

Notes on Quiz #8

Women in Antiquity • Fall 2022

1. What kinds of work did female slaves perform? In what way were these roles different from those played by freedwomen and working women?

While male slaves might end up in any kind of labor, including roles that made use of their skills and education (Greek captives included scholars, historians, poets, accountants, and men with other valuable skills), the variety of jobs held by female slaves was more limited. Since female education and training was limited, possible skillsets involves household skills or being a midwife, actress, or prostitute.

Female slaves could work as spinners, weavers, clothesmakers, menders, wetnurses, child nurses, kitchen help, and general domestics. With training, female slaves in Rome might also work as housekeepers, clerks, secretaries, ladies' maids, clothes folders, hairdressers, hair cutters, mirror holders, masseuses, readers, entertainers, midwives, and infirmity attendants. Female domestics also served as part of a lady's entourage. In general they were better off than very poor free women, since domestics were cared for and their appearance and upkeep were important.

Female slaves might also have a sexual function. As Pomeroy pointed out, the master had access to all his slave women. Some slaves worked as prostitutes in brothels, inns, or baths; others were actresses, which might involve sexual performances.

Freedwomen comprised a large part of the Roman working class, serving as shopkeepers or artisans or continuing in domestic service. Most commonly they pursued the same work they had trained for as slaves, very often in their former owner's household. Most freedwomen and working women were involved in textiles, but others were tavern waitresses.

2. How did marriage work for slaves? What status did the children have?

Slaves could not enter into formal marriage, but they could have an informal cohabitation, which had no legal validity but had the social value of marriage among slaves. Masters encouraged family life among slaves in order to improve morale and to bring about slave children that he might keep or sell. A male slave could use his savings to purchase his wife.

A slave could marry a free person with the master's permission. If the slave belonged to an important household (e.g., the emperor's), the marriage might involve a raise in status for both, though a law was passed in the late Republic discouraging such acts by reducing the free person's status to freedman.

Children born of cohabitation took the status of the mother. If the mother was a slave, the child was a slave. If only the mother was freed, the child was freeborn but illegitimate; if both parents were freed, the child was legitimate and freeborn.

EC1. A female Roman slave could achieve manumission (release from slavery) through all of the following EXCEPT:

- (b) Fasting for 30 days during the festival of the Good Goddess

EC2. Discuss the specific provisions of the Twelve Tables that relate to gender roles. What do you think these provisions tell us about how the Romans saw gender?

There are a number of provisions in the Twelve Tables that touch on both male and female gender roles. The rules for manus vs. common-law marriage, based on the idea title vs. usufruct in property, are established. The paterfamilias's guardianship of men ends when they become eligible for military service; the guardianship of women does not. Sons can be sold into slavery across the river up to three times, but daughters cannot. The Tables provide for the exposure of deformed children, and prohibit inheritance by children born 10 months after the father's death. There are rules about the exhibition of grief at public funerals. A late provision states that patricians and plebeians cannot marry (but this barrier was soon rescinded).