

[from *Plautus & Roman Slavery*, Roberta Stewart]

Emergence of large-scale slavery dated by 3 developments:-

1. **5th century**: The definition of the slave as a person recorded in the Twelve Tables (The Twelve Tables was a set of laws inscribed on 12 bronze tablets created in ancient Rome in 451 and 450 BCE. They were the beginning of a new approach to laws where they would be passed by government and written down so that all citizens might be treated equally before them). According to these laws, the slave was a member of the hierarchically structured community and counted as a person of lesser status, usually enslaved for debt.
2. **4th century (326 or 313 B.C.)**: Abolition of debt slavery by a 'lex Poetelia' (a law passed in Ancient Rome that abolished the contractual form of Nexum, or debt bondage).
3. **Between 287 B.C. (3rd century) and the early 2nd century B.C.**: The definition of the slave as 'chattel' (a **chattel slave** is an enslaved person who is owned forever and whose children and children's children are automatically enslaved. Chattel slaves are individuals treated as complete property, to be bought and sold), appears in the 'lex Aquilia' (The lex Aquilia was a Roman law which provided compensation to the owners of property injured by someone's fault, set in the 3rd century BC, in the Roman Republic).

The slave as chattel:-

- This law distinguished between the citizen and slave, and institutionalized the objectification of a human being as fungible property (fungible: a good or a commodity which is essentially interchangeable).
- Correlations of the Roman conquest and enslavements in Italy and the Punic Wars (264-146 B.C. between Rome and Carthage), with a demand for labour caused by the freeing of the person of the citizens by the 'lex Poetelia'. Other late 4th century Roman wars with Etruscan, Samnite and Greek peoples, and the carefully recorded enslavements marked a change in the character of Roman militarism.

- Roman army and Roman militarism fed the private needs of slave-holders for slaves. Therefore, increased wealth of the elite.
- The increasing use of slaves facilitated the re-employment of citizen soldiers as necessary labour force for Mediterranean conquest. Therefore increasing wealth of these Roman citizen soldiers.

Transition from a society with slaves TO a slave society:-

- Slave societies displayed a radical commodification of the human body. The slave was deracinated and so, without kin or natal community. The slave was the object of sale and did not own his/her own body or labour. The slave lived at the complete discretion of the master.
- In a slave society, slavery facilitated the economy and defined the social, political and economic structures of the society-
 - Development of Roman Republican political and military structure because Romans were enslaving significant numbers of diverse populations.
 - 4th century political practice illustrates the increasing importance of slavery, where a manumission law of 357 B.C. imposed a tax on manumission (the act of freeing slaves by their owners).
 - Victorious consuls paraded captives among the spoils of battle in their triumphal processions. They made public celebration of slaves as the reward of successful Roman militarism. Enslaved captives were sold on the battlefield. This suggests that there was a careful interest in human property.
 - Significance of the 'lex Aquilia' was that it defined the economic interests of private slave-holders as a public interest, and harnessed state institutions, assemblies and courts to protect those interests.
- Traditional historical documents typically write slaves out of history:
 - While Roman law denies slaves familial ties, privilege of military service and political participation, it also institutionalized the disregard of the slave as an agent or subject capable of acting in his/her own right.
 - Even when slaves are documented, the representations are mediated by the extreme power relations of slavery (the master and slave relation). The slave-holder creates and promotes representations of the

slave and slave behaviour that legitimated his domination by the master. The idea of the master's 'honourable' capacity to exercise authority, and the slave's ability to act morally as a subject only when obedient to the masters, are fundamental to the success of the Roman slave system.

- A different way of looking (From Hegel- *Phenomenology of Spirit*): The intersubjective contest of master and slave. The slave's struggle for survival- The actions of the slave are a form of self-assertion within a contest for domination and survival. Often slaves learned to silence themselves in order to survive. Therefore, the slave is able to control in some measure what the master observes about the slave (therefore challenging the objectification of the slave by the master).

How we might study Plautus:

- Both as a text written from the master's perspective, as well as, the slave's resistance and self-assertion. The question of the slave's survival, physically and psychically, is paramount here.
- Plautus's public dramas are the earliest documented representations of chattel slavery in Rome as a dynamic interaction of master and slave.
- Role and character of the clever slave (the 'servus callidus' or cunning slave) as a Plautine development.
- Plautine comedies also represent a piece of discourse that formed, supported and perpetuated the political, social and legal institutions of the slave society.
- Overall, the plays represent the interactions within slave society and the systems of slavery in such a society, as a daily experience. Therefore they allow a deeper understanding of Roman slave experiences.