

STUDENT HANDOUT #3: INTRODUCTION TO SLAVERY IN ROME

ROMAN EMPIRE



ABOVE: DETAILED DIGITAL RECONSTRUCTION OF ROME CIRCA 320 CE. (NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC)

The Power of Rome

In 509 BCE the Roman republic was founded. Over a period of four centuries, the Roman empire expanded until it conquered the entire Mediterranean basin. The unifying of the empire included the conquest of Etruscans, Greeks, Egyptians, Berbers, Gauls, and Syrians, among others. At its

height, around 100 CE, the empire covered a land area of approximately 1,698,400 square miles.

Its peak of prosperity during the Pax Romana, or Roman peace, extended well into the third century CE. For a long time, the city of Rome was the empire's most powerful city as well as

the capital. In terms of art and architecture, the city was not only the largest site of art production but for centuries it received a constant stream of the spoils of war from all over the Mediterranean region.



Slavery in the Roman Empire

In the third-century BCE, with the wars of conquest Rome became a large-scale slave society.

Many common citizens lost their farmland because they were away for extended periods fighting in the Roman army. Aristocrats then bought up this farmland with the profits they made from war. The problem was that they then needed a lot more workers to farm the land. Free citizens were needed by the army, plus they did not want to work for the aristocrats. Aristocrats chose to use slaves to work the farmland.

It is hard to know how many slaves there were in imperial Rome. Scholars using a variety of methods, have estimated that up to 35% of the total population in the first century CE were slaves. Compare that to estimates of slavery in ancient Egypt where the slave population never rose above 10%.

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War was a common source of slaves because the winner in a war could take some or all the enemy captive. As agriculture increased in the third century BCE in Rome, so did the demand for slaves. At this point, Romans began to enslave and sell many more of their war captives. Slaves were bought at slave markets, and could even be rented for periods of time.

The Romans did not depend only on war as a source of slaves. New slaves were also

obtained when the existing slaves had children, piracy, kidnapping, abandoned babies, and the sale of one's children or of oneself.

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Wealthy Romans owned hundreds or thousands of slaves, but even the average person could own a few. The Roman government even owned slaves and forced them to work in such jobs as: mining for precious metals; building roads and bridges; and as executioners.

Some masters made a lot of money from the labor of their slaves. The slaves who were profitable to their owners did jobs like farming, unskilled labor (i.e. digging, moving), and skilled labor (i.e. carpentry, weaving).

On the other hand, some masters owned slaves that did not actually make profit for the master. These masters only owned slaves to serve them in their homes and to show off their wealth. Some people were so dependent on their slaves that they did not even dress themselves---they had a slave do it for them. The slaves who were not profitable to their masters were:

- nannies
- housekeepers
- dancers
- cooks
- laundry-women
- personal/body slave (with the master at ALL times)

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The lives that slaves 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. Perhaps they also thought it was a good idea to take care of their investment. Sometimes slaves were put into trusted positions like accountants or advisors. However, most slaves led very difficult lives. Some owners abused their slaves by beating them, torturing them, and even killing them. It is known that many abused slaves reacted against their masters by running away. Runaway slaves, if caught, were whipped, branded with iron, or even killed. Some slaves killed their masters or started a rebellion, as in the case of Spartacus.

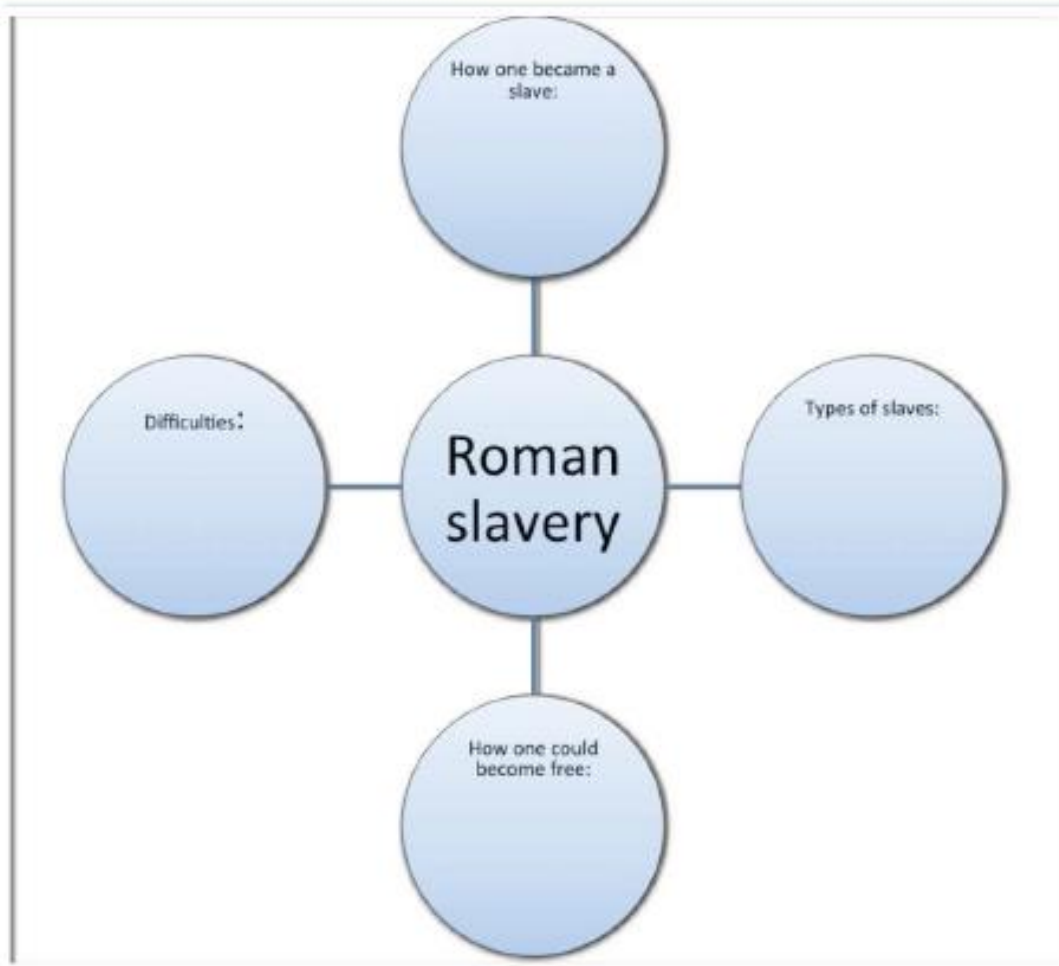
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There never was an attempt to legally abolish slavery in Rome. But it is known that Rome was unique among slave-owning societies in that slaves were regularly freed. When a slave was informally freed, he or she did not become Roman citizens and could not own property or wealth. When a slave was formally freed, he or she became a Roman citizen. However, ex-slaves could not hold public office and faced discrimination. In theory, a freedman or freedwoman's child had the same opportunities as other free-born citizens.

*Adapted from World History For Us All, Era 4
Closeup Teaching Unit 4.5.*

Putting it all together: Jot down one or two ideas in each circle below, based on the reading you just did.

When you are done, Turn & Talk to compare your thinking about the big picture of slavery in Rome, adding to your graphic organizer any important ideas you missed.



A DEFEATED BARBARIAN KNEELS BEFORE THE ROMAN EMPEROR. 2ND CENTURY CE. RELIEF ON SARCOPHAGUS IN ROME, VATICAN MUSEUM



ARTIFACTS

BRONZE TAG OF A RUNAWAY SLAVE. 4TH CENTURY, CE. IT READS, "HOLD ME, LEST I FLEE, AND RETURN ME TO MY MASTER VIVENTIVS ON THE ESTATE OF CALLISTUS."