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World History-5th Period

Slavery in Rome

Rome was known as one of the greatest empires, if not the greatest, in the world for almost 1,000 years. The people of Rome were happy and prospering. They went through two hundred years of what is now called *Pax Romana*, or Peace of Rome. The citizens were as united as ever. Everywhere you would hear *Civis Romanus Sum*, I am a Roman Citizen. The Romans were proud to be Romans. To say you were Roman meant that you were the best of the best, the *Crème de la Crème*. But then, slowly but surely, Rome began to decline. The government became more corrupt, the people less united. People would no longer consider themselves Romans, because to say you were Roman meant that you were corrupt, untrustworthy pond scum. What caused this terrible fate? There are many different theories from many different people, but one thing is certain; whether directly or not, slavery played a major role in the fall of the Republic of Rome. It caused massive unemployment, weakened the government, and created many riots. These riots cost the government money and a loss of lives for both sides of the argument.

Rome is located in modern-day Italy. Rome lies on both sides of the Tiber River, about 17miles from its mouth in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Rome was founded on the east bank of the Tiber River and was built on seven hills—the Palatine,

Capitoline, Quirinal, Aventine, Caelian, Esquiline, and Viminal (Hibbert 313). It was the cultural, architectural, and business center of the Roman Empire (Halsall). People from all over envied Rome's prosperity. They wanted to be like Rome. Everybody who was anybody called themselves Roman. The huge latifundas on the outskirts of Rome were producing massive amounts of food, and business was booming like never before ("Ancient Rome"). Merchants were becoming plentiful, and the marketplaces were bustling with people willing to trade.

Even though slavery was a prevailing feature of all Mediterranean countries in antiquity, the Romans had more slaves and depended more on the m than any other people (Madden). This meant that the Romans had more slaves per person than in any other Mediterranean country during that period of time. The slaves were used as the main source of labor and came from the cities that the Romans conquered. Many of them were Greek. Over 75 percent of the workforce in Rome was composed of slaves (Keaveney 321). The exact number of slaves is uncertain. "From evidence such as this Westermann, Hopkins and others are understandably cautious when attempting to come to a figure for slaves in the city of Rome in the first century, AD. Hopkins' estimate of 300,000-350,000 out of a population of about 900,000-950,000 at the time of Augustus seems plausible" (Madden). That's about one-third of the population! The whole city was dependent on these slaves.

The slaves were used for almost anything. Whether it be working in a field or working in the city, slaves were the number one resource. They were a cheap source of labor. The slaves, once bought, required absolutely no monthly

wages. They, of course, would have to have some kind of housing and food, but that was easily taken care of. They were crammed like sardines into nothing better than a little box, and given the most disgusting and cheap gruel imaginable. This was easier and much more affordable than hiring free men. The free men would expect monthly wages, vacation, and pay raises. The free men could quit whenever they felt like it. Slaves required no vacation, no wages, and couldn't quit.

Latifundas are huge plantation-like farming estates in Ancient Rome that were worked on by slaves ("Latifunda"). The wealthy patricians who owned these estates grew a variety of crops on the rich land (Halsall). Their source of labor was of course, slaves. They could work them as long as they needed for practically nothing at all. Because the latifunda owners could get much work done for almost nothing, they were able to sell their crops for a cheaper price than the private farmers. Private farmers were people who had little land compared to the latifunda owners and had no slaves. They had to either work on the land themselves or hire free men to do the job. Therefore, in order to make a profit, they would have to sell their crops for a little more. In this way, the latifunda owners caused the private farmers, who were numerous, to 'sell out' (Madden). The farmers then had to sell their land to a wealthy landholder or go bankrupt trying to pay taxes (Madden). Most of them decided to sell their land and go to the city in search of work. They found no work because, like on the latifundas, slaves were the source of labor. This put the farmers out of jobs. They then depended on the government's "welfare" program to support them. Although the 'welfare

program' was nothing more than meager food and entertainment, it cost the government money, nonetheless. This greatly weakened the government. .

If not for the wealthy, Rome could have been saved (Hibbert 315). Two tribunes to the lower class, Tibers and Gaius Gracchus, proposed two methods to fix the unemployment predicament (Gill). They said that land reform, or measures designed to effect a more equitable distribution of agricultural land by government action ("Land Reform"), and creating more public works projects would be the way out of their catastrophe (Halsall). Although the plan sounded simple enough, it was not done. The wealthy used their powers to veto the proposal. They did not want their land chopped to pieces like a birthday cake. They wanted to keep their money to them selves. But why didn't they allow the public works projects? The answer is simple; not only the land holding elite ran the government. There was also many of the business elite as well. They did not want to have to worry about their companies competing with the government. They wanted to create a monopoly over their specialty. They had their own slaves to make the roads, buildings, etc, so they reaped the benefits. This simply made unemployment worse.

Because of the tension between the unemployed and the wealthy landowners, Rome steadily weakened. Rome lost its unity, which played a main part in making Rome what it was (Gill). Without its unity, Rome was nothing. Slave uprisings were happening in cities around Rome during this time as well, and Rome grew tenser (Keaveney 330). The unemployed lower class began to revolt. Riots were started in many places and many people lost their lives. The

same thing started occurring with slaves. They felt that they should be free and they would pay any price to become free. This cost the Roman government much money and many lives for both sides. It simply made the government weaker with each revolt. It started to get to the point where the government could take it no more. They could not afford to pay for the armies required to keep the riots down. This resulted in an even weaker government.

In conclusion, slavery played a vital role in the demise of what was known as one of the greatest empires of all times. Slavery brought the Roman empire crashing down like a plane on its last voyage. Slavery caused massive unemployment for both farmers and city workers. They were forced to live off the government's 'welfare program.' This weakened the government. The massive unemployment also caused the unemployed to 'lash out' on the government by starting numerous riots. The slaves did the same as well. They wanted to be free and treated like individuals. People soon grew weary of the city that they knew and loved. They were no longer happy and prospering. They were no longer proud to call themselves Romans. They were spiraling into a slow decline. The *Pax Romana* was over. People fear that is what our society is slowly leading towards. We were prospering and happy and proud to be Americans. Now, although we are still proud to be Americans, we are weary. The economy is going a slow decline, and the government is becoming more corrupt than ever before. And what can we do? All we can do is sit and wait and hope that history does not repeat itself once again.