

## VARIOUS

# Slavery in the Roman Republic

Source: Plautus, *Pseudolus*, Act. I, Sc. 2; Cato the Elder, *Agriculture*, chs. 56-59; Plautus, *Menaechmi*, Act V, Sc. 4.; Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, viii-xi. From: William Stearns Davis, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: *Rome and the West*, pp. 90-97. *The Conduct and Treatment of Slaves*.

### The Conduct and Treatment of Slaves: Plautus: *Pseudolus* Act. I, Sc. 2.

*A Roman playwright, Plautus, writing about the time of the end of the Second Punic War (201 BCE), gives this picture of an inconsiderate master, and the kind of treatment his slaves were likely to get. Very probably conditions grew worse rather than better for the average slave household, for at least two centuries. As the Romans grew in wealth and the show of culture they did not grow in humanity.*

[Ballio, a captious slave owner, is giving orders to his servants.]

Ballio: Get out, come, out with you, you rascals; kept at a loss, and bought at a loss. Not one of you dreams minding your business, or being a bit of use to me, unless I carry on thus! [He strikes his whip around on all of them.] Never did I see men more like asses than you! Why, your ribs are hardened with the stripes. If one flogs you, he hurts himself the most: [Aside.] Regular whipping posts are they all, and all they do is to pilfer, purloin, prig, plunder, drink, eat, and abscond! Oh! they look decent enough; but they're cheats in their conduct.

[Addressing the slaves again.] Now, unless you're all attention, unless you get that sloth and drowsiness out of your breasts and eyes, I'll have your sides so thoroughly marked with thongs that you'll outvie those Campanian coverlets in color, or a regular Alexandrian tapestry, purple-broidered all over with beasts. Yesterday I gave each of you his special job, but you're so worthless, neglectful, stubborn, that I must remind you with a good basting. So you think, I guess, you'll get the better of this whip and of me—by your stout hides! Zounds! But your hides won't prove harder than my good cowhide. [He flourishes it.] Look at this, please! Give heed to this! [He flogs one slave] Well? Does it hurt? ... Now stand all of you here, you race born to be thrashed! Turn your ears this way! Give heed to what I say. You, fellow! that's got the pitcher, fetch the water. Take care the kettle's full instanter. You who's got the ax, look after chopping the wood.

Slave: But this ax's edge is blunted.

Ballio: Well; be it so! And so are you blunted with stripes, but is that any reason why you shouldn't work for me? I order that you clean up the house. You know your business; hurry indoors. [Exit first slave]. Now you [to another slave] smooth the couches. Clean the plate and put in proper order. Take care that when I'm back from the Forum I find things done—all swept, sprinkled, scoured, smoothed, cleaned and set in order. Today's my birthday. You should all set to and celebrate it.

Take care—do you hear—to lay the salted bacon, the brawn, the collared neck, and the udder in water. I want to entertain some fine gentlemen in real style, to give the idea that I'm rich. Get indoors, and get these things ready, so there's no delay when the cook comes. I'm going to market to buy what fish is to be had. Boy, you go ahead [to a special valet], I've got to take care that no one cuts off my purse.

### How to Manage Farm Slaves: Cato the Elder: *Agriculture* 56-59

*Cato the Elder passed as the incarnation of all worldly wisdom among Romans of the second century BCE. The precepts here given were undoubtedly put into effect on his own farms. During the early Republic, when the estates were small, there seems to have been a fair amount of kindly treatment awarded the slaves; as the farms grew larger the whole policy of the masters, by becoming more impersonal, became more brutal. Cato does not advocate deliberate cruelty—he would simply treat the slaves according to cold regulations, like so many expensive cattle.*

Country slaves ought to receive in the winter, when they are at work, four modii<sup>1</sup> of grain; and four modii and a half during the summer. The superintendent, the housekeeper, the watchman, and the shepherd get three modii; slaves in chains four pounds of bread in winter and five pounds from the time when the work of training the vines ought to begin until the figs have ripened.

Wine for the slaves. After the vintage let them drink from the sour wine for three months. The fourth month let them have a hemina [about half a pint] per day or two congii and a half [over seven quarts] per month. During the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth months let them have a sextarius [about a pint] per day or five congii per month. Finally, in the ninth, tenth, and the eleventh months, let them have three hemina [three-fourths of a quart] per day, or an amphora [about six gallons] per month. On the Saturnalia and on Compitalia each man should have a congius [something under three quarts].

To feed the slaves. Let the olives that drop of themselves be kept so far as possible. Keep too those harvested olives that do not yield much oil, and husband them, for they last a long time. When the olives have been consumed, give out the brine and vinegar. You should distribute to everyone a sextarius of oil per month. A modius of salt apiece is enough for a year.

As for clothes, give out a tunic of three feet and a half, and a cloak once in two years. When you give a tunic or cloak take

<sup>1</sup> One modius equals about a quarter bushel.

back the old ones, to make cassocks out of. Once in two years, good shoes should be given.

Winter wine for the slaves. Put in a wooden cask ten parts of must (non-fermented wine) and two parts of very pungent vinegar, and add two parts of boiled wine and fifty of sweet water. With a paddle mix all these thrice per day for five days in succession. Add one forty-eighth of seawater drawn some time earlier. Place the lid on the cask and let it ferment for ten days. This wine will last until the solstice. If any remains after that time, it will make very sharp excellent vinegar.

**How a Faithful Slave should Act:**  
**Plautus: *Menaechmi* Act V, Sc. 4**

*What a slave had to do in order to save himself from constant cuffs and stripes is here set forth somewhat humorously, but with a serious undercurrent of grim truth. There was no high motive for a slave to behave himself—simply a fear of cruel punishment if he did not. There might be a hope of ultimate freedom, but that depended entirely on the caprice of the master.*

Messenio, a slave, soliloquizes: Well, this is the proof of a good servant: he must take care of his master's business, look after it, arrange it, think about it; when his master is away, take care of it diligently just as much as if his master were present, or be even more careful. He must take more care of his back than his appetite, his legs than his stomach—if he's got a good heart. Just let him think what those good-for-nothings get from their masters—lazy, worthless fellows that they are. Stripes, fetters, the mill, weariness, hunger, bitter cold—fine pay for idleness. That's what I'm mightily afraid of. Surely, then, it's much better to be good than to be bad. I don't mind tongue lashings, but I do hate real floggings. I'd rather eat meal somebody else grinds, than eat what I grind myself. So I just obey what my master bids me; and I execute orders carefully and diligently. My obedience, I think, is such as is most for the profit of my back. And it surely does pay! Let others do just as they think it worth while. I'll be just where I ought to be. If I stick to that, I'll avoid blunders; and I needn't be much afraid if I'm ready for my master, come what may. The time's pretty close when for this service of mine, my master will give his reward.

**The Last Great Slave Revolt:**  
**Plutarch: *Life of Crassus* 8-11**

*In 73 BCE the "Speaking Tools"—as the Romans called their slaves, especially those upon the great estates of Southern Italy—burst loose in a terrible insurrection, the third such in fifty years; to quell the rebellion taxed the whole power of the government. Despite the sympathy one must have for these slaves and their gallant leader, their success would have been a calamity to civilization. An army of such brutalized wretches could only destroy; they could never have erected a firm and tolerable government. After these outbreaks and the havoc and terror spread by them, the Romans out of sheer fear seem to have begun to treat their slaves less harshly than before.*

The insurrection of the gladiators and the devastation of Italy, commonly called the war of Spartacus, began upon this occasion. One Lentulus Batiates trained up a great many gladiators in Capua, most of them Gauls and Thracians, who, not for any fault by them committed, but simply through the cruelty of their master, were kept in confinement for the object of fighting one with another. Two hundred of these formed a plan to escape, but their plot being discovered, those of them who became aware of it in time to anticipate their master, being seventy-eight, got out of a cook's shop chopping knives and spits, and made their way through the city, and lighting by the way on several wagons that were carrying gladiators' arms to another city, they seized upon them and armed themselves. And seizing upon a defensible place, they chose three captains, of whom Spartacus was chief, a Thracian of one of the nomad tribes, and a man not only of high spirit and valiant, but in understanding, also, and in gentleness, superior to his condition, and more of a Grecian than the people of his country usually are.

First, then, routing those that came out of Capua against them, and thus procuring a quantity of proper soldiers' arms, they gladly threw away their own as barbarous and dishonorable.<sup>2</sup> After many successful skirmishes with Varinus, the praetor himself, in one of which Spartacus took his lictors and his own horse, he began to be great and terrible; but wisely considering that he was not to expect to match the force of the empire, he marched his army towards the Alps, intending, when he had passed them, that every man should go to his own home, some to Thrace, some to Gaul. But they, grown confident in their numbers, and puffed up with their success, would give no obedience to him, but went about and ravaged Italy; so that now the Senate was not only moved at the indignity and baseness, both of the enemy and of the insurrection, but, looking upon it as a matter of alarm and of dangerous consequence, sent out both the consuls to it, as to a great and difficult enterprise. The consul Gellius, falling suddenly upon a party of Germans, who through contempt and confidence had straggled from Spartacus, cut them all to pieces. But when Lentulus with a large army besieged Spartacus, he sallied out upon him, and, joining battle, defeated his chief officers, and

<sup>2</sup> Two praetors who were sent against them with small armies were defeated, while a third general's army was routed and he himself slain.

captured all his baggage. As he made towards the Alps, Cassius, who was praetor of that part of Gaul that lies about the Po, met him with ten thousand men, but being overcome in battle, he had much ado to escape himself, with the loss of a great many of his men....<sup>3</sup>

But Spartacus retreated through Lucania toward the sea, and in the straits, meeting with some Cilician pirate ships, he had thoughts of attempting Sicily, where, by landing two thousand men, he hoped to kindle anew the war of the slaves, which was but lately extinguished, and seemed to need but a little fuel to set it burning again. But after the pirates had struck a bargain with him, and received his earnest, they deceived him and sailed away. He thereupon retired again from the sea, and established his army in the peninsula of Rhegium....<sup>4</sup>

Spartacus, after this discomfiture, retired to the mountains of Petelia, but Quinctius, one of Crassus's officers, and Scrofula, the quaestor, pursued and overtook him. But when Spartacus rallied and faced them, they were utterly routed and fled, and had much ado to carry off their quaestor, who was wounded. This success, however, ruined Spartacus, because it encouraged the slaves, who now disdained any longer to avoid fighting, or to obey their officers, but as they were upon their

march, they came to them with their swords in their hand, and compelled them to lead them back again through Lucania, against the Romans, the very thing which Crassus was eager for. For news was already brought that Pompey<sup>5</sup> was at hand; and people began to talk openly that the honor of this war was reserved for him, who would come and at once oblige the enemy to fight and put an end to the war.

Crassus, therefore, eager to fight a decisive battle, encamped very near the enemy, and began to make lines of circumvallation; but the slaves made a sally, and attacked the pioneers. As fresh supplies came in on either side, Spartacus, seeing there was no avoiding it, set all his army in array, and when his horse was brought him, he drew out his sword and killed him, saying, if he got the day, he should have a great many better horses of the enemies, and if he lost it, he should have no need of this. And so making directly towards Crassus himself, through the midst of arms and wounds, he missed him, but slew two centurions that fell upon him together. At last, being deserted by those that were about him, he himself stood his ground, and, surrounded by the enemy, bravely defending himself, was cut to pieces.

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<sup>3</sup> The Senate in disgust now sent Crassus against the rebels. Spartacus, however, defeated Mummius, Crassus's lieutenant, and the general had to restore discipline among the demoralized Romans by executing fifty who had begun the flight; later he advanced again.

<sup>4</sup> Here Crassus tried to blockade him. Spartacus escaped with part of his army to Lucania, but some of Spartacus' followers mutinied, and left him. This division of malcontents was soon destroyed by Crassus.

<sup>5</sup> Crassus' rival for military glory.