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HI 206 – Fall of Rome

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How did the treatment of slaves change during the Roman imperial period, and at the introduction of Christianity as the imperial religion?

Slavery played a massive role in the Roman Empire, it has been said to be “the most extensive and enduring slave system in pre-modern history” (Harper, 3). In Pliny the Younger’s letters it is shown that each Roman citizen could treat his slaves differently. When talking of one of his slaves who died young, Pliny says “I am quite aware that there are other people who call misfortunes of this kind a mere pecuniary loss” (Pliny the Younger, 8.16). Pliny the Younger was aware of the differing attitudes towards slaves in his time and remains an example of one of the kinder treatment of slaves. The treatment of slaves changed greatly over the course of the Roman imperial period due to different emperors’ attitudes, changing philosophies and the rate of expansion of the Roman Empire. Christianity is propagated as having initiated changes to slavery in Ancient Rome, but despite what the Bible says they did not practice as much as they preached.

Enslaved people in the Roman Empire came from varying different backgrounds, and contrary to modern slavery, was not race-based. There were 3 different circumstances in which a person could become enslaved. First, a child born to an enslaved mother. In law, “the child of a slave mother was a slave – no matter who was the father” (Shumway, 640). A child could only belong to the father in the case of a marriage, and slaves were not allowed to be married. The second reason people could be enslaved is called the ‘Civil Law’ which changed a fair amount over time, but generally served the purpose of providing slavery as judiciary punishment. In early imperialism, “creditors [could sell] their insolvent debtors, one who had been robbed might sell the robber” (Shumway, 641). The largest number of slaves came from a section of the ‘Law of Nations’, whereby citizens of captured cities and states would be enslaved. It can be seen that even in the Republic, “conquest remained the most important source of slaves” (Joshel, 55-56). Once the Roman economy was reliant on slaves, having a supply of slaves became important to keep up with the demand.

The treatment of slaves was an ever-changing set of societal norms, that attempted to be regulated by Roman law. “Before the law, the slave was rightless, an object to be controlled” (Bradley, 1988, 485), the law recognized the slave as property of his slaveowners, with no rights akin to that of a Roman citizen. “But if legal regulation of slaves as a form of property was both desirable and necessary, in practical circumstances, real life if you will, it was impossible to deny the humanity of the slave” (Bradley, 1988, 485). There seems to have been a great deal of choice left to the slaveowner in how he wanted to treat his slaves, although this eventually became more restricted with the introduction of new laws. Those who acknowledged the slave as a human being were kind to their slaves, freed them, did not abuse them, and seemed to develop some

care towards the well-being of the slave. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are certain individuals who loved the power-trip over fellow human beings and would abuse enslaved people sometimes to the point of death. It is due to the behavior of the latter that such laws to prevent the abuse and execution of slaves were made.

There is archaeological evidence that gives some insight into the treatment of slaves during Ancient Rome, specifically through studying the restraints and tags used on enslaved people. Trimble debates the intention behind slave collars and slave tags. She suspects due to the inscriptions on them, that they were used specifically for slaves that had previously attempted escape or considered a 'flight risk'. The Zoninus Collar is unique in that it promises a reward for the return of the slave – "When you have brought me back to my master Zoninus, you will receive a gold coin" (Trimble, 447). Note here the demeaning nature of the inscription referring to the slave in first-person, as was common. The Zoninus collar also includes a prominent palm frond after the inscription, a symbol of Christianity. Additionally, there are "Christian terms on some collars (acolyte, archdeacon) further suggest an institutional structure for Christianity" (Trimble, 453). The contradiction between the preached Christian distaste for slavery and the archaeological evidence of Christian slave-owners points towards different morals when it comes to scripture versus reality. Trimble even goes as far to say, "early Christianity was no more averse to slavery or humanitarian in its treatment of slaves than the rest of Late Roman society" (Trimble, 455).

Amendments in slave laws are very helpful in addressing the question of whether Christianity was responsible for any changes to slavery in Late Roman society. Of the Julio-Claudians, Claudius was one of the first to add any significant change to the treatment of slaves. His contribution was that any slaves who had been abandoned by their 'masters' were lawfully considered freedmen and would be treated as such by the law and society (Dillon & Garland, 297). Emperor Nero continued this trajectory and amended that slaves could launch complaints against their masters in court, and under Antoninus Pius a master who executed his slave could be tried in court for homicide (Dillon & Garland, 297). Note that Claudius and Nero were emperors before Christianity formed, and Antoninus Pius was a non-believer in what at his time was a very little established religion. There were other additions and edits of many different laws, of which there are no specific timelines for. There were alterations made to the Praetorian Law, which "greatly increased the independence of the slave, and magnified his individuality in the eyes of the law" (Shumway, 639), however this was done for the business gain slaveowners would receive. In the case of the 'Law of Nations', a captive could be made a slave if he was not able to pay the ransom he owed to someone who freed him for captivity using a sum of money, forcing him into indentured servitude. However, this was often abused, and the captive could be a forced laborer for a long time. By 409 CE, "by statute, a limit of five years was put" (Shumway, 652) on this type of indentured servitude. It can be difficult to determine why these laws were put into place, and whether Christianity had any part in it. But we can see the move towards humane treatment of slaves beginning long before Christianity had anything to say about slavery.

Specific veins of philosophical thinking cannot be determined in their exact origin, however the Ancient Greeks, and most famously the Spartans, were utilizing stoicism centuries before Christianity was established. Stoicism is widely noted to have become heavily popularized in the Ancient Roman Empire from the second century BCE onwards (Brunt, 7). It is important to note that it was the higher-class citizens who would've been able to devote time towards studying, learning and implementing philosophical ideas such as stoicism. Despite this, the stoic attitude was present in law, societal norms and even everyday interactions – having a trickle-down effect on the population. The basis of stoicism follows most other ancient philosophies in that stoics believe each man has the ability to and therefore “must pursue his individual happiness” (Brunt, 10). Stoicism differs in that the main belief centers around only being able to control one's own self, specifically one's own actions, and one can only experience and deal with the situations that arise. If one put in the effort to act like and become on the inside, a virtuous person, one will have a life of virtue, and “a life of virtue is open to all, even to slaves” (Brunt, 12). There is also a focus on individuality in stoicism, which informed new conditions and new ideas which “tended to a larger view of the slave's individuality, not only in the field of property law but also in the law of persons and of procedure” (Shumway, 638). The conditions of slave-owning and the treatment of slaves were introduced into the category of the law of persons and the law of procedure, exemplifying the perspective of the slave as a human being. In stoicism “the principle of brotherhood and equality was preached before Christianity, and independently of it” (McGiffert, 31). This led to some pagans, stoics and non-stoics, freeing their slaves and/or treating their slaves better and with the kindness necessary for other human beings. Even in Jewish law, we see the confusion between the categorization of a slave as “not legally agents (human beings in the full, legal sense), but it was recognized that they had wills; as human beings they were capable of volitional action” (Martin, 117). Many different schools of thought, including stoicism and Judaism, recognized the slave as a human being and worthy of kindness and humanity towards them.

Christianity is too often credited with starting the philosophy of equality as it pertains to slavery. As explained above, this is not the case. However, one cannot deny that Christianity didn't play a part in spreading the rhetoric of brotherhood through tumultuous times as the dominant religion shifted away from paganism. There was an inclination towards forming “a religio-ethical taboo against the enslavement of the majority of inhabitants” (Fynn-Paul, 4), however it wasn't adopted or strongly advocated for until more modern times. One can see this in the case of the law: “Christianity continued the movement along the lines of physical protection and regard for ties of family existing among slave but did not seriously modify their legal condition.” (Shumway, 640). Christianity was extending a call towards humane treatment of slaves, yet not considering the dissemination of the institution which enslaved them. In fact, several sources claim “Christianity in the days of the Roman Empire made no protest against slavery” (McGiffert, 30) and there is lots of archaeological evidence that proves early Christianity engaged freely in slavery without qualms. In fact, the number of slaves increased during the reign of Christian emperors, and it is in the fifth century CE “that the slave presence seems to become qualitatively significant” (Bradley, 1985, 8). Christianity developed a savior

complex pertaining to slavery which was not accurate to the Ancient Roman slave society, as in practice Christians did not change the lives of slaves any more than stoicism or human kindness achieved.

In conclusion, the treatment of slaves changed throughout the Roman imperial period and whilst Christianity claims to have propagated the change, evidence suggests otherwise. Stoicism initiated a fair amount to the perception of the slave as a person and emperors without any ties to Christianity implemented laws that improved enslaved people's lives.

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