

History

Although it is commonly held that slavery was rare among primitive pastoral peoples and that it appeared in full form only with the development of an agricultural economy, there are numerous instances that contradict this belief. Domestic slavery and sometimes concubine slavery appeared among the nomadic Arabs, among Native Americans primarily devoted to hunting, and among the seafaring Vikings. Some ascribe the beginnings of slavery to war and the consequent subjection of one group by another. Slavery as a result of debt, however, existed in very early times, and some African peoples have had the custom of putting up wives and children as hostages for an obligation; if the obligation was unfulfilled, the hostages became permanent slaves.

Slavery in the Ancient World

The institution of slavery extends back beyond recorded history. References to it appear in the ancient Babylonian code of Hammurabi. Its form and nature varied greatly in ancient society. It seems to have been common in the Tigris-Euphrates civilizations and in ancient Persia. In ancient Egypt slave labor was used in building temples and pyramids. The institution was familiar to the ancient Hebrews, according to passages in the Bible.

Slavery was an established institution in the Greece of Homer's time, and a large portion of the population of the Greek city-states in later days were of the servile class. There were domestic slaves, agricultural slaves, and artisans and workers. In Greece, although not quite as commonly as in Asia Minor, there were also public slaves, for example, those belonging to the temples. In general it is thought that slaves in the Greek city-states were relatively well treated, and there were laws protecting them against excessive cruelty or abuse. However, the slaves were regarded as property and had no rights in courts of law. Slaves could obtain their freedom by buying it, by being granted it in the owner's will, or as a reward for outstanding service.

Slavery in early Roman history seems to have been of the same type as in Greece, but by the 1st cent. B.C., as the Roman Empire continued to expand, a form of agricultural slavery called estate slavery was introduced on a wide scale; in this form agriculture was pursued by large numbers of slaves in an impersonal relationship with the landowner, who had practically absolute power over them. The increasing wealth of Rome led to an expansion in domestic slaves, and the servile class grew to great numbers. They were employed in the theater, in gladiatorial combats, and, to some extent, in prostitution. Most of the slaves were foreign, and some were highly educated and were employed as instructors. Having a large retinue of slaves became one of the prime marks of luxury, and exotic, especially Asian, slaves were in great demand. As the number of conquered provinces grew, so did the slave supply. Consequently, manumission (emancipation from slavery) was common, and freedmen became a significant factor in the Roman social system. The slave had almost no legal status, although custom mitigated against extreme brutality; the slave could testify against his or her master only in a very limited number of serious crimes (adultery, incest, and, later, lese majesty). As the Roman expansion abated, conditions of slavery improved somewhat.

Slavery after the Fall of the Roman Empire

The introduction of Christianity toward the end of the Roman Empire had no effect on the abolition of slavery, since the church at that time did not oppose the institution. However, a change in economic life set in and resulted in the gradual disappearance of the agricultural slaves, who became, for all practical purposes, one with the coloni (tenant farmers who were technically free but were in fact bound to the land by debts). This process helped prepare the way for an economy in which the agricultural slave became the serf.

The semifreedom of serfdom was the dominant theme in the Middle Ages, although domestic slavery (and, to some extent, other forms) did not disappear. The church began to encourage manumission,

while ignoring the fact that many slaves were attached to church officials and church property. Sale into slavery continued to be an extreme punishment for serious crimes.

Slavery flourished in the Byzantine Empire, and the pirates of the Mediterranean continued their custom of enslaving the victims of their raids. Islam, like Christianity, accepted slavery, and it became a standard institution in Muslim lands, where most slaves were African in origin. In Islamic life, keeping slaves was largely a sign of wealth, with slaves used as soldiers, concubines, cooks, and entertainers and to perform a variety of other functions. Another form of Muslim slavery was in the eunuch guardians of the harems; eunuchs had been widely known in Greek, Roman, and especially Byzantine times, but it was among the Muslims and in East Asia that they were to survive longest. In Muslim countries, slavery and freedom had a much more fluid boundary than in the West, with some slaves and former slaves reaching positions of great power and prestige.

In Western Europe slavery largely disappeared by the later Middle Ages, although it still remained in such manifestations as the use of slaves on galleys. In Russia slavery persisted longer than in Western Europe, and indeed the serfs were pushed into the classification of slavery by Peter the Great.

Modern Slavery

A revolution in the institution of slavery came in the 15th and 16th cent. The explorations of the African coast by Portuguese navigators resulted in the exploitation of the African as a slave, and for nearly five centuries the predations of slave raiders along the coasts of Africa were to be a lucrative and important business conducted with appalling brutality. The British, Dutch, French, Spanish, and Portuguese all engaged in the African slave trade. Although Africans were, as early as 1440, brought back to Portugal, and although subsequent importations were large enough to change distinctly the ethnography of that country, it was not in Europe that African slavery was to be most profitable and widespread, but in the Americas, where European exploitation began at the end of the 15th cent.

The first people to be enslaved by the Spanish and Portuguese in the West Indies and Latin America were the Native Americans, but, because the majority of Native American slaves either revolted or escaped, other forms of forced labor, akin to serfdom, were introduced (see repartimiento and encomienda). The resistance of the Native Americans to slavery only increased the demand for Africans to replace them. Africans proved to be profitable laborers in the Caribbean islands and the lowlands of the South American mainland. In the colder highlands Native American slavery or quasi-slavery continued; long after the introduction of the first Africans the Paulistas (inhabitants of the city and state of São Paulo, Brazil) continued their slave raids against the Native Americans of the Brazilian hinterlands. But African slavery gradually became dominant.

The first Africans arrived in the British settlements on the Atlantic coast when they were traded or sold for supplies by a Dutch ship at Jamestown, Va., in 1619. They may have been indentured servants, but by the 1640s lifetime servitude existed in Virginia, and slavery was acknowledged in the laws of Massachusetts. The raising of staple crops—coffee, tobacco, sugar, rice, and, much later, cotton—and the rise of the plantation economy made the importation of slaves from Africa particularly valuable in the Southern colonies of North America. The slave trade moved in a triangle; setting out from British ports, ships would transport various goods to the western coast of Africa, where they would be exchanged for slaves. The slaves were then brought to the West Indies or to the colonies of North or South America, where they were traded for agricultural staples for the return voyage back to England. Later, New England ports were included in this last leg. The number of slaves in the colonies increased until in some (notably French Saint-Domingue, the modern Haiti) they constituted a majority of the population. In America by the date of the Declaration of Independence (1776) about one fifth of the population was enslaved.