

CHAPTER 8

SPARTACUS THE REBEL

SLAVERY IN ANCIENT ROME

66 SLAVE COLLAR
FROM ROME,
DIODORUS, CATO,
AND PLUTARCH

Spartacus was born into a world of comfort and freedom. His father may even have been a nobleman. And yet Spartacus died a Roman slave.

Ancient writers give us only a sketchy outline of Spartacus's early years, but he was probably born in Thrace on the eastern fringe of Rome's huge empire. He served in the Roman army for a while but then deserted. Now instead of fighting to defend Rome, he became a rebel and a robber.

When the Romans captured him, they made him a slave and put him on the auction block. Whoever offered the most money would own him. Like all slaves in ancient

The actor Kirk Douglas fights the Romans in the title role of the 1960 movie Spartacus.



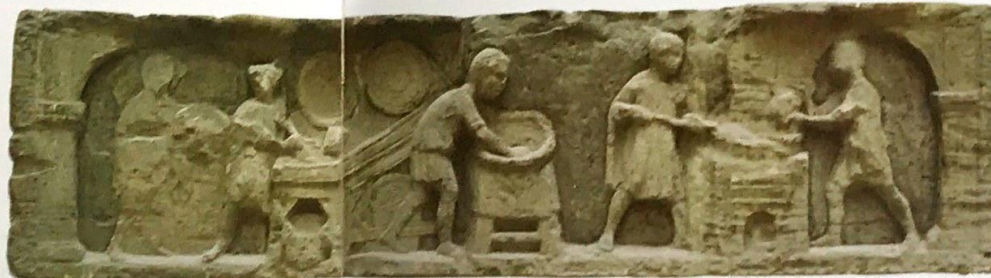
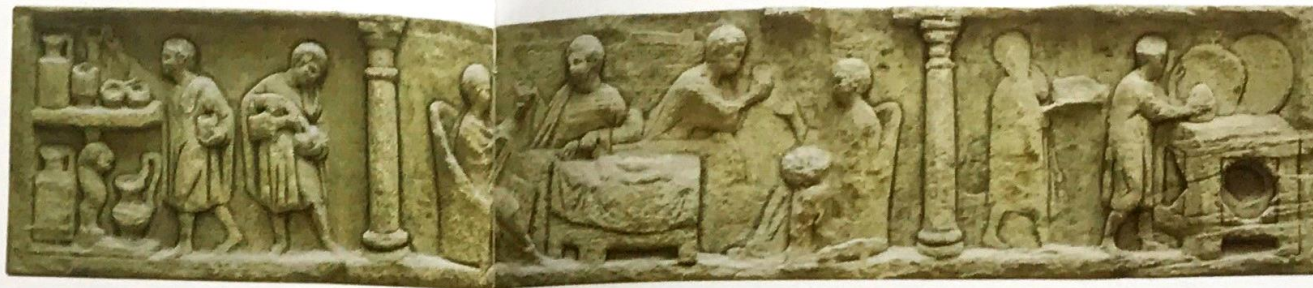
Rome, Spartacus could be bought and sold as easily as a pottery bowl or a bundle of grain. If he got into trouble or tried to escape, he might be forced to wear a metal band around his neck.

On one of these collars, now in a museum, are the words: "I have run away. Capture me. When you have returned me to my master . . . you will get a reward." He might have had a brand on his face, made with a sizzling-hot iron. He could not own land or vote. He could not marry legally, and his children would be born into slavery. He could not choose his work; his master would make that decision.

Many foreign slaves, mostly prisoners of war, did the backbreaking work of building roads and aqueducts. Another unpleasant job was cleaning the public toilets and baths. But one of the worst places to work was in the silver mines of Spain. This was often the fate of slaves who had been convicted of crimes. The Greek historian Diodorus describes the lives of these men:

Their bodies are worn down from working in the mine shafts both day and night. Many die because of the terrible treatment they suffer. They are given no rest or break from their work but are forced by the whiplashes of their overseers to endure the most dreadful hardships. . . . They often pray more for death than for life.

In the early years of the Roman Republic, most slaves were native Italians. These were people who fell into slavery because they had money troubles and couldn't pay their debts. Later, as Rome gradually conquered the Mediterranean world, the number of slaves grew, especially during and



Slave collar from Rome, 4th century 30 CE

Diodorus, *The History of the World*, 30 BCE

This coffin shows a Roman family at dinner while slaves cook and wash the pots in the kitchen below. Kitchens were in the slave quarters to keep the noise and mess away from the family's living rooms.

right after the wars between Rome and Carthage. By the first century BCE, when Spartacus lived, Rome had millions of foreign slaves.

Most of the slaves who were brought into Italy served their masters as farm laborers. Their owners thought of them as things, not human beings. Cato, writing in the second century BCE, advised his son that a "master should sell any old oxen, cattle or sheep that are not good enough, . . . an old cart or old tools, an old slave or a sick slave." For Cato, a slave was no different from a farm animal or a plow—something to be used, then thrown out when it became old or broken down.

Many slaves rebelled against this brutal treatment. The first huge, terrifying rebellion began in Sicily in 135 BCE when 200,000 slaves took up arms against their owners. And Spartacus led the last slave revolt in 73 BCE.

Plutarch describes Spartacus as having "great courage and great physical strength. He was very intelligent . . . more than one would expect of a slave." Because he was so strong, Spartacus was bought by a school that trained gladiators in Capua, south of Rome. The gladiators faced

Cato, *On Agriculture*, 160 BCE

Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, 110 CE

SLAVES IN NORTH AMERICA

The first slaves in North America were brought to Virginia in 1619 to work in the fields and homes of wealthy farmers.

Although many were trusted by their masters, they weren't often given the chance to work as teachers, craftsmen, or artists as Roman slaves so frequently were.

Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833, but was not abolished in the United States until the end of the Civil War in 1865. And there are still slaves in some parts of the world today.

possible injury—sometimes death—every time they entered the arena to fight. But to the Roman audiences, these battles were “games.” And if a gladiator was injured, his suffering was just part of the entertainment.

But Spartacus didn't intend to live—or die—as a slave. He secretly organized 200 gladiators in the school and together they planned a daring escape. At the last moment, the managers of the school discovered the plot and captured more than half of the men. But, according to Plutarch, Spartacus and about 70 men escaped with knives and skewers that they stole from the school's kitchen.

As the rebels slipped through the darkened streets of Capua, they got a lucky break: they happened upon a cart full of weapons, intended for use in the gladiatorial games. The men helped themselves and left the city, armed with swords and daggers. Their first hiding place was in the top of Mt. Vesuvius, an inactive volcano.

When the news broke about the slaves' escape, Rome sent 3,000 foot soldiers to surround the slaves and starve them out. Spartacus and his men were outnumbered, but not outwitted. While the Romans guarded the road, the rebels cut some thick vines they found growing near the mouth of the volcano. They twisted the vines into ropes, which they used to climb down the mountain. Surprising their enemies, they seized the Roman camp, and the defeated Romans fled.

As word of this astonishing victory spread, thousands of farm slaves left their masters and joined Spartacus. The rebel band grew to nearly 70,000 men who roamed the countryside and broke into slaves' barracks. The rebels freed thousands of men and armed them for battle against Rome and their former masters.

The Senate thought it would be easy to defeat Spartacus, but Spartacus's men defeated the Roman forces again and again. Then the senators appointed Crassus, one of Rome's top generals, as commander in chief. Crassus sent a lieutenant named Mummius against the ex-slaves. The rebels crushed Mummius so completely that he lost his soldiers, his tents, and equipment—even his horse. The soldiers who survived

the battle saved their own lives by handing over their weapons to the enemy.

Crassus was furious. He armed the men again. Then he divided 500 of the soldiers into 50 groups of 10. In each group, the men drew straws, and one man was chosen. Plutarch says that Crassus ordered the death of these fifty men, that they be executed “with a variety of appalling and terrible methods, performed before the eyes of the whole army, gathered to watch.” Crassus finally led Rome to victory, but only after a long, fierce struggle. Most of the rebels were killed. According to Plutarch, Spartacus refused to give up and fought savagely, even after the last of his men had deserted him. In the end, he died a soldier's death—with his sword in his hand.

The Romans **crucified** 6,000 rebels and left them hanging on wooden crosses all along the Appian Way—a road that led to Rome. Their rotting bodies served as a horrible warning to rebellious slaves.

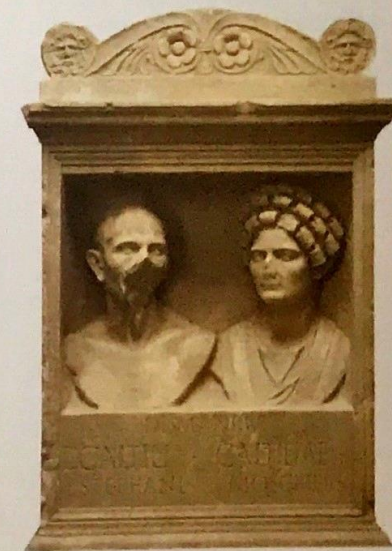
Although Rome was cruel to its slaves, not all of them suffered as terribly as the gladiators and mine workers did. Many captured people were skilled craftsmen who were allowed to continue their work as potters, artists, or metal workers. Those who worked in the homes of wealthy aristocrats were also treated fairly well—compared to less fortunate slaves. Household slaves were usually well fed and clothed. And their jobs were much safer and more pleasant. They worked as nannies, cooks, and seamstresses. Well-educated Greek slaves could become household secretaries or tutors for their masters' children.

Although slaves might become friendly with the master and his family, they still had to take orders. And if they committed crimes, they could be tortured, burned alive, crucified, or sent to fight wild beasts in the arena while the audience watched and cheered. The upper classes never suffered these violent punishments. Aristocratic criminals were killed with the sword—a quicker, less agonizing way to die.

Slaves were sometimes able to gain their freedom legally. Freedmen, as these lucky ones were called, were usually educated people or household workers. Freed slaves, both

“Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, 110 CE

crux + figere = “cross” + “to fix or attach”
Crucifixion was a cruel, but common, method of execution reserved for slaves or non-citizens. The victim's hands and feet were nailed to a cross of wood, and they were left to hang until they died.



Lucius Caltilius and his wife, Caltilia, look out proudly from their funeral altar. They were freed slaves who “hit the jackpot” in business, as shown by Caltilia's very fancy hairdo indicates.



Two strong slaves balance pottery jars on their shoulders and pour wine into cups held by other slaves. The cup bearers then serve the wine to their masters.

men and women, could legally marry—though a former slave could not marry a senator. They were even allowed to own property. Although freedmen could live anywhere they liked, many stayed with their former masters to work for pay. They still needed to make a living.

Even though slaves had few possessions of their own, Roman masters often gave gifts of money to hard workers. A slave could keep this gift, called a *peculium*, as his private property. Valuable slaves who were careful with their savings might eventually tuck away enough to buy their freedom. This system motivated slaves to work hard. It helped the masters too because, by the time a slave had saved enough money, he or she was probably growing old, and the master could use the money to buy another, younger, slave.

Many freedmen worked almost as hard as the slaves did. Most remained desperately poor. But at least as freedmen, they were servants who were paid for their work. And they could not be taken from their families and sold as Spartacus was.