

Slaves in the Roman Economy



ECONOMICS FOCUS Slaves were very important to Roman society. They contributed greatly to Rome's economic prosperity through the production of goods and services. However, a slave population that is too large can be costly to society.



As you read, think about all the day-to-day jobs, such as cleaning office buildings, building roads, and maintaining the water supply, that slaves performed. Think about the people in our society who perform all those important jobs today.

Slaves were used for almost every possible purpose in ancient Rome. In the city itself, slaves were part of the civil service and performed important jobs such as maintaining the aqueducts that supplied Rome with water. The emperor's household employed slaves as cooks, maintenance workers, and caretakers. Many private households also relied heavily on the assistance of slaves. Rome's slave workers came from conquered territories and other sources.

Estimates of the size of the slave population vary widely. Slaves were not counted in census taking, as citizens were, so the exact number of these important workers is hard to know. One estimate is that slaves were about 1/3 of the total population. Another estimate puts the ratio of slaves to citizens at 1:1. A third estimate is that slaves actually outnumbered citizens by a ratio of 5:3.

Roman Citizens and Slave Population (estimates)			
Year	Roman Citizens	Slave Population (1/3 estimate)	Slave Population (5:3 estimate)
115 BC	394,336	131,445	657,227
70 BC	900,000	300,000	1,500,000
27 BC	4,063,000	1,354,333	6,771,667
13 AD	4,937,000	1,645,667	8,228,333
47 AD	6,944,000	2,314,667	11,573,333

Use the data in the table to answer the following questions.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What would each of the three estimates predict slave population to be in 70 BC?

2. What would each of the three estimates predict slave population to be in 27 BC?

3. What would each of the three estimates predict slave population to be in 47 AD?

4. **Critical Thinking: Application** Some scholars believe that the size of the slave population may have contributed to slave revolts. These scholars believe that the large population of slaves was one of the factors that led to the fall of Rome. Which ratio estimate would best support this idea? Explain your answer.
