

Student Handout 5 - Slavery in Rome: Primary Documents

1) Suetonius was a second-century-CE Roman writer. In this selection we learn about the abandonment of Gaius Melissus:

Gaius Melissus was born at Spoleto; he was free-born, but abandoned because of an argument between his parents. Because of the interest and efforts of the man who brought him up, he received a higher education and was presented as a gift to Maecenas to use as a grammarian. Because he realized that Maecenas liked him and accepted him as he would a friend, he retained the status of a slave even though his mother claimed his freedom on his behalf, and he preferred his present status to that due to his true birth. For this he was soon freed, and became friendly with Augustus; ...

Source: Suetonius, *Grammarian* 5, qtd. in Thomas Wiedemann, ed., *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), 118.

2) The *Theodosian Code* was a compilation of fourth- and fifth-century Roman laws, published in 438 CE. This selection is from a law passed by Constantine in the early fourth century CE: The August Emperor Constantine, to the Italians.

In accordance with the decisions of earlier emperors, any person who lawfully obtains a new-born child in any manner and intends to bring it up, shall have the right to hold it in a state of slavery; so that if after a series of years anyone asserts that it is free, or claims it as his own slave, that person must provide another similar slave or pay an equivalent price.

Source: The *Theodosian Code* 5.10.1, qtd. in Thomas Wiedemann, ed., *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), 118-9.

3) This contract on papyrus records the sale, in 142 CE, of ten-year-old Abaskantis:

Pamphilos, otherwise known as Kanopos, son of Aigyptos, from Alexandria, has purchased in the marketplace from Artemidoros, son of Aristokles, the slave girl Abaskantis, or by whatever other name she may be known, a ten-year-old Galatian, for the sum of 280 silver *denarii*. M. Aelius Gavianus stands surety for and guarantees the sale. The girl is healthy, in accordance with the Edict of the Aediles ... is free of liability in all respects, is prone neither to wandering nor running away, and is free of epilepsy ...

Source: *P. Turner* 22, in Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 2.

4) Galen was a second-century-CE doctor and philosopher. This selection shows some ways in which masters abused their slaves:

There are other people who don't just hit their slaves, but kick them and gouge out their eyes and strike them with a pen if they happen to be holding one. ... The story is told that the emperor Hadrian struck one of his attendants in the eye with a pen. When he realized that he had become blind in one eye as a result of this stroke, he called him to him and offered to let him ask him for any gift to make up for what he had suffered. When the victim remained silent, Hadrian again asked him to make a request of whatever he wanted. He declined to accept anything else, but asked for his eye back. ...

Source: Galen, *Diseases of the Mind* 4, qtd. in Thomas Wiedemann, ed., *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), 180-1.

5) This papyrus records a complaint filed before the authorities in Roman Egypt against an abusive husband and master:

He shut up his own slaves and mine with my foster-daughters and his agent and son for seven whole days in his cellars, having insulted his slaves and my slave Zoe and half killed them with blows, and he applied fire to my foster-daughters, having stripped them quite naked, which is contrary to the laws. ...

Source: *P. Oxy.* 903, in Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 171.

6) Suetonius was a second-century-CE Roman writer. This selection shows one way of acquiring a slave:

Staberius Eros was a Thracian bought at a public sale, and later set free because of his interest in literature. ...

Source: Suetonius, *Grammarians* 13, qtd. in Thomas Wiedemann, ed., *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), 127.

7) 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 slaves were property:

"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.

8) 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.

9) Cassius Dio was a second- and third-century-CE writer. He reports an excessive case of abuse in which the slave was saved by the emperor himself:

This same year Vedius Pollio died, a man who ... belonged to the **knights**, and had performed no brilliant deeds; but he had become very famous for his wealth and for his cruelty, so that he has even gained a place in history. Most of the things he did it would be wearisome to relate, but I may mention that he kept in reservoirs huge **lampreys** that had been trained to eat men, and he was accustomed to throw to them such of his slaves as he desired to put to death. Once, when he was entertaining [the emperor] Augustus, his cup-bearer broke a crystal goblet, and without regard for his guest, Pollio ordered the fellow to be thrown to the lampreys. Hereupon the slave fell on his knees before Augustus and supplicated him, and Augustus at first tried to persuade Pollio not to commit so monstrous a deed. Then, when Pollio paid no heed to him, the emperor said, "Bring all the rest of the drinking vessels which are of like sort or any others of value that you possess, in order that I may use them," and when they were brought, he ordered them to be broken. When Pollio saw this, he was vexed, of course; but since he was no longer angry over the one goblet, considering the great number of the others that were ruined, and, on the other hand, could not punish his servant for what Augustus also had done, he held his peace, though much against his will. ...

Source: Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 54.23, Vol. VI, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960), 339-43.

10) This contract written on papyrus in 139 CE records the sale of six-year-old Passia in the Roman province of Dacia, present-day Romania. The seller has to guarantee that she has not tried to flee:

Maximus Bato buys the girl named Passia, or whatever other name she has, more or less six years old ... She is now a healthy girl [and] is not a runaway or a wanderer ...

Source: *CIL III 3937 (FIRA:III no. 87)*, in Carl Bruns, ed., *Fontes Iuris Romani Antiqui* (Aalen, Germany: Scientia Antiquariat, 1958), 330; translated from Latin by the writer of this unit.

11) 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 that some slaves may have resorted to suicide as a means of resistance:

No valuation is put on slaves who have been drowned, any more than if they had sickened and died on board or thrown themselves into the sea. ... The damage arising when a slave wounds himself is not a deductible item, any more than if he had committed suicide or thrown himself over a cliff, ... He is deemed a bad slave who does something to remove himself from human affairs, for example, he strangles himself or drinks a poisonous potion, casts himself from a height, or does something else in the hope of resulting death; it is as though there is nothing that he would not venture against others, who dares to do it against himself.

Source: *The Digest of Justinian* 14.2.2.5, 15.1.9, and 21.1.23.3, Vols. I and II, trans. Alan Watson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 420 and 439 (Vol. I), 609 (Vol. II).

12) Plutarch was a second-century CE writer. In this selection we read about the beginning of Spartacus' rebellion.

The insurrection of the gladiators and their devastation of Italy, which is generally called the war of Spartacus, had its origin as follows. A certain Lentulus Batiatus had a school of gladiators at Capua, most of whom were Gauls and Thracians. Through no misconduct of theirs, but owing to the injustice of their owner, they were kept in close confinement and reserved for gladiatorial combats. Two hundred of these planned to make their escape, and when information was laid against them, those who got wind of it and succeeded in getting away, seventy-eight in number, seized cleavers and spits from some kitchen and sallied out. On the road they fell in with wagons conveying gladiators' weapons to another city; these they plundered and armed themselves. Then they took up a strong position and elected three leaders. The first of these was Spartacus, a Thracian ... They were also joined by many of the herdsmen and shepherds of the region, sturdy men and swift of foot, some of whom they armed fully, and employed others as scouts and light infantry. ... [After the rebels defeated the Romans in several battles, the senate] chose Crassus to conduct the war ...

Source: Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, Vol. III, *Crassus* 8-10, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1916), 337-43; first-century-CE bronze statuette: Getty Villa, # 96.AB.189, "© 2009. The J. Paul Getty Trust. All rights reserved,"<http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=35439>
