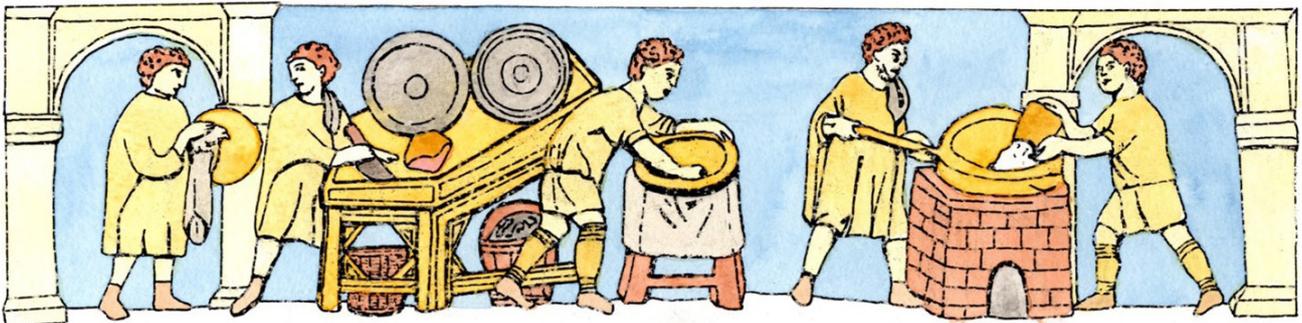


Slaves in the Fort



A painted reconstruction of a Roman tombstone from Germany, showing slaves at work in the kitchen.

There were many people living as slaves inside the fort.

People could become enslaved in different ways. People could be born into slavery if their parents were already slaves themselves. They were therefore brought up as a slave and knew no other life. Others were often sold into slavery.

Slaves were not thought of as people, but as pieces of property owned by someone, just like a horse.

The quality of their life depended on their owner, and while some might eventually be freed, many would die as slaves. The master could do what they liked with them. He could beat or whip them, sell them, sell their children (perhaps never to be seen again) or even kill them.

Most Romans thought they should treat slaves well but there was no law to make them do so, and of course, what an owner thought was 'treating them well' might not have been the same as what the slave thought.

Commanding officer's house

The commanding officer owned the most slaves within the fort; having many slaves was an indication of his status.

He needed slaves to clean the house, fetch water and fuel, cook, do the laundry, throw out the rubbish, stoke the fires heating the hypocaust and the baths, serve food and wine, entertain him and his guests, help dress him and his family, look after his children, empty the chamber pots, act as a secretary, clean and polish his armour and equipment and look after his horses.



Tombstone of Regina- showing her holding a distaff and spindle.

When there were many slaves in a household they could specialise and just carry out a single job (such as cook or hairdresser).

The slaves within the commanding officer's house varied in status. For example, a secretary slave who could read and write would be expensive to buy and would be in daily contact with his master. The commanding officer's wife would have a closer relationship with the slaves who served her in the bedroom (looking after her clothes, dressing her, doing her hair, putting on her makeup and jewellery) than with the unskilled slaves who swept the floors or fetched the water for the kitchen.

Housework was not just women’s work in the Roman world - men did just about everything, apart from spinning, which was considered a uniquely female occupation. For example, Regina’s tombstone at Arbeia Roman Fort shows her holding a distaff and spindle to show she was a good and industrious wife (you would keep the raw wool on the distaff and then use the spindle to turn it into thread).



Image showing distaff and spindle.



Illustration from a tombstone of a slave carrying a container of perfumed oils. ©Konstantin Tanchev

In some households, female slaves would have to spin a certain amount of thread every day. The mistress would control how much wool or flax they had to do per day, and so could make their day easy or horrible.

Slaves could not leave the house without permission of their owner. A room near the front door housed a slave (called a porter) who controlled who left and came into the house.

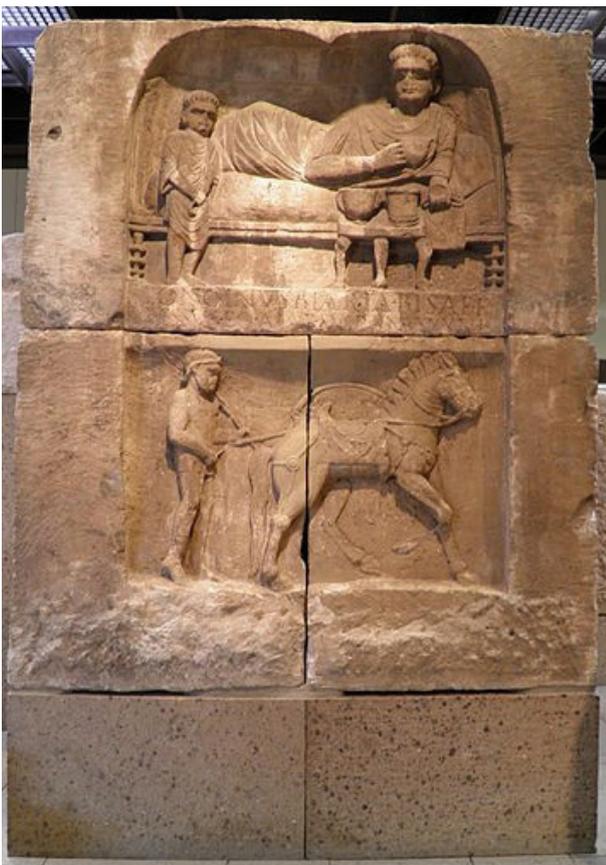
Slaves of centurion and decurion

Each centurion and decurion also had at least one slave. These slaves had to do many of the same jobs as those in the commanding officer’s house, but as there were fewer of them, they had to do more jobs. The same slave might have to fetch water, sweep the floor, cook meals and help his owner get dressed.

The decurion would also have a groom to help look after his horses.

Slaves of soldiers

Cavalrymen also had slave grooms to help with the horses, clean their armour and weapons, muck out the stables, and fetch water and fodder. Some infantry soldiers may also have owned slaves, and it is possible the unit itself also had some slaves to work in the fort. The slaves may have lived in the roof space in the barracks.



Tombstone of a cavalryman reclining on a couch with a slave beside him; below his groom is training his horse.



Tombstone of Victor from Arbeia Roman Fort, an ex-groom belonging to a cavalry soldier.