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Slavery

TYPES OF SLAVEOWNERS

Slavery was an economic fact of Roman life, and as such, seldom received the moral opprobrium which it would undoubtedly attract in the modern world. **A Cruel Sicilian Slaveowner**

Slaves were drawn from several sources; the most important was warfare, with slavery often the fate that awaited captives. Children born to slaves inherited that servile status from their parents. Sometimes condemned criminals might be punished with hard labor, in mines and stone quarries.

Slaves might engage in various forms of employment. Often, they served as household workers performing menial tasks, but sometimes, educated slaves (always in high demand) could work as teachers or doctors. Other slaves might be put to work in private businesses, often as clerks or couriers.

Urban slaves led relatively comfortable lives. However, their counterparts in the country did not fare as well; one method of controlling urban slaves was the ever-present threat to sell them to a rancher or farm owner. Rural slaves worked long hours, under harsh working conditions.

Slaves might eventually become free (manumission), either by the initiative of the master, or through their own initiative; a slave was permitted to have a savings account of sorts (*peculium*, earned primarily through tips, wages, or gifts), and eventually might be able to purchase his freedom. Former slaves were called *liberti*, "freedmen."

In the second century B.C. there lived in the town of Enna, in Sicily, a certain Damophilus, a rich and arrogant man. This Damophilus owned large estates, many herds of cattle, and numerous slaves, whom he often treated with great cruelty. He habitually drove around the countryside in expensive carriages drawn by thoroughbred horses, all the while surrounded by a huge assemblage of servants and slaves. He lived a life of conspicuous consumption, often throwing lavish banquets at which he displayed his costly dinnerware and other dining accoutrements. He was, in sum, a rude, heartless, and uncultured man.

He used some of his excess wealth to purchase slaves, and a great number of them. Harsh treatment was the order of the day: some of them he branded like cattle; others he shackled and kept in pens like prisoners. Still others he assigned to tend his flocks and herds, but he did not provide them with even the minimum of food or clothing. On one occasion a group of his household slaves appeared stark naked before him and begged for some clothes. Damophilus eyed them angrily and suggested that they go out to the public road and plead for garments from travelers. After dispensing that bit of advice he ordered that they be tied to pillars, beaten savagely, and then sent back to their work stations or their cages.

This cruel master mistreated his slaves continually, sometimes for no reason whatsoever. And his wife, Metallis, was no better. She dished out punishments to her servants, as well as any other slaves she might come across, that equaled the abuse that her husband customarily laid upon them. Eventually the slaves could no longer take it. They began to plot ways to assassinate Damophilus and Metallis; they were not worried at all about the possibility of failure. They had long since decided that any fate would be easier to bear than life under their two masters. So they approached a slave who lived nearby, a man named Eunus.

Eunus hailed from Syria, and he brought with him to Sicily from the east some mysterious powers. He was a magician and a fortuneteller. He claimed to have a direct pipeline to the gods, who (he said) appeared to him at night in dreams, or sometimes even in broad daylight, and informed him of future events. This information he passed along to unwitting audiences, and in great profusion. Many times his predictions turned out to be false, but he was right just often enough to maintain his credibility and even enhance his prophetic reputation.

He devised a way whereby he could spit flames from his mouth. He would obtain an empty nutshell, bore holes at each end, stuff fuel and burning embers into it, and place the whole thing into his mouth. Then, at precisely the most dramatic moment, he would blow on the nutshell, thus fanning the embers and producing a flame, which gave the appearance that he breathed fire.

Eunus once claimed that the Syrian goddess Atargatis had material-

ized before his eyes to inform him that he would one day be a king. Eunus told this story not only to his fellow slaves but also to his master, Antigenes. Most people who heard the tale did not believe it, Antigenes among them. But he humored the man who would be king; he even introduced him at banquets and interrogated him in front of the guests, asking him how he would behave toward Sicily's landed gentry if ever he did indeed don the crown and purple robe.

Eunus gave all the right answers, saying that he would treat all his conjectural subjects with kind consideration. So entertaining was he, and so clever at embellishing his yarns, that the laughing diners customarily presented him with table scraps, at the same time admonishing him to remember their benefactions when he ascended to the throne.

This Eunus was the man to whom the slaves of Damophilus made their appeal.

Eunus played to his audience. In mysterious-sounding tones he told them that the gods had favored their enterprise, and he urged them to put the plan in motion immediately. The slaves agreed; they quickly mustered 400 men, who armed themselves as best they could, and marched upon Enna, with Eunus as their leader. (He used his fire-breathing trick during the assault to increase the ardor of his followers.)

The slave-army showed no mercy. They killed babies before the eyes of the mothers and then raped the mothers in the presence of their helpless husbands. When Eunus and the 400 discovered that Damophilus and Metallis were in a nearby park, a small detachment of the army was sent to fetch them into the city. This was no sooner ordered than done, and before long the two were standing captive, in the town theater, in front of their (now) former slaves.

Damophilus began to beg for mercy and was actually winning over some in the crowd; however, two of the men who hated him the most deeply, Hermeias and Zeuxis, were not swayed by his words. Fearing that Damophilus might escape punishment through his oratory, they drew their weapons and slew him.

Immediately the 400 helped one of Eunus's many prophecies come true: they named him king. And not because of any regal bearing or administrative skill, but simply because of his sideshow appeal and also his name, which in Greek means "friendly." Eunus's first royal act was to decree that all the surviving citizens of Enna be executed, except for weaponry mongers, whom he placed in chains and ordered to fabricate additional arms. He also spared the men who had indulged him at the banquets (mentioned previously). He ordered these men to be whisked away from Enna and set free. They were amazed at their good fortune, that their condescension at the dinners would be repaid with such an act of mercy.

Metallis was turned over to her former slaves to do with as they

wished. Their wish: to hurl her over a cliff, but only after torturing her first.

Damophilus and Metallis had a daughter, a young girl noted for her gentle nature and generous spirit. She had always taken pity on the slaves who suffered physical abuse at the hands of her parents, and she had showed compassion for those who were bound or caged. Because of these past acts of kindness, none of the slaves dared to harm her. Several of their number were chosen to convey the girl safely to the town of Catania, where some of her close relatives lived.

Not surprisingly, the Roman authorities soon took note of the events in Sicily and dispatched a military force to deal with the situation. As the Romans approached the town of Enna, it did not require any special prophetic powers for Eunus to perceive that his life was in danger. So he fled to the nearby hills, taking with him a contingent of 1,000 men. The Romans pursued them; many of the 1,000 killed themselves or each other prior to the arrival of the legions. But Eunus, along with a cook, a baker, a masseuse, and a jester, hid in a cave. Unfortunately, the cave offered no protection: the five were discovered, dragged out, and sent to prison, where Eunus soon died.

Diodorus Siculus, the source for the details of Eunus's life and times, summarizes the incident well: "Even among slaves, human nature needs no instructor in regard to just repayment, whether of gratitude or of revenge" (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 34/35. 2ff; tr. Francis R. Walton).

A Kind and Generous Master Mark Antony's (82–30 B.C.) father, Marcus Antonius Creticus, was a rather inept politician and soldier, but in his private life he had a reputation for kindness and generosity. His inability to deny loans and other indulgences to his friends caused his wife to closely monitor his activities, especially because the family coffers were not overflowing with sesterces.

One day, a friend in need approached Creticus; because at that time he had no money to lend, he hit upon this scheme: he ordered a slave to fill a silver bowl with water and bring it to him in the presence of his friend. Creticus then slapped some of the water onto his face, as if preparing to shave, while simultaneously ordering the slave to leave on a bogus errand. As soon as the two men were alone, Creticus dumped the water out of the bowl and gave it to his friend with instructions to sell it and keep the proceeds. This he did.

Unfortunately, Creticus's wife (not knowing about the transaction) soon missed the bowl and initiated a thorough search for it. When it did not turn up, she proposed torturing the household slaves one at a time until the guilty party confessed (for she was certain that a slave had stolen it).

At this point her husband intervened and told her the truth. He

begged and pleaded for forgiveness, which after a time he succeeded in gaining from her. And so no slaves were put to the test (Plutarch *Life of Mark Antony* 1).

SLAVES AND FREEDMEN

A prudent and humane householder need not necessarily seek friends exclusively in the forum or in the halls of government buildings; for if he behaves courteously to his own slaves, he may find among them some true friends. Slaves are not naturally hostile to their masters; they only become that way if the master treats them with cruelty. Conversely, slaves who receive kind treatment often reward that kindness in unexpected ways.

Urbinus, a member of the Roman nobility, had for some unknown reason been placed on a list of persons to be executed. Upon hearing of his likely fate, he immediately hurried from Rome to his estate at Reate, where a hideout was prepared for him.

Unfortunately, the precise location of his hiding place was revealed to the authorities whose task it was to execute him. Fortunately, before they arrived at Reate to carry out their grim mission, one of his slaves donned Urbinus's clothing and signet ring in an effort to masquerade as Urbinus. The trick worked; the assassins mistakenly killed the loyal slave.

Afterwards, Urbinus was pardoned. Out of gratitude he ordered an inscribed monument to be built to commemorate his slave's selfless action (Macrobius *Saturnalia* 1.2).

Aesopus, a freedman of Demosthenes during the time of the emperor Augustus, had been engaging in illicit behavior with Julia, the emperor's daughter. As a way to obtain evidence against Demosthenes, Aesopus was tortured. But the stoical freedman was the picture of steadfastness and would say nothing to incriminate his former master. Finally other witnesses came forward to testify against Demosthenes, and the faithful Aesopus was released.

Sometimes even cruel masters were repaid not in coin but with consideration. For example, Antius Restio learned that his name had found its way onto a proscription list, so naturally he fled from his home. Most of his slaves jumped at the chance to help themselves to the possessions that Restio left behind in his haste to flee. But one, who had been shackled and branded at Restio's demand, but later freed by a merciful stranger, pursued his master—not to take vengeance but to encourage him, help him find a place to hide, and care for him. For the slave believed that it was fate, and not any human agency, that was responsible for his mistreatment of earlier days.

Later, when the slave observed that the pursuing authorities were nearby, he killed an old man whom he happened to meet, built a funeral

pyre, set it ablaze, and threw the corpse onto the fire. He then ran to the pursuers and told them that he had slain his cruel master. The story made sense to them, and they saw no reason to disbelieve him, especially with the burning fire as evidence. So they departed, and Restio survived (Macrobius *Saturnalia* 1.2).

Sometimes slaves were not only loyal and brave in protecting their masters, but also ingenious. When the town of Grumentum was under attack, some of the slaves of a certain lady who lived in the town deserted her and joined the attackers. After Grumentum was captured, these same slaves assaulted their former place of residence and dragged their mistress into the streets. They gave every indication of preparing to have their wicked ways with her, all the while loudly shouting that the treatment she was about to receive was exactly what she deserved. But once they had transported her out of Grumentum and well away from the town's attackers, their behavior changed. They showed the highest respect and loyalty to her and offered her their protection (Macrobius *Saturnalia* 1.2).

Publius Cornelius Scipio (d. 211 B.C.), father of the renowned Africanus, also owed his life to a loyal slave. During a battle against Hannibal's forces, Scipio was severely wounded. His men left him to die, but a slave who happened to be present hoisted Scipio onto a horse and led him through the chaos and mayhem to safety (Macrobius *Saturnalia* 1.2).

Slaves were generally not eligible for service in the Roman army, but even this prohibition was waived on occasion. After the Battle of Cannae in 216 B.C., for example, 8,000 able-bodied slaves were enlisted, even though it would have been less costly to ransom the soldiers who had been captured by the Carthaginians (Macrobius *Saturnalia* 1.2).

How Many Slaves Does It Take to Maintain a Farm? Cato the Elder (*On Agriculture* 10–11) suggests the following personnel requirements for a 150-acre orchard:

Thirteen workers:

- one overseer
- one housekeeper
- five general farmhands
- three plowmen
- one mule driver
- one swineherd
- one shepherd

For a sixty-acre vineyard, Cato specifies sixteen workers:

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- one overseer
- one housekeeper
- ten general farmhands
- one plowman
- one mule driver
- one willow worker
- one swineherd

In his book on agriculture, Varro adds that Saserna, an authority on things cultivated, asserts that one man should be able to maintain a 5-acre plot and that he ought to be able to plow it over in 45 days. However, an industrious farmer, working solo, should be able to cultivate nearly 1 acre in 4 days or the entire amount (5 acres) in about 32 days. However, 13 days of leeway need to be added to the mix to account for inclement weather, sickness, or vacation time (Varro *On Agriculture* 1.18).

A former slave from Assisi by the name of Publius Decimius Eros Merula certainly did well for himself. He carved out a multifaceted career in medicine and optometry and also dabbled in politics as a member of the town council. (His membership, however, did not come without a price: 2,000 sesterces, to be exact.) **From Slavery to Surgery**

He paid 50,000 sesterces for his freedom and made several benefactions to the community, including 37,000 sesterces for statues in a temple of Hercules and 30,000 for road paving (*CIL* 11.5400).

TWO EXTREME INCIDENTS INVOLVING SLAVES

Pedanius Secundus, a city prefect, was murdered in A.D. 61 by one of his own slaves. The motive for the dastardly deed was variously ascribed to a disagreement over the terms of the slave's manumission or his rivalry with his master in a love triangle. **Pedanius Secundus**

The perpetrator was apprehended and convicted; according to Roman law and custom, not only he but the entire household of some 400 slaves were condemned to death. The prospect of an indiscriminate slaughter of so many innocent people provoked a riot in the city, and ultimately the Roman senate was compelled to deal with the matter. Some senators agreed with the popular sentiment, but many more favored upholding the letter of the law, no matter how bloodied it might become. One of these law-and-order types was a senator named Gaius Cassius. His arguments were as follows.

He began by stating that during previous senatorial debates on points

of law he generally had said nothing so as not to appear unduly pompous, even though he had a better grasp of the issues than did the debaters. But in this case he felt it was high time for him to be heard. He referred to the law passed a few years earlier (in 57) specifying punishment for all slaves in a household if even only one were found guilty of assassinating the master, let alone a city prefect. To exonerate the 400 would be tantamount to a declaration of justifiable homicide, he argued.

He claimed that the law of 57 was a sound and prudent piece of legislation, necessary for the protection of the established order. And if innocent people occasionally died as a result of applying the law, so be it. Who ever said that life was fair? With this sentiment, he concluded his remarks.

No senator opposed him, but an angry crowd with other ideas remained outside the senate house. Those in the assemblage were outraged that so many blameless people—including the very young and the very old—would be dragged to their deaths. In the end the executions were carried out, but not until the emperor Claudius called out contingents of soldiers to keep the mob from interfering (Tacitus *Annals* 14.42–45).

Publius Vedius Pollio, a first century B.C. Roman knight,

Publius Vedius Pollio had great wealth but also an unsavory cruel streak.

One day he was entertaining at his home no less a personage than Augustus himself. When one of the household slaves accidentally dropped a crystal goblet, causing it to shatter, the infuriated Pollio ordered the unfortunate slave to be tossed into a fish pond. This was not a severe penalty, except that the pond was stocked with voracious, man-eating lampreys.

The butter-fingered slave somehow slipped from the grasp of the executioners and fled to Augustus's feet, where he begged not to be set free but only to be executed in a more humane fashion. Disgusted by the cruelty of the proposed punishment, Augustus not only pardoned the slave on the spot but also ordered that all of Pollio's crystal dinnerware meet the pavement in the same way as the first cup and that the lamprey-infested pond be drained and filled in (Seneca *On Anger* 3.40).

LEGALLY FREE, BUT A SLAVE NONETHELESS

Cicero noted the following ways in which a free citizen may nonetheless, in some respects, be a slave:

1. If slavery can be defined or characterized by a person's lack of free will, then anyone who is saddled with a greedy, violent, or simple-minded nature could be considered a slave.

2. A man who is under the thumb of a woman, who is constantly at her beck and call, could hardly be called free. "She asks, he must give; she calls, he must come; she throws him out, he must go; she threatens, he must tremble." Cicero claims that this is one of the lowest forms of slavery, even if the "slave" is a member of Rome's noblest family.
3. People who devote inordinate amounts of time and effort to admiring and acquiring works of art could be considered slaves of the very things that they aspire to control through ownership.
4. Those who would do almost anything for money—no matter how demeaning—could be equated to slaves. The prime example: a legacy-hunter who continually flatters and waits upon a wealthy old widower or dowager in the hopes of a big payoff when the old person dies and the will is read.
5. An excessive ambition for political office, military command, or provincial governorship can turn a free man into a slave, if he is willing to sell out his honor to satisfy that ambition.
6. Even if a man has become a consul or a governor, and even if he has attained great wealth, and amassed a huge art collection, and married a compatible wife, and has not given in to a violent or avaricious nature, and has found satisfaction in all these fulfilled life goals, he could still be a slave, if in thrall to the fear caused by a guilty conscience.

Even the most powerful man in the Roman government would be a slave if reason and truth have failed to set him free.

(Cicero *Paradoxes of the Stoics* 33–41; tr. H. Rackham LCL)

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