Scurranus [slave] of Tiberius Caesar Augustus, superintendent of the Gallic Treasury of the province of Lyon: [dedicated] to him, as he well deserved, by those of his under-slaves who were with him at Rome when he died:

Venustus, buying agent	Agathopus, physician	Facilis, attendant
Decimianius, treasurer	Epaphra, in charge of silver	Anthus, in charge of silver
Dicaeus, attendant	Primio, in charge of wardrobe	Hedylus, chamberlain
Mutatus, attendant	Communis, chamberlain	Firmus, cook
Creticus, attendant	Pothus, attendant	Secunda
Tiasus, cook		

Source: *ILS* 1514, in Thomas Wiedemann, ed., *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 123-4.

**Document D**

In the first century BCE, Varro wrote *De Re Rustica*. This selection is on rural jobs:

For herds of larger cattle older men, for the smaller even boys; but in both cases those who range the trails should be sturdier than those on the farm who go back to the **steading** every day. Thus on the range you may see young men, usually armed, while on the farm not only boys but even girls tend the flocks . . .

Source: Varro, *De Re Rustica* 2.10.1, trans. W. D. Hooper (London: Heinemann, 1934), 405-7.

**Document E**

The *Digest* was a compilation of more than 700 years of Roman legislation enacted under the emperor Justinian in the early sixth century CE. This selection shows that the Romans distinguished between urban and rural slaves:

Where [urban] slaves have been **bequeathed**, some authorities distinguish them not by their place but by their work, so that even if they are on country estates but do not do country work they are held to be [urban] slaves. . . . There may be doubt whether huntsmen and **fowlers** should be included under [urban] or country slaves, but it should be said that where the head of the household used to maintain them and they stayed is where they should be counted as belonging. . . .

Source: *The Digest of Justinian* 32.99, Vol. III, trans. Alan Watson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 99.

**Document F**

The *Digest* was a compilation of more than 700 years of Roman legislation enacted under the emperor Justinian in the early sixth century CE. In this selection we read about a variety of slave occupations:

. . . Trebatius [a lawyer] further thinks that a baker and barber, intended to serve the needs of the rural household, are included [with the equipment of the farm]; likewise, the mason, who is intended to repair the villa, and the women who cook bread and look after the villa; likewise, the millers, if they are intended for use on the estate; likewise, the kitchen maid and the **steward's** wife . . . likewise, the wool-makers who make clothes for the rural household and those women who cook relishes for the rural slaves. . . .

Source: *The Digest of Justinian* 33.7.12, Vol. III, trans. Alan Watson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 125.

**Document G**

Seneca was a Stoic philosopher and writer in the first century CE. In this selection we read about the training of slaves:

There is another type of knowledge which does allow us to use the assistance of others. I remember that there was a very rich man called Calvisius Sabinus. . . . His memory was so bad that he would sometimes forget the name Ulysses, or Achilles, or Priam . . . No slave assigned the job of reminding us of people's names (*nomenclator*), no matter how old, ever made so many mistakes in imposing names . . . The following solution occurred to him: at enormous expense he bought some slaves, one to memorize the whole of Homer off by heart, another Hesiod, and one each assigned to the nine lyric poets. That he paid an enormous price for them isn't surprising—he couldn't find any for sale, and had to contract for them to be trained. . . .

Source: Seneca, *Letters* 27, qtd. in Thomas Wiedemann, ed., *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 126.

**Document H**

Hippolytus was a Christian who wrote in the early third century CE. In this selection we read about a slave who had a job that involved handling large amounts of money:

[Callistus] happened to be the house-slave of someone called Carpophorus, a Christian believer belonging to the Emperor's household. Carpophorus entrusted a considerable sum of money to him, since he seemed to be a reliable person, and told him to invest it profitably in banking. He took the money and set up a bank in what is called the "Public Fish-Market," and in time several quite significant deposits were lodged with him on behalf of widows and other Christians. . . .

Source: Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies* 9.12, qtd. in Thomas Wiedemann, ed., *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 131.



**Document I**

Columella wrote *De Re Rustica*, a treatise on farming, in the first century CE. In this selection he describes the tasks of the woman overseer (*vilica*):

. . . [The *vilica*] must send out of doors those slaves who have some work to do in the fields, and keep within the walls those for whom it seems that there is some duty to perform in the villa; and she must see that the daily tasks are not spoiled by inaction. She must carefully inspect everything that is brought into the house to see that it is not damaged, and receive it after it has been examined and found intact; then she must set apart what has to be consumed and guard what can be placed in reserve, so that the provision for a year may not be spent in a month. Again, if any member of the household is beginning to be affected by bad health, she will have to see that he is given the most suitable treatment; . . . but in order that she may have recourse to wool-work on rainy days or when, owing to cold or frost, a woman cannot be busy with field-work under the open sky, there should be wool prepared and combed out ready, so that she may be able more easily to carry out the task of spinning and demand this work also from others. . . . She will also have to be perpetually on the watch, when the slaves have left the villa, and seek out those who ought to be doing agricultural work outside, and if anyone, as sometimes happens, has managed to skulk indoors and escape the vigilance of her mate, she must inquire the reason for his laziness and find out whether he has stayed behind because bad health has prevented him from working or whether he has hidden himself through idleness. . . . Then too she will have to see that the kitchen and the cowsheds and also the mangers are cleaned, . . .

Source: Columella, *De Re Rustica* 12.1 and 12.3, Vol. III, trans. E. S. Forster and Edward H. Heffner (London: W. Heinemann, 1955), 173-5.

**Document J**

Columella wrote *De Re Rustica*, a treatise on farming, in the first century CE. In this selection he writes about men's jobs:

The next point is with regard to slaves—over what duty it is proper to place each and to what sort of tasks to assign them. So my advice at the start is not to appoint an overseer from that sort of slaves who are physically attractive, and certainly not from that class which has busied itself with the . . . occupations of the city. The lazy and sleepy-headed class of servants, accustomed to idling, to the **Campus**, the **Circus**, and the theatres, to gambling, . . . never ceases to dream of these follies; and when they carry them over into their farming, the master suffers not so much loss in the slave himself as in his whole estate. A man should be chosen who has been hardened by farm work from his infancy, one who has been tested by experience. If, however, such a person is not available, let one be put in charge out of the number of those who have slaved patiently at hard labor; . . . He should be, then, of middle age and of strong physique, skilled in farm operations or at least very painstaking, so that he may learn the more readily; for it is not in keeping with this business of ours for one man to give orders and another to give instructions, nor can a man properly exact work when he is being tutored by an underling as to what is to be done and in what way. Even an illiterate person, if only he have a retentive mind, can manage affairs well enough. . . . an overseer of this sort brings money to his master oftener than he does his book, because, not knowing his letters, he is either less able to falsify accounts or is afraid to do so through a second party because that would make another aware of the deception.

Source: Columella, *De Re Rustica* 1.8.1-4, Vol. I, trans. E.S. Forster and Edward H. Heffner (London: W. Heinemann, 1955), 85-7.

## Vocabulary Words and Terms

Word/term	Definition
<b>bequeathed</b>	left to someone in a will
<b>Campus</b>	refers to the Campus Martius, or Field of Mars—one of the regions of Rome; it had a theater, monuments, baths, and temples
<b>circus</b>	a large, open-air venue similar to a hippodrome that was used for public events
<b>fowlers</b>	hunters of birds
<b>hippodrome</b>	a stadium for horse shows or races
<b>steading</b>	farm
<b>steward</b>	male slave who worked as superintendent or overseer of farm
<b>vilica</b>	female slave who worked as superintendent or overseer of farm



**Roman aqueduct.**  
**Public works were built using slave and free labor.**

Photo by Ingrid de Haas