

The History of Slavery and the Rise of Race

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 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. Some slaves were even well respected, such as those employed in the theater and in gladiatorial combats. Furthermore some were highly educated and were employed as instructors.



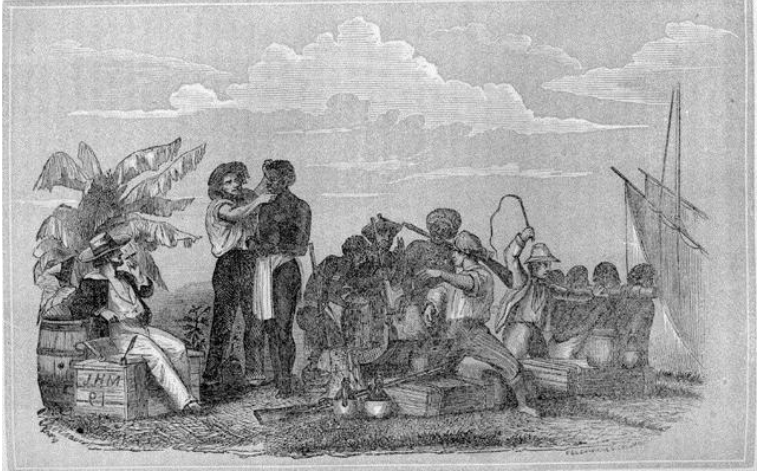
In the institutions above the most common form of slave came from the loss of a war or due to monetary debt. Although most of the slaves were foreign, they did not necessarily have to be, however the idea of a racial slave did not exist. That is not to say that Romans, for example, did not have prejudices, in fact they believed anyone not Roman to be an inferior.

Slavery in this form continues after the fall of Rome in both Europe and in Asia, although it is disguised in words like serfdom. It is not until the 15th and 16th century that slavery begins to be “racialized.” Skin color has been an obvious distinction between people throughout history but it is due to slavery the categories for race are created.

With the discovery of the New World came the need for cheap labor. Slavery was the most convenient answer. At first enslaving people was done, as always, conquered people became slaves. In the case of the Americas, slaves were made up of native people. Although the slavery of the Native Americans lasted for several years it was not the most lucrative form of slavery, particularly since many Native Americans revolted, others escaped having a vastly superior knowledge of the land and most significantly of Northern Native American 90% to 96% of them died due to the new diseases brought over from Europe.

This left the most profitable source of slavery would be from the peoples of Africa. The African slave trade brought new dimensions to institution of slavery. No longer were Europeans simply making slaves out prisoners

of war, they trafficking in people for profit. For many this was morally questionable. However, if there was difference that could separate people into groups of superior and inferior, a conflicted conscience could easily be appeased. Of course that difference was skin color and the idea of race was created.



Race is thought to be a *social construction*, meaning it was created by people and is defined by society. Scientifically race does not exist. Each cell in the human body contains 100,000 genes and six of them control skin color. Everyone has the same six genes including genes for both dark and light skin.

Slave traders, however saw how easily discernable skin color was as a dividing characteristic, and created a beneficially definition of racial groups. The creation of “inferior people” allowed Europeans to continue to participate in the slave trade without guilt.

Answer the questions below using the article you just read

1. How were slaves treated/regarded differently prior to the Atlantic slave trade than they were after the 17th century?
2. Based on the information in this article, why is it not surprising that Europeans were able to begin such an extensive, complex trans-Atlantic slave trade?
3. How does this article imply that race is a socially constructed concept? How was race used in exploration/colonization?