Ancient Greek Slaves at a Glance

Ancient Greek civilization both depended and thrived on slavery. During the Classical period (480-323 BCE) in Athens, slaves represented one-fourth to one-third of the population, or an estimated 80,000-100,000 people. Slaves were procured in several ways, but most commonly they were won in battles against the Persians or other groups, where they were considered part of the spoils of war. They were also bought and sold in a trade market that originated in Asia Minor (Turkey), Scythia (an area that now includes Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and southern Russia), and Africa.

Chattel slaves, those owned by individuals, served in the house and on the farm, in the mines and factories, and in brothels and craft workshops. A citizen of average means owned at least one slave and the elite could own up to 1,000, many of whom were then rented out to work in the mines or factories. A citizen's status was based greatly on the number of slaves owned.
In addition to chattel slaves, there were sacred slaves who served at temples, public slaves that were owned by the polis and served in the police force or in the agora, and helots, most notably the Spartan helots, who produced most of the food for Spartan families and military.

- **Time Period Dates:** ca. 1575-31 BCE (Mycenaean through Hellenistic Periods)
- **Time Period Name:** Ancient Greece
- **Geographic Location:** The ancient Greek civilization began on the islands and mainland of present-day Greece. By the end of the Hellenistic Period, it had expanded north to the Black Sea, south to the coast of North Africa, west to Sicily, Italy, and the Mediterranean coast of present-day France, and east to the coast of Asia Minor, or present-day Turkey.
- **Class Rank:** Slave
- **Typical Life Span:** 30 years (estimate)

**Childhood**

The children of slaves were automatically born into servitude. Some Greek parents who were destitute could sell their children into slavery, and were at risk of becoming debt-slaves themselves. Abandoned newborn babies were also sometimes raised as slaves and the children of enemy soldiers killed on the battlefield, or whose lives were spared, were also thrust into slavery. Most young slaves experienced very dismal childhoods. Considered commodities, as were their parents, they could be sold at any time. Only the most benevolent masters would have deliberately kept families together.

While children were not legally exempt from any specific occupations, most were put to work in the house or on the farm. The youngest took care of "light duty" chores compared to the work of their elders, but were still on call from morning until night without much opportunity to play. Among the slaves most depicted on painted pottery were the young boys who served wine at the males' evening symposia. Older children and teenagers would have been expected to handle more physically taxing work and some even labored in the mines.

The child slave who served both as servant and playmate to the master's children would have been able to enjoy some semblance of a normal childhood, but the hierarchy was maintained in numerous ways and the differences in social status would have been clear to all involved.

**Education**

Slaves did not receive a formal academic education while they were indebted to their masters. Nonetheless, many were taught occupational skills that, in some cases, allowed them to reach a high level of expertise as adults. As most slaves were foreigners, they would have needed to learn Greek upon arrival, although these lessons would have been informal.

A more fortunate slave grew up in a household where his parent or another slave provided the education for the master's children. In these cases, the slave boy might have been invited to sit in on reading, math, or lyre (stringed instrument) classes. The slave girl might have learned
weaving or embroidery when taught to the daughters in the household, skills that were considered more rewarding and less physically demanding than cleaning and combing wool.

Some slave children had received an education prior to their servitude, and may have been encouraged to continue intellectual pursuits, as slaves were also used in professional capacities. For instance, during the Hellenistic period, many of the scribes at the Alexandrian Library were slaves.

**Personal Relationships & Family Life**

The personal relationships and family life of slaves varied greatly. Some families that were captured or bought in the slave market remained intact, while others were split apart. Some female slaves were forced to marry their captors or were enslaved into prostitution, while others were free to marry other slaves and start their own families.

Interrmarrying with free men and women was also common. In fact, Aristotle had a son with his slave, Herpyllis, although they remained unwed. The fate of these children, whether they were considered free or slaves, changed over time. During the fifth century BCE, children could have been legitimized, but by the fourth century BCE, that was no longer the case. The status of children from these unorthodox unions was largely the whim of whoever was in power at the time, and also depended upon the city-state in which they resided.

Some Greeks practiced a ritual in which they welcomed domestic slaves into their family with gifts. In these households, the slaves might have been considered members of the extended family rather than servants. In general, the life of a typical female slave would not have been significantly different from the life of a peasant woman, as all women in ancient Greece were considered subservient to males.

**Living Quarters**

Slaves usually lived on their master's property, most often in communal structures that tended to be primitively constructed and furnished. Some domestic slaves might have been privileged to sleep in the master's house, such as a wet-nurse, the children's primary caregiver, or a female concubine. Helots (Sparta) were the only slaves who traditionally lived separately in their own houses with their own families.

**Typical Appearance**

Slaves could often be identified by their appearance, if only because they were typically foreigners. In Athens, however, where foreigners represented a large segment of the population, it was often impossible to tell the difference between a slave and a free person. If a woman dared to wear a garment such as a short peplos or chiton in public, she was surely a slave, or a Spartan woman, who were derided by Athenians for their "impropriety." Female slaves were also forced to wear their hair short.

As depicted on ancient Greek pottery, male slaves often went naked or wore loincloths. They also wore their hair short. In some cases, a slave could be identified by the welts across his
back caused by a flogging. Most slaves went barefoot, although presumably some would have been able to make or buy a pair of sandals.

**Typical Meals**
The quantity and quality of food eaten by a slave was dependent on several factors, the most obvious being the level of resources and benevolence of the master. Some masters kept their slaves in a state of near-starvation, feeding them only as necessary to keep them strong enough for work. In some cases, slaves were allowed to maintain their own gardens and would have been able to hunt and gather wild foods in their spare time.

Most slaves subsisted on bread and other products made from grains, supplemented by seasonal fruits, herbs, and nuts. As slaves were usually prohibited from attending religious functions, such as animal sacrifices, they would not have eaten much meat.

In all cases, slaves would have been the last to eat. When drought, war, and other situations--common occurrences in the ancient world--caused food shortages, slaves would have been the first to succumb to major health problems or death.

**Typical Earnings**
While some slaves received only meager rations of food, others received wages. In some cases, some slaves were able to save enough money to buy their freedom. A few slaves even became bankers or opened their own craft workshops. Most slaves, however, were paid meager wages for hard labor. Slaves did not spend much time on the slave market or looking for work, as most employers valued the profits they earned from employing slaves over the freeman, who desired higher wages.

**Typical Day**
Slaves were usually given the most degrading, dangerous, and/or monotonous jobs in society. In most cases, they were up at the crack of dawn and labored until dark, with just a brief break for a meal. As male slaves were frequently required to handle the most dangerous jobs. One might spend the day carting heavy boulders across a field or tunneling through a silver mine. Another slave might find himself racing a chariot at the hippodrome, perhaps the most life-threatening job of all.

A domestic female slave might begin the day by filling up water jugs for the family from the master's well, or lugging the heavy vessels back from the public fountain. Cleaning clothing, bathing the children, removing human waste, grinding flax, shelling nuts, and preparing the day's big meal would have occupied the morning duties. In the evening, if the slave was a concubine, she would have been at the whim of her master. All slaves would have been at the mercy of those they served, and would have been expected to be available whenever and wherever needed.

A small percentage of slaves enjoyed a slower, easier pace. They may have accompanied their masters into the agora to do some shopping, followed by a trip to the gymnasion where
they waited patiently while their masters exercised. Afterward, the slave would have bathed his master and oiled his skin.

Athenian masters were not permitted to abuse their slaves, although punishments were often meted out for theft, insubordination, or other infractions. A master was responsible for his slaves' actions, and therefore would not have restrained himself when he felt justified.

**Societal Standing**

Slaves were commodities. They lacked freedom and were prohibited from becoming citizens or from owning land. No doubt, many were treated far worse than a prized horse or pet dog. Slaves were also characterized as being untrustworthy, lazy, and/or stupid. Yet within the rank of slave, there existed multiple levels of social standing. A debt slave was especially shameful because he was a Greek, and thus a failure to his own people. However, the sixth-century BCE Athenian statesman Solon recognized the travesty of forcing Greeks into slavery simply because they could not afford to pay their bills, and ended the practice in Attica, although it continued elsewhere.

Those slaves who had previously enjoyed a high social status before becoming enslaved, and were educated, wealthy, and/or had worked in a noble or highly skilled occupation may have continued to receive some amount of respect in Greece. A slave could be a "head slave" and oversee the work performed by a team of domestic or farm slaves. Or a slave could manage his owner's pottery or sculpture workshop. Many domestic slaves also earned respect for their caregiving or culinary skills.

The slaves who worked for the city-state in occupations that served the public good, such as the Scythian archers (a type of police force), were also held in reasonably high esteem. After gaining their freedom, a few slaves went so far as to reach a level of admiration reserved mostly for nobility. Aesop, a former slave who lived during the sixth century BCE on the island of Samos, became legendary for his fables. Some slaves were honored upon their death with inscribed grave markers. However, for every slave who reached this level, there were thousands who were considered dispensable.

**Personal Time**

Very little is known about the amount of personal time the average slave might have enjoyed, but it was likely minimal. Some slaves earned time off for good behavior and productivity. A slave would have needed to spend most of this free time taking care of his own needs and those of his family. Yet some slaves learned to play a musical instrument, or enjoyed poetry.

**Religious Life**

In general, slaves were not permitted to participate in Greek religious events and rituals, especially those limited to citizens. Nor were they normally given time to worship their own deities. However, some masters allowed their domestic slaves to participate in religious events along with the family.
A particular class of sacred slaves, "hierdouloi," lived at the site of a temple where they served the deity in various capacities, from taking care of the grounds to lifting heavy statues. In some instances, female hierdouloi also served as prostitutes, with the money they earned being "donated" back to the cult.

**Political Life**
The slave in ancient Greece had few legal rights and was prohibited from participating in civic matters. From the sixth century on, male slaves were also prohibited from using a gymnasium and other measures implemented by Solon that created additional social and psychological distance between free men and slaves.

A slave was given one important legal right--the ability to testify in court. The stakes were rather high though, as only under torture could a slave testify, otherwise, his testimony might be considered little more than fabrication. The outcome was that few slaves would testify against their masters for any reason, and slaves were frequently victims of criminal behavior themselves, without any recourse.

Once a slave was emancipated, he could potentially be granted the same rights as a citizen, although most remained "metics," or foreigners, with few legal rights.

**Bibliography**


- This book discusses the relationship between the craftsman and the slave in ancient Greece, who often competed for the same jobs.


- This general article provides a good introduction to both Greek and Roman slavery.


- This scholarly study is for advanced readers who are interested in learning more about the underlying theory and practice of slavery in ancient Greece.


- This sociological study of Athenian youth also presents information about the lives of child slaves.

• This article sheds some light on how slavery could have existed in democratic Athens.


• Osborne, a renowned classicist, discusses the importance of slavery to the ancient Greek society and economy.

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