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Breaking Bondage: Manumission and the Absence of Abolitionist Ideology in Rome

The nefarious practice of slavery has infected every society throughout history. Despite the brutal and dehumanizing nature of slavery, the practice continues to persist to this day with an estimated 27 million slaves around the world.¹ No society exemplifies the perpetual continuation of slavery than that of the Romans. From Rome's inception with Romulus and Remus to its final destruction of Constantinople, around every corner and in every province of the empire, there existed slavery. Nowhere throughout Rome's millennia of existence would anyone seriously question the validity of slavery and advocate for the abolition of the practice. Rome experience three of the largest slave rebellions in world history happened, yet even the thousands of slaves rebelling did not advocate for the entire destruction of slavery, rather just the destruction of their own slavery.²

Rome propagated the practice of slavery through both positive and negative reinforcement designed to ensure the compliance of its enslaved population. Negative incentives like beatings, starvations, and imprisonment kept enslaved individuals within the confines of slavery and continued the practice on an individual level. Positive incentives, most notably manumission, showed enslaved people a legal way out of slavery and justified slavery on a societal level. The prevalence of manumission and the customs of the relatively large Roman freedpeople population created a culture within Rome that suppressed abolition ideology and perpetrated slavery for centuries.

¹ Theresa Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts in Antiquity* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2008), 4.

² Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 75.

Ideology of Abolition

Abolition as an ideology does not appear to be prevalent within the Roman world. No Roman text exists that explicitly urges abolition.³ Furthermore, most defenses of slavery as an institution likely were not defenses against critiques of the institution, but merely statements reflecting their perceptions of the “natural” world.⁴ This does not mean that no one advocated for the complete abolition of slavery, just that there is no existing evidence that they did so.

Aristotle deeply influenced not only Greek culture, but Roman culture as well. In his work *Politics*, he discusses the ideal state and various forms of domination and subjugation. In doing so, Aristotle upholds the institution of slavery, as some people are “by nature a slave...”⁵ Aristotle defends slavery against “others” who argue, “that for one man to be another man’s master is contrary to nature,” since there is no innate difference between a freedperson and an enslaved person, except that slave masters coerce enslaved people into slavery by force.⁶ These abolitionist “others” are such group mentioned in ancient texts.⁷ Later ancient authors did not necessarily agree with Aristotle’s arguments, but they agreed with his message: slaves were inferior beings to freed people.⁸

Roman viewpoints on slavery were mixed. Roman law contradicted the Aristotelian view by stating, “Slavery is... whereby someone is against nature made subject to the ownership of another.”⁹ Furthermore, many Roman laws restricted the punishments slave masters could inflict on their slaves by making things such as murdering a slave without just cause a capital offence.¹⁰

³ Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 79.

⁴ Peter Hunt, *Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 207.

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 19.

⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 15.

⁷ Hunt, *Roman Slavery*, 192.

⁸ Hunt, *Roman Slavery*, 197.

⁹ Florentinus, *Institutes*, book 9, trans. and ed. By Alan Watson *The Digest of Justinian, Volume I*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 86.

¹⁰ Hunt, *Roman Slavery*, 204.

Yet the Romans also had a popular proverb of, “all slaves are enemies,” which would later be modified by Seneca in the first century CE to, “slaves are not our enemies but we make them so.”¹¹ Roman law and Roman thinkers like Seneca both advocated for more temperate treatment of enslaved people, but did not advocate for the complete abolition of slavery. To them, slavery was unjust but necessary for society to function.

Nonetheless, Roman society had an idea of a golden age in which slavery did not exist. During the legendary founding of Rome, it was reported by Pompeius Trogus that Rome functioned without slavery or private property in general.¹² Furthermore, Plutarch wrote that in the mythical age of Saturn, all men lived as equals with slavery being nonexistent. Plutarch stated the early Roman king Numa paid homage to this ideal and allowed slaves to taste freedom during the feast of Saturn.¹³ Despite these ideals, Rome continued to practice slavery; however, many subsequent Roman slaves tasted freedom like during the feast of Saturn. Yet instead of only a day, these slaves gained their freedom permanently through manumission.

Manumission

Roman slaveholders frequently manumitted their slaves, allowing for them to live as a free citizen of Rome with near full citizenship rights. There were three main ways Roman masters would free their slaves: *manumissio vindicta*, *manunmissio censu*, and *manumissio testamento*. Slaves freed via *manumissio vindicta* would undergo a ceremonial service where their master would apply a *vindicta* (rod) to the enslaved person in front of a magistrate and his

¹¹ Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 77.

¹² Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 79.

¹³ Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 78-79.

licitor.¹⁴ In *manumissio censu*, an enslaved person would, with their master's consent, present themselves as a free citizen for the Roman census.¹⁵ Finally, a master could free a slave through *manumission testamento* when they die; within the master's will, they would specify which of their slaves would be freed, and who their new patron would be.¹⁶ *Manumissio testamento* was by far the most common method of manumission, as masters would benefit from the slave's services until their death and could demonstrate their magnanimity and kindheartedness in their funeral services.¹⁷

Masters also freed enslaved people via informal manumissions. Masters could informally manumit a slave through actions like declaring them free in front of a group of friends.¹⁸ Essentially, informal manumissions did not involve the government or legal documents and relied on the testimony of the master and other Roman citizens. Enslaved people freed informally would not have the same rights as one freed formally. A person manumitted informally would be legally identified as a "Latin freedmen," with restrictions placed on their ability to pass on inheritance to their children and being unable to run for public office.¹⁹ However, it appears that no one was particularly concerned with this distinction since these restrictions did not greatly impact freedpeople's lives. Public office was something that was only truly available to Roman elites and most ordinary Romans did not have enough wealth and resources to be truly hampered by inheritance laws.²⁰

¹⁴ Maureen Carroll, "'The mourning was very good.' Liberation and Liberality in Roman Funerary Commemoration," in *Memory and Mourning: Studies on Roman Death*, ed. By Valei M. Hope and Janet Huckinson (Oxford, UK: Oxbow Books, 2011). 127.

¹⁵ Carroll, "Liberation and Liberality," 127.

¹⁶ Carroll, "Liberation and Liberality," 127.

¹⁷ Carroll, "Liberty and Liberation," 127-128.

¹⁸ Robert C. Knapp, *Invisible Romans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). 173

¹⁹ Knapp, *Invisible Romans*, 174.

²⁰ Knapp, *Invisible Romans*, 174.

While statistics regarding the number of slaves, freedpeople, and the frequency of manumission are not completely accurate, they do tell us that Rome practiced manumission at a much higher rate than other slave societies.²¹ In fact in 2 BCE, slaves and *manumissio testamento* were so prevalent that Augustus enacted the *lex Fufia Caninia* which limited the number of slaves masters could free upon their deaths with varying acceptable thresholds. Masters with few slaves could potentially free all or half of them, but masters with many slaves could only manumit 1/5 of their slaves, and never more than 100.²² Furthermore, Augustus was concerned with servile blood contaminating Rome's freeborn population, so he instituted the *lex Aelia Sentia* in 4 BCE.²³ This law further restricted manumission by placing further requirements enslaved people need to meet in order to be freed; slaves must be "thirty years of age, quiritary ownership of the manumitter, liberation by a civil and statutory mode of manumission."²⁴ Basically, if a slave was not over 30, legally owned by their master, and/or manumitted in one of the three legally recognized manumission methods, they would not have full citizenship rights.

Most Roman manumissions happened within cities, as masters would manumit domestic workers who had a high degree of asymmetrical information; most enslaved agricultural workers would live and die within slavery, having little hope of being manumitted.²⁵ Roman slave masters depended upon enslaved labor to live their comfortable life; therefore, masters utilized a variety of carrots (rewards) and sticks (punishments) to ensure each slave was operating at maximum efficiency. Slaves working jobs like agricultural or construction work, which were low

²¹ Henrik Mouritsen, "Slavery and Manumission in the Roman Elite: A Study of the *Columaria* of the Volusii and the Statilii," in *Roman Slavery and Roman Material Culture*, ed. By Michele George (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000). 43.

²² W. W. Buckland, *A Text-Book of Roman Law From Augustus to Justinian*, 2nd ed. (London: Cambridge University Press 1932). 78.

²³ Carroll, "Liberty and Liberation," 128.

²⁴ Gaius, *Institutiones*, trans. W. M. Gordon and O.F. Robinson (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1988). 25-27.

²⁵ John Bodel, "Death and Social Death in Ancient Rome," in *On Human Bondage: After Slavery and Social Death*, ed. by John Bodel and Walter Scheidel (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 89.

skilled and easy for masters to supervise, were subjected to a greater amount of threats and corporal punishments, as masters could easily verify which slaves were unproductive and coerce them into working with whipping or the threat of whipping.²⁶

Conversely, masters relied more on carrots for jobs that had a high degree of skill and little master oversight like banking or manufacturing, as masters had a minimal information on their slaves' productiveness.²⁷ Generally, more complex tasks require more complex incentives to achieve results since the amount of work is greater; therefore, masters rely on rewards such as nicer living quarters and manumission to incentivize good work rather than harmful punishments which might destroy their economic investments.²⁸ Punishing a slave hurts the master in addition to the enslaved person, as a slave's productivity is lowered when punished, with harsher punishments impacting slave's productivity more.²⁹ Therefore, punishing a slave working in a job with a high degree of asymmetrical information (which normally generate high profits for the master), has a much greater impact on a master's bottom line. When masters have limited information on which slaves to punish for bad work, they risk persecuting innocent slaves, further harming their economic capabilities.³⁰

Slave labor and manumission, like all other aspects of Roman society, was divided by gender and was deeply misogynistic. Roman society viewed male work as more prestigious than female work, since women were viewed as weak and unable to participate in outdoor labor. Instead, women were responsible for domestic tasks like maintaining a household, textile production, and food service.³¹ However, the key economic value for female slaves in the

²⁶ Giuseppe Dari-Mattiacci, "Slavery and Information", *The Journal of Economic History*, 73, no. 2, (2013): 86.

²⁷ Dari-Mattiacci, "Slavery and Information" 86-7, 99.

²⁸ Dari-Mattiacci, "Slavery and Information" 86.

²⁹ Dari-Mattiacci, "Slavery and Information," 89-90.

³⁰ Dari-Mattiacci, "Slavery and Information," 86.

³¹ Matthew J. Perry, *Gender, Manumission, and the Roman Freedwoman*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 44-46.

principate period was their reproductive potential. Enslaved women generated new slaves in a time in which the traditional ways to acquire new slaves, conquest and territorial expansion, stagnated.³²

Since enslaved women did not have jobs with high asymmetrical information that would incentivize manumission, female slaves generally were freed due to their high relationship with their master.³³ The primary way female slaves would gain favor with their male master, and thus be manumitted, was through sexual relationships.³⁴ Many Roman slaveholders would free the enslaved women they coerced into sex either as a reward for the sexual relationship or as a means to legally marry them.³⁵ For instance, Lucius Antistius Sarculo freed his former slave, Antistia Plutia in order to marry her. Sarculo was a master of the local Alban college of Salian priests and had his wife's likeness depicted upon their shared tombstone.³⁶ This showcases that marrying a freedwoman was not looked down on in Roman society, as men of notoriety did so, and proudly displayed that on their tombstone.

Enslaved women could also buy their own freedom if they were employed in high income jobs such as prostitution or entertainment. An enslaved prostitute servicing wealthy clients may save the necessary funds to buy her way out of slavery, and an enslaved actress may gain enough notoriety to facilitate manumission.³⁷ Furthermore, some masters may reward female slaves who reproduced frequently with manumission. Columella, an elite Roman author describing best agricultural practices, wrote, "For to a mother of three sons exemption from work

³² Perry, *Gender, Manumission*, 44, 49-50.

³³ Perry, *Gender, Manumission*, 54.

³⁴ Perry, *Gender, Manumission*, 51, 54.

³⁵ Perry, *Gender, Manumission*, 54-55.

³⁶ The British Museum "relief; funerary equipment 1858,0819.21".

³⁷ Perry, *Gender, Manumission*, 56-57.

was granted; to a mother of more her freedom as well.”³⁸ Masters also promised to manumit the enslaved wives of their male slaves as a reward for good work.³⁹ A master’s decision to manumit was not only an economic decision, but a gendered one as well. Masters would generally manumit enslaved men as a reward for performing their job well by generating high profits and would manumit enslaved women for performing their role as women well.

Roman reasons for manumission echo throughout history, with many later slave societies also manumitting slaves as a reward for working jobs with high asymmetrical information and reproduction capabilities. Like Rome, the vast majority of manumissions that occurred in many Atlantic slave societies (such as Suriname, Barbados, Maryland, Louisiana, El Salvador, Argentina, and many more) happened in urban areas.⁴⁰ Further, in Louisiana from 1725-1820, slaves with a large asymmetry of information had “a sixfold increase in the probability of manumission.”⁴¹ Similarly, male masters during Sabará, Brazil’s 1710-1759 mining boom frequently manumitted enslaved women much more than their male counterparts for two key reasons. First, population pressures stemming from the low percentage of single, free women in the area resulted in men freeing enslaved women for the purposes of marriage.⁴² Second, the gendered dynamics of labor within Sabará allowed for women to buy their freedom at a higher percentage, since enslaved women were assigned domestic work and most importantly marketing work. Women ran Sabará’s markets, allowing for many enslaved women opportunities to earn money to buy themselves out of slavery.⁴³

³⁸ Columella, *On Agriculture, Volume I: Books 1-4*, trans. Harrison Boyd Ash, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 95.

³⁹ Perry, *Gender, Manumission*, 58.

⁴⁰ Dari-Mattiacci, “Slavery and Information,” 100-103.

⁴¹ Dari-Mattiacci, “Slavery and Information,” 103.

⁴² Kathleen J. Higgins, “Gender and the Manumission of Slaves in Colonial Brazil: the Prospects for Freedom in Sabará, Minas Geras, 1710-1809,” *Slavery & Abolition* vol. 18, no.2 (1997). 7-8.

⁴³ Higgins, “Gender and the Manumission,” 5-6, 8-10.

Atlantic slave societies do not reflect the attitudes of Romans engaged in slavery, rather they serve as a useful comparison which showcases that the reward and punishment systems of Roman slavery were not unique to their culture. Societies engaged in slavery utilized manumission as a means to pacify and ensure compliance within their slave population. However, what sets Roman manumission practices apart is their frequency. Atlantic slave societies did not practice manumission as frequently as the Romans did.⁴⁴ Regularity of manumission advances an ideology of slavery as a temporary position in life, rather than an innate, permanent characteristic of a person.

Both Roman slaves and slave holders viewed slavery as a temporary condition, rather than a permanent one, where slaves progressed along a natural path reminiscent to dying, death, and the afterlife.⁴⁵ When slavers captured a free person and forced them into slavery, this is seen as a form of social death. As a person is being enslaved, they are going through a process of natal alienation, since they are removed from their previous family, friends, home, and culture.⁴⁶ This newly enslaved person can never go back to their previous life, as the process of slavery effectively kills who they were before being enslaved. The process of enslavement is the dying stage; the newly enslaved person progresses to the death stage when they meet their new master and begin to work as a slave.⁴⁷ While slaves reduced the effects of natal alienation and social death through a shared slave community, the lack of freedom and total domination of the master created the theoretical sense of total, social death.⁴⁸ Finally, when a master manumits an enslaved person, they are, in effect, transitioning them into the divine afterlife.⁴⁹ during the legendary

⁴⁴ Dari-Mattiacci, "Slavery and Information," 100.

⁴⁵ Bodel, "Death and Social Death," 89, 96.

⁴⁶ Bodel, "Death and Social Death," 81-82.

⁴⁷ Bodel, "Death and Social Death," 90-91.

⁴⁸ Bodel, "Death and Social Death," 82-83.

⁴⁹ Bodel, "Death and Social Death," 96.

founding of Rome, it was reported by Pompeius Trogus that Rome functioned without slavery or private property in general.⁵⁰

Regularity of manumission allows for this ideology to form. In race-based slave societies like Virginia or Louisiana, any person of color was assumed to be a slave unless their slave papers passed a rigorous document check.⁵¹ These slave societies asserted that “black” was synonymous with “slave,” and as a result was able to assert stricter manumission laws.⁵² Conversely, Cuba, despite practicing race-based slavery, was unable to implement an ideology of innate racial slavery due to its substantial population of free people of color. Since its inception as a colony, Cuba allowed slaves to purchase their own freedom through a legal process called *coartación*, allowing many people of color to gain freedom.⁵³ Free people of color legitimized their position within Cuban society through military and civil service.⁵⁴ The presence of freedpeople on the island effectively stopped racist arguments to implement slavery as a permanent condition and ensure the continuation of manumission.⁵⁵

Romans did not tie racial characteristics to slavery, and conceptualized slavery as something anyone could be apart of. Romans enslaved people in many different ways, such as capturing people in war, enslaving abandoned children, or kidnapping innocent travelers; in fact, some Romans even sold their children or themselves into slavery to pay off debts.⁵⁶ As a result, there were no somatic or racial characteristics that denoted enslaved status. Most Roman slaves look, dressed, and acted like everyone else, which made it almost impossible to identify slaves in

⁵⁰ Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 79.

⁵¹ Ariela Gross and Alejandro de la Fuente, “Slaves, Free Blacks, and Race in the Legal Regimes of Cuba, Louisiana, and Virginia: A Comparison,” *North Carolina Law Review*, vol. 91, iss. 5 (2013), 1740-1741, 1748.

⁵² Gross and de la Fuente, “Slaves, Free Blacks,” 1730, 1741.

⁵³ Gross and de la Fuente, “Slaves, Free Blacks,” 1726.

⁵⁴ Gross and de la Fuente, “Slaves, Free Blacks,” 1736.

⁵⁵ Gross and de la Fuente, “Slaves, Free Blacks,” 1750.

⁵⁶ Knapp, *Invisible Romans*, 130-132.

public.⁵⁷ The high population of freedpeople, and the lack of physical characteristics denoting enslaved status, both created and enforced an ideology that slavery was a transitive status, not a permanent one. By making slavery theoretically temporary, enslavers and the enslaved can more easily rationalize slavery as necessary, allow the practice to continue, and in effect suppressing abolitionist ideology.

Freedpeople's Culture

The process of manumission demonstrated to the enslaved population that they had a legal avenue out of slavery, even if it was improbable. The process of getting your freedom and rights restored dramatically affects the formerly enslaved person. Freedpeople have a unique perspective within Roman society, as they lived through the dehumanizing experience of slavery, and now are able to engage with the world with near total freedom. This generates a unique culture which demonstrates how the institution of slavery can continue to function despite the large number of freed slaves.

After overcoming their social death and ascending into their divine afterlife, freedpeople erected monuments to ensure their legacy would live on. Freedpeople, by far, created the most funerary monuments out of any group. Three quarters of the funerary monuments in Rome are estimated to belong to freed people. Similarly in Osia, 75% percent of funerary monuments were erected by freedpeople. In Canosa, it was 73%. Pompeii had a lower percentage of freedpeople's funerary monuments than other cities, but over 50% of monuments were created by freedpeople.⁵⁸ Contemporary elite Romans noticed the frequency in which freedpeople erected

⁵⁷ Knapp, *Invisible Romans*, 129.

⁵⁸ Henrik Mouritsen, "Freedmen and Decurions: Epitaphs and Social History in Imperial Italy," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 95 (2005). 38-39.

monuments, with Seneca Petronius using the fictional character Trimalchio to pejoratively poke fun at this practice.

Petronius dedicates much of the *Satyricon* to describing an extravagant dinner the wealthy freedmen Trimalchio put on for his guests, as a way to denigrate the nouveau riche class of freedpeople. When he is first introduced, Trimalchio is said to have an expensive “water clock in his dining room, and a trumpeter who’s always in uniform, so that he constantly knows how much of his life he’s lost.”⁵⁹ This caricature of a freedmen infected later historians and scholars with what Dr. Lauren Hackworth Petersen calls “Trimalchio Vision.”⁶⁰ Petersen explains that some historians utilize Trimalchio and his ostentatious displays of wealth to explain designs of actual freedpeople’s funerary monuments, especially larger monuments like that of Eurysaces.⁶¹ Petersen’s analysis of the story of Trimalchio is correct; however, that does not mean the *Satyricon* is not of value. Roman elites interacted often with freedpeople, and as such freedpeople’s culture greatly impacted and shaped elite culture.⁶² Therefore, it is a useful exercise to compare the fictional Trimalchio’s motivations for erecting his extravagant monument with epigraphs left behind by actual freedpeople.

Towards the end of Trimalchio’s dinner, the freedman decides to impress his guests by publicly reading his will. Interspersed between phrases describing ornate statutes and sweet-smelling perfumes, Trimalchio specifies the tomb’s main inscription should write as follows. “‘Here rests Gaius Pompeius Trimalchio who belonged to the household of Maecenas... Though he could have been a member of every guild in Rome, he refused. God-fearing, brave, faithful,

⁵⁹ Seneca Petronius *Satyricon. Apocolocyntosis*, ed. and trans. by Gareth Schmeling, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020). 111.

⁶⁰ Lauren Hackworth Petersen, “The Baker, His Tomb, His Wife, and Her Breadbasket: The Monument of Eurysaces in Rome,” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 85, no. 2 (2003), 238.

⁶¹ Petersen, “The Baker,” 238-239.

⁶² Rose MacLean, *Freed Slaves and Roman Imperial Culture: Social Integration and the Transformation of Values*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

he grew from a small beginning...”⁶³ The beginning of Trimalchio’s epitaph explains that he belonged to Maecenas’ household as a slave. Inscriptions in which a freedperson clearly identifies their patron is the only definitive way to identify which monuments belong to freedpeople.⁶⁴

The regularity in which these identifications occur indicate that this was a traditional practice expected by freedpeople, but the language of these epitaphs can indicate good relations between freedpeople and their patrons.⁶⁵ For example, one epitaph in Rome reads, “To the Spirits of Quintus Fabius Theogonus [patron]... Fabia Nobilis [Freedperson] set this up to the very best and most thoughtful patron, well deserving of her greatest loyalty, and to herself.”⁶⁶ Social custom dictated that freedpeople merely indicate whom their patron was, and were not forced to write such a glowing review of their patron as Fabia Nobilis did. Good relations between freedpeople and their former masters indicates that for at least some freedpeople, they did not hold outward resentment toward their master for their treatment as a slave. In fact, especially wealthy freedpeople, as personified by Trimalchio, might have a closer connection to the elite slaveholding masters than their former enslaved kin.

Trimalchio, like many Roman freedmen, owned slaves themselves and continued to practice slavery despite being subject to the same terrible system. Trimalchio exclaims at the end of the dinner party that, “... even slaves are men and have drunk the same milk as everyone else, even if an evil fate has overwhelmed them. But if things go my way, they’ll soon taste the water of freedom. In fact, I’m setting them all free in my will.”⁶⁷ Trimalchio claims that enslaved

⁶³ Petronius *Satyricon* 213-215.

⁶⁴ Mourtsen, “Freedmen and Decurions,” 40-42.

⁶⁵ Knapp, *Invisible Romans*, 184.

⁶⁶ CIL 6.9673, trans. Robert Knapp in *Invisible Romans*, 184.

⁶⁷ Petronius, *Satyricon*, 213.

people are still human and thus do not deserve the evil fate of slavery that befalls them.

Therefore, in all his benevolence, Trimalchio sets all his slaves free. Petronius likely included this piece of dialogue to show the hypocrisy he believes to be inherent in freedpeople: they know slavery is evil and are glad for their own freedom, but still continue to inflict that status onto other people.

This characterization of freedpeople is certainly true for some of the wealthier Roman free and enslaved populations. Freedmen participated in business on a much larger scale than any other class in Roman society, as slave masters would invest resources to train certain slaves to perform business tasks. As mentioned earlier, these tasks would usually require a high degree of asymmetrical information, so masters would promise manumission as a reward for performing well. Once manumitted, these freedmen would gain the financial backing of their former master (now current patron) and would be able to leverage their business knowledge to generate wealth.⁶⁸ These freedmen would use their wealth to hire slaves to assist them in domestic work or help manage their business.⁶⁹ Furthermore, even some slaves were able to amass the wealth and clout needed to purchase their own slaves. *Servus vicarius*, or slave-owned slaves, were fairly numerous within Roman society, particularly within the slaves owned by the imperial family.⁷⁰ Slavery was so ubiquitous in Rome that even enslaved people who themselves faced the dehumanizing nature of slavery on a daily basis, practiced slavery.

However, many freedmen bought slaves not for their labor, but due to their personal connection to them. While enslaved, slaves formed close knit communities, often marrying other

⁶⁸ Knapp, *Invisible Romans*, 176.

⁶⁹ P. R. C. Weaver, "Vicarius and Vicarianus in the Familia Caesaris," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 54, Parts 1 and 2 (1964), 118.

⁷⁰ Weaver, "Vicarius," 117.

slaves and starting families with them.⁷¹ When freed, many freedmen would purchase their loved ones from their former master (if that was not apart of the manumission contract itself). For example, Flavia Aphrodisia erected a funerary monument for Titus Flavius Euschemon, a freedman of Augustus, but more importantly, “her patron and husband.”⁷² In contrast, many freedpeople expressed great disappointment when they were unable to purchase a family member. One parent wrote on a funerary epigraph for their enslaved child, “You never enjoyed freedom... Now death everlasting gave the only freedom he will know.”⁷³ Whether it was due to death or their patron’s unwillingness to sell, freedpeople were deeply distraught when they were unable to reunite with their child. Most freedpeople continued to feel tied to their enslaved kin after manumission and would not wish to enslave their own. It is certainly untrue that every freedperson acted as hypocritically as Trimalchio.

Even if they did not own their own slaves, many freedpeople continued to interact with enslaved people in their daily life by simply living at their patron’s house. Slaves living in their master’s house would often not have assigned living quarters and would sleep on cots in hallways or under stairs. They would then stash their cots and blankets into storage during the day.⁷⁴ Upon manumission, a freedperson was legally the child of their former master and could continue to live in their patron’s residence if they chose to. They might have done this simply for job security, as enslaved people with specialized, high asymmetrical information jobs, likely could only work within elite households. Many also did so in order to keep up relationships with their friends and that were still in bondage.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Knapp, *Invisible Romans*, 159-160.

⁷² CIL 6.8604 = ILS 1519, trans by. Jane F. Gardner and Thomas Wiedemann in *The Roman Household: A Sourcebook*, (London: Routledge, 1991). 162.

⁷³ CIL 8.25006, trans by Robert Knapp in *Invisible Romans*, 189-190.

⁷⁴ Knapp, *Invisible Romans*, 135.

⁷⁵ Hunt, *Roman Slavery*, 128.

Both work and religious activities facilitated continued relationships between freedmen and slaves. For instance, an imperial Freedmen in charge of the mint in Rome wrote on a dedication to Hercules Augustus the work roster of all the freedmen and slaves working under him.⁷⁶ This epigraph lists the names of 30 freedmen (denoted by LIB) and 29 enslaved workers (denoted by SER). Likewise, religious acts allowed many freedmen and enslaved individuals to encounter people associated with other masters/patrons. CIL 10.1582 details “Quintus Numisius Legio, freedman of Quintus; Lucius Safinius, freedman of Lucius; Hilarus and Sodalis, slaves of Gaius Modius Cimber; Aeschinus, slave of Octavius Marcus” all worked as cult officers to “set up an altar to the Augustan Lares.”⁷⁷ These men came from different owners/patrons, but still worked together to dedicate an altar to the cult of Caesar.

In fact, many free Romans would go so far as to publicly protest mass punishment of enslaved people. In 61 CE, a group of slaves murdered their master, the Roman city prefect Pedanius Secundus. When they were questioned by the authorities, none of them confessed to the crime nor confessed who did.⁷⁸ The Senate decreed that the slaves would all be executed according to old custom, with Senator Gaius Cassius arguing, “To our ancestors the temper of their slaves was always suspect...” and that in order to ensure the safety of the ruling class, they must make an example out of these rebellious slaves.⁷⁹ In response, the free populace of Rome protested and threatened to violently resist the execution. However, the emperor Nero marched a detachment of soldiers to forcibly break up the crowd and ensure the execution continued.⁸⁰ This

⁷⁶ CIL 6.44, trans by. Ohio State University’s Center for Epigraphical and Paleographical Studies Knowledge bank.

⁷⁷ CIL 10.1582 = ILS 3611, trans by Robert Knapp in *Invisible Romans*, 186-187.

⁷⁸ Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, trans. John Jackson in Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 175.

⁷⁹ Tacitus, *Annals*, 175-179.

⁸⁰ Tacitus, *Annals*, 179-181.

story showcases that the freed population, even free born Romans who were never subjected to slavery, empathized with enslaved citizens and advocated for their protection.

The prevalence of freedpeople within Rome indirectly helped suppress abolitionist ideology from forming. Freedmen were deeply affected by their experience as a slave, as evidenced by the frequency of their funerary monuments to show they overcame bondage. Further, freedpeople that owned slaves directly contributed to the continuation of slavery, as they too subjugated people to enslavement. Even freedpeople that did not own slaves indirectly enforced slavery, as the continued interaction between enslaved individuals and freedpeople showed slaves a way out of their desperate situation. Living and working in close proximity to people who legally escaped subjugation, instilled hope within enslaved people's minds that they too can break out of their bondage.

Overview of Slave Revolts

Still, some slaves viewed violent resistance as the only method available to them to escape the torment and torture slavery subjected them to. Like all slave societies, Rome experienced numerous slave revolts both big and small. Yet Rome is unique, as three of the largest slave revolts in world history all happened within the Roman Republic.⁸¹ Roman slave wars exploited periods of deep instability within Rome society yet were still all brutally crushed by the Roman military. While the bias of Roman historians colors our viewpoint of these events, some truth about the motivations of the slaves can still be parsed out.

After the Third Punic War, Rome incorporated the fertile territory of Sicily as its first province. In order to farm this rich land, Rome imported thousands of slaves, but the slavers of

⁸¹ Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 8.

the island did not have enough resources for the slaves to live on.⁸² In 141 BCE, many enslaved people throughout the island rebelled against their masters due to poor working conditions and overly harsh punishments; the Sicilian revolt inspired many other slaves across the empire to also rebel creating a large period of instability.⁸³ The number of slaves in revolt quickly grew as the war progressed from a few hundred to potentially 200,000; however, many different ancient historians reported remarkably different figures, so the true size of the slave army is unknowable.⁸⁴ An enslaved man named Eunus proclaimed himself king over the army and employed another slave named Cleon as his premier general.⁸⁵ Together, they defeated many Roman armies, until Rupilius, the Roman commander, brutally besieged and recaptured the cities of Tauromenium and Enna, which instilled such fear in the beleaguered slave army that they killed themselves. Four of Eunus' servants betrayed him and left him to rot in prison.⁸⁶ With Eunus dead, Rupilius aptly ferreted out the remaining rebellious slaves and reasserted control over the island.⁸⁷

In between the First and Second Sicilian great slave revolts, there were numerous smaller revolts in smaller which were quickly destroyed.⁸⁸ However, 104 BCE, the consul Gaius Marius needed more troops to fight the Cimbri, a Germanic tribe. As a result, he and the Senate passed a law which stated all enslaved Bithynian men were to be freed to join the war effort. Licinius Nerva, the governor of Sicily, attempted to manumit over 800 enslaved men, but the Sicilian elites bribed Nerva to withdraw the order in fear of losing their slaves. When Nerva rescinded the

⁸² Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*, trans. Francis R. Walton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 57.

⁸³ Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 10-11.

⁸⁴ Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 38-40.

⁸⁵ Diodorus, *Library of History*, 67.

⁸⁶ Diodorus, *Library of History*, 67-71.

⁸⁷ Diodorus, *Library of History*, 71.

⁸⁸ Diodorus, *Library of History*, 143-149.

promise of manumission, enslaved men everywhere on the island revolted. Nerva was unable to put down the revolt, as the slaves won decisive victory after decisive victory under the leadership of a slave called Tryphon and his general Athenion.⁸⁹ However, the slave's victory streak would not last. Roman commander Lucullus successfully whittled down the enslaved forces, even killing Tryphon. Yet, even with Tryphon dead, the slaves continued to rebel, leading the consul Marius to recall Lucullus and replace him with Manius Aquillius who would defeat Athenion in single combat to end the slave revolt.⁹⁰ In order to prevent another slave revolt from happening again, the Romans prohibited slaves from ever owning weapons, even enslaved herders who needed a weapon to protect their flocks.⁹¹ Yet, this measure was not enough, and 30 years later, the slaves would revolt yet again.

In 73 BCE, a gladiator school unjustly imprisoned a small group of gladiators, and 78 men armed themselves with kitchen implements and escaped. They elected a man named Spartacus to lead them, and under his command they travelled up and down the length of Italy, easily defeating all the Roman armies that came in their way. Spartacus' army took advantage of a period of instability within Rome, as in the preceding 30 years, Rome was embroiled in both civil and foreign wars.⁹² Eventually, the Senate assigned Crassus and Pompey (who would go on to form the Triumvirate with Julius Caesar, leading to Caesar's eventual dictatorship) to quell the rebellion. Eventually, Crassus defeated Spartacus' army and to deter any future dissent, Crassus crucified 6000 slaves across the 125 mile long Appian Way; every 35 yards, a Roman traveler would view the decaying corpse of a once rebellious slave.⁹³ Yet for more than 10 years after

⁸⁹ Diodorus, *Library of History*, 151-167.

⁹⁰ Diodorus, *Library of History*, 169-175.

⁹¹ Hunt, *Roman Slavery*, 165.

⁹² Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 21-22.

⁹³ Hunt, *Roman Slavery*, 165.

Crassus and Pompey defeated Spartacus, there were still enslaved rebels fighting for their freedom.⁹⁴

Roman historians describing these revolts fell into two biased camps: those who blamed the slaves and those who blamed the masters. In Sallust's description of the Spartacus revolt, he cited the slaves' servile nature for the brutality they employed as they waged war. He highlights atrocities committed by the slaves like indiscriminate rape, plundering, and murder.⁹⁵ Elite slave owners like Sallust would blame the slaves not only to excuse their own brutal actions against enslaved people, but to also enforce the system of slavery itself. By depicting enslaved rebels as brutal savages, Sallust is in turn justifying their subjugation. He highlights the atrocities they commit to show that when slaves reach their freedom, it means the destruction of society as a whole. Therefore, to avoid societal collapse, slavery must continue.

On the other hand, historians like Diodorus and Plutarch are more sympathetic to slaves and almost excuse their behavior. Diodorus's wrote his histories so that his readers could learn from the mistakes of the past.⁹⁶ His descriptions of the Sicilian Revolts reflect this aim, as he laid the blame for the revolt squarely on the shoulders of slaveholders and their poor treatment of the enslaved.⁹⁷ Likewise Plutarch wrote that Spartacus and his comrades were falsely imprisoned due to their owners' unjust behavior.⁹⁸ Both authors were Greek subjects to Rome and throughout their work, they argued that the Roman Republic deserved its downfall due to its arrogance.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 22.

⁹⁵ Hunt, *Roman Slavery*, 162-163.

⁹⁶ Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 81.

⁹⁷ Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 82.

⁹⁸ Hunt, *Roman Slavery*, 163.

⁹⁹ Hunt, *Roman Slavery*, 163.

Historians like Appian mirror this ideology. Appian details the fall of the Roman Republic in his *Civil Wars*, and one of his main focuses is slaves. Appian cites the growth of the enslaved population and their influence as reasons that led to the collapse of the Roman Republic. He ties slaves to key historical figures which enabled the downfall of the Republic. For instance, slaves supported Sulla, not Marius, in a brutal civil war that saw Sulla proclaim himself dictator through bigger army diplomacy. Sulla then freed 10,000 slaves to ensure popular support for his regime.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Appian explains the Senate broke tradition and made Pompey sole consul to protect themselves and their interests from rampaging slaves.¹⁰¹ Whether ancient historians argued that the responsibility of the revolt belonged to the slaves or the slaveholders differs, but they agree that mass slave revolts represent the fall of society.

Unfortunately, the true motivations of the slaves revolting in Sicily and under Spartacus will remain a mystery. The only reports we have of their motivations come from biased authors writing from an elite perspective, and their ultimate goals would be stopped by the Romans before they could be fully achieved. Whether Eunus or Spartacus would have abolished slavery throughout their territory or simply supplant themselves as slave masters and their former enslavers as slaves remains unknown. We do know that for at least these slaves, they saw no way out of their enslavement. The slaves of the second Sicilian revolt witness the promise of manumission ripped away from them by their slave masters. Likewise, Spartacus and his comrades were falsely imprisoned, resulting in what little freedom of movement they possessed as slaves being stripped away even further. The possibility of manumission and legally achieving the “afterlife” from their social death was deprived from them. The only opportunity for these slaves to achieve freedom and identity was to fight for it themselves.

¹⁰⁰ Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 106-107.

¹⁰¹Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts*, 106.

Conclusion

Slavery in the Roman world was as ubiquitous as life itself. While Roman philosophers could conceive of a world without slavery, they knew it would not be their world. Likewise, enslaved people envisioned a world without slavery, and fought for their own freedom, only to be quashed by the Roman military. Manumission provided an avenue for enslaved people to legally overcome the dehumanizing system of slavery. Romans conceptualized manumission as a mechanism for slaves to be reborn as freedpeople. These freedpeople drew on the knowledge that they themselves were freed, allowing them to buy into the system of slavery. In turn, freedpeople worked, lived, and prayed side by side with enslaved individuals, showcasing to them that if the freedpeople could be manumitted, so could they. Abolition ideology was not prevalent in Rome in part due to the ideology of manumission showcasing that even though slavery was a dehumanizing, tortuous existence, there was a promise of a divine ascension to freedom.

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