

SUMMARY

slavery

- Slaves could be bought from slave dealers (*venalicii*) and could be used to perform domestic duties such as cooking or cleaning, or to assist with running a business
- They would be displayed on a platform with a scroll (*titulus*) round their neck, listing their qualities
- Some slaves were owned by the state (*servi publici*) and helped with administration or maintaining public buildings
- Some slaves were forced to work in the mines or on farms
- Slaves were regarded as possessions and were sometimes very badly treated
- They could be granted their freedom (*manumissio*), often in their owners' wills, in which case they became freedmen

The life of a slave

It is difficult to imagine what life was like for an enslaved person in the Roman world. Almost all the evidence we have is written by enslavers and shows their point of view. The lives of slaves and the extent of the physical suffering they had to endure varied depending on their masters and the type of work the slaves did. Not all enslaved people worked in a household as Currax, Quartilla, and Lucrio did. In the city, some worked in industry or were public slaves. For example, crews of slaves owned by the state looked after the aqueducts and the water supply or worked in public buildings such as temples. In the countryside, many slaves were agricultural labourers. And in provinces such as Spain and Britain, slaves worked in the mines.



➤ The status of slaves

In Roman law, slaves were seen as property, to be bought and sold as people liked. They were not seen as being people. If someone became a slave (rather than being born a slave), he would have his old identity and even his old name taken away from him.

➤ The treatment of slaves

Slaves often faced physical abuse. Flogging (whipping) was very common and we also hear of branding, leg-breaking and eye-gouging. Sexual assault was another form of abuse. These punishments were given out either for a real offence or because the owner decided that a slave had committed an offence (whether he had or not).

Some slaves suffered terrible treatment, not because of any faults of their own, but because their master was very cruel. The threat of physical violence was very useful to a master: he felt that it would make his slaves more obedient and that he had greater control over them. The master had to feel as though he was in control because in many houses, there were far more slaves than citizens.

Another possible threat to a slave was that his master could sell his female companion and their children to a different owner, if he did not behave properly. This meant that all the members of the 'slave family' had to behave well for the safety of all the others.

However, not all masters were cruel: some were very kind to their slaves.



A slave's life

In imperial times there was a vast workforce of slaves. Their lives varied depending on the jobs they did and whom they worked for. Many slaves suffered terribly at the hands of cruel masters, but others lived well. Here are some of the jobs that slaves did.

On the farms

Why was working on a farm tougher than working in the city?

Wealthy Romans often had huge estates in the countryside outside Rome and in the provinces. Enslaved people managed and farmed these estates. Columella, in a handbook on agriculture, advised how to treat slaves on an estate:

All careful masters inspect the slaves in the farm prison, to check whether they are properly chained and whether the building is secure. I reward slaves who are hardworking and obedient. To female slaves who have had children I have given time off from work, and sometimes even freedom after they raised several children.

Answer the question
in a full sentence.

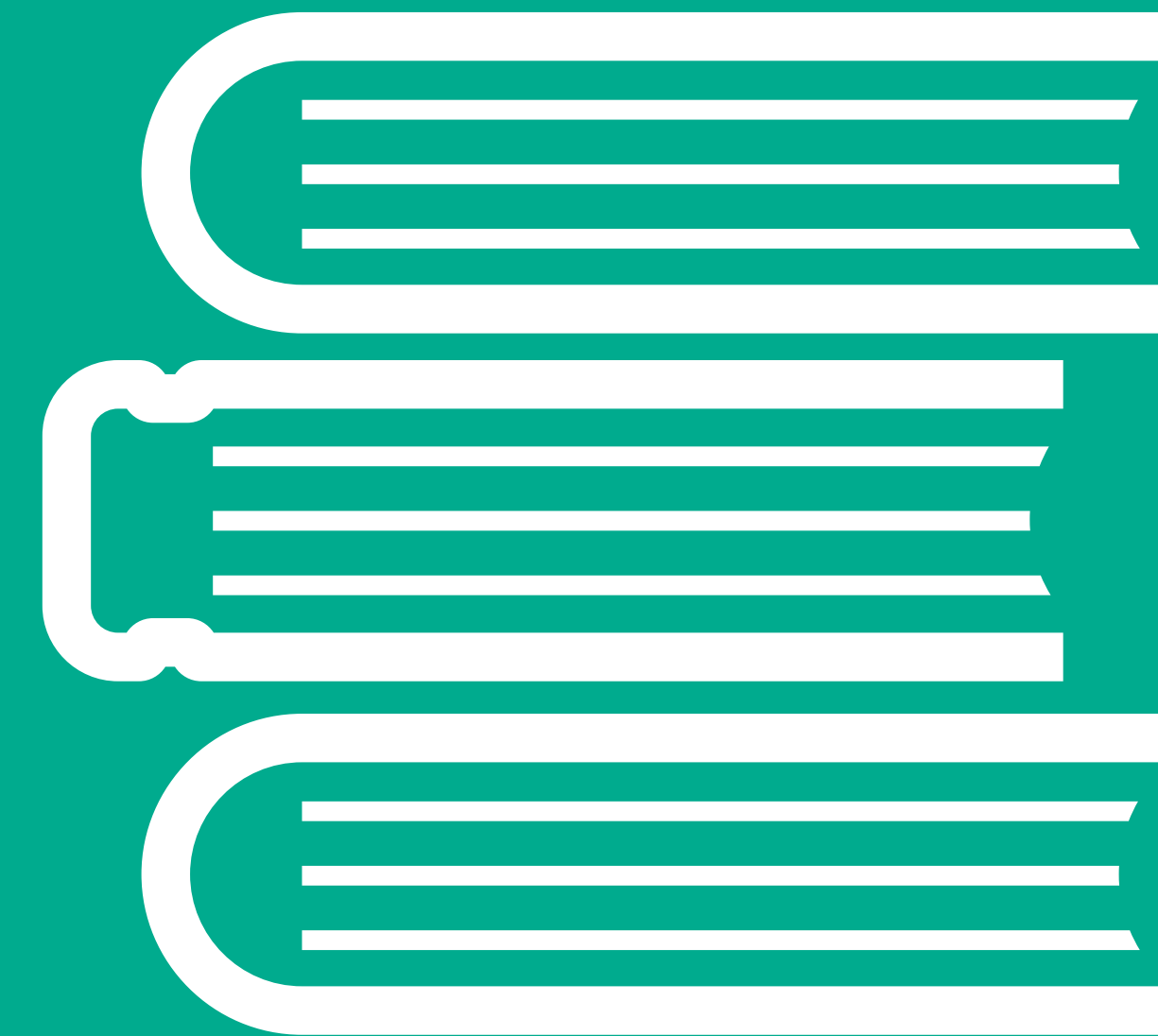


Slaves owned by good masters in the country often lived better than poor citizens in towns. They worked in pleasant surroundings, and could marry and have children. Many also ran small farms of their own.

An educated slave

The Romans admired the cultures of some of the nations they had conquered, especially the Greeks. Enslaved Greeks were often skilled workers, such as teachers, doctors, and librarians. In this letter, Pliny praises a slave and worries about his health:

Encolpius, my reader and a favourite of mine, is sick. How grim it will be for him and what a bitter blow to me if he is unable to study, since studying is his chief accomplishment. Who will read my books and take such pleasure in them as he does?



Greek slaves were thought to be the cleverest. They worked in richer Roman houses as doctors, tutors, artists and librarians.

Relief showing a slave working as a scribe



Which person is the master?

Which person is the slave?

How can you tell?

What sort of thing would the slave be scribing for the master?

Domestic slaves

Slaves working in a household were often the victims of brutality, as Romans believed they had the right to punish their slaves with violence. Some Romans were extremely cruel towards their slaves. Seneca records that Emperor Augustus was having dinner with Vedius Pollio when one of Vedius' slaves broke a crystal cup:

Vedius ordered the slave to be seized and executed in a particularly bizarre way, by being thrown as food to lampreys – he kept some huge ones in his fish pond. Why did he do this? Just to show off his wealth? It was an act of savagery.

At the other extreme, some Romans felt affection for their slaves. Martial wrote this poem expressing his grief for the death of the home-born slave (*vernula*, little verna) he called Erotion:

Erotion is still warm on her funeral pyre. The cruel law of the Fates has carried her off, my love, my joy, my delight, with her sixth year not yet complete.



Make lists under the following headings, stating in note form what tasks slaves would have to perform in the different places. Then underline in different colours the tasks which would have been performed by men and those by women.

Urban home

Rural farm

Answer this question in a full sentence.

What jobs might slaves have in the city, but outside the home?

Using your headphones, watch the video on slaves in the household on the website.

Enslaved people and freedmen/women in the household

Relief showing a slave caring for a child, gravestone, Cologne, third century AD



What does the picture on the left tell us about the types of jobs female slaves did in the household?