

INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF THE ROMAN SLAVE

ROMAN SLAVE



Slaves tend the hair of their mistress

Who were slaves?

They were people who were frequently captured in battle and sent back to Rome to be sold. However, abandoned children could also be brought up as slaves. The law also stated that fathers could sell their older children if they were in need of money.

A wealthy Roman would buy a slave in a market place. Young males with a trade could fetch quite a sum of money simply because they had a trade and their age meant that they could last for quite a number of years and, as such, represented value for money. Someone who was a cook by trade could be very expensive.

Once bought, a slave was a slave for life. A slave could only get their freedom if they were given it by their owner or if they bought their freedom. To buy your freedom, you had to raise the same sum of money that your master had paid for you – a virtually impossible task.

If a slave married and had children, the children would automatically become slaves. Young children were sometimes killed by their parents rather than let them become slaves.

A rich man might own as many as 500 slaves and an emperor usually had more than 20,000.

A logical assumption is that slaves led poor lives simply because they were slaves. In fact, a good master looked after a good slave as an equally good replacement might be hard to acquire – or expensive. A good cook was highly prized as entertaining was very important to Rome's elite and rich families tried to outdo each other when banquets were held – hence the importance of owning a good cook.

Those slaves who worked down mines or had no trade/skill were almost certainly less well looked after as they were easier and cheaper to replace.

A slave's day began at daybreak. If his master lived in a cold climate, the first job of the day for a day would be to fire up the hypocaust. When his master awoke, a slave would be expected to assist dressing him. When the day properly began, a whole group of slaves started set tasks, such as walking children to school, cleaning a villa, washing clothes, tidying a garden etc. A group of slaves would work in a kitchen preparing the day's meals. When a rich man and his family bathed at home, slaves would help out by drying them once they had finished and dressing them. When a master entertained, slaves would ensure a constant supply of food and drink. If guests had to return home and it was dark, a slave or slaves would walk ahead of them with a lighted torch.

The Roman writer Seneca believed that masters should treat their slaves well as a well treated slave would work better for a good master rather than just doing enough begrudgingly for someone who treated their slaves badly. Seneca did not believe that masters and their families should expect their slaves to watch them eat at a banquet when many had only had access to poor food.

“The result is that slaves who cannot talk before his (the master) face talk about him behind his back. It is this sort of treatment which makes people say, “You’ve as many enemies as you’ve slaves.” They are not our enemies when we get them; we make them so.” (Seneca)

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