

Slavery across the Ages

A historical overview shows that slavery has been a part of many societies. Read the selection, and answer the questions.

Ancient Greeks—Slaves were counted among the necessities of life, since there was more work than the Greeks themselves could do. Slaves were obtained as prisoners of war and through trade. Although they held the lowest social position and lacked the privileges of citizenship, it was possible for them to earn wages, buy freedom, and eventually, attain full citizenship. Generally speaking, the slaves were treated well so that they would do good work. It has been estimated that fifty percent of the population of fourth-century Athens consisted of slaves.

The Romans—Slave labor was essential to Roman society. Massive efforts at road building and other construction required enormous numbers of slaves. Roman slaves included prisoners of war, criminals, and children sold into slavery by their parents. Like Greek slaves, they wore no visible sign of their slavery, and they could buy or earn freedom. While domestic slaves were generally well treated, gangs of agricultural slaves were managed roughly, often working in chains.

Aztecs of Mexico—Aztec slaves were used for both domestic and agricultural work. The slave population consisted of women and children who were prisoners of war, criminals, and people sold into bondage by their families. Aztec slaves had the right of ownership, extending even to owning other slaves. They had a voice in whether or not they could be sold, and their children were automatically free and equal Aztec citizens.

African Tribes—African tribes had a background of slavery long before Europeans cultivated a slave trade. African slaves included war prisoners and criminals. There was, however, no rigid distinction between slave and citizen. All people were considered working members of society, with the slaves having the lowest status. Slaves could earn money and buy freedom; they sometimes acquired prominent and powerful social positions.

1. What are some common aspects of these four systems of slavery?
2. From what you have read in your textbook, compare the African slave trade, as it was engineered by European merchants, with these earlier systems.

Source of slaves

Types of work

Reasons for using slaves

Relationships of slaves to citizens

Opportunities