

# Analysis of the Slaveries in Roman Empire and Germanic Society in the 1st and the 4th-century A.C.

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**Abstract.** Slavery acted as a method of production in the transition from a clans-dominated society to a feudal society in the development of human society. It benefits society's operation and wealth accumulation through the exploitation of slaves. This essay will focus on the comparative analysis of Roman slavery and Germanic slavery in the 1st and the 4th century, two representative historical periods. In the 1st century, the two kinds of slavery differed regarding slaves' labor division and views of the ruling classes upon the slaves. These differences were caused by differential technological development, lifestyles, and laws. As for 4th-century slavery, the slavery crisis in Rome led to disasters in the economy and cultural unity. The development of slavery promoted by advanced technology in Germanic society urged the Germanic people to invade Rome. These analyses support the argument that technological advancement fundamentally determines production relationships and promotes the transformation of human society.

**Keywords:** slavery, economy, Roman Empire, Germanian society, Europe.

## 1. Introduction

Slavery is a mode of production in which humans perform dependent labor with limited freedom and political right. Slaves, an entire social group that generated productivity, played an irreplaceable role in developing the Roman Empire and Germanic society. Slavery peaked in Rome in the 1st and the 2nd century A.C., creating unprecedented prosperity for the empire. While in Germanic society, slavery remained immature and differed from the slavery in Rome in several perspectives. In Rome, Slavery began to collapse and led to chaos in the 3rd-century A.C. The aftermath was a full-rounded crisis in politics, the economy, and the military. The massive invasion of Germanic people in 375 brought the two slaveries close together, accelerating the establishment of feudalism in Europe. In 395, the Roman Empire split into two empires, the eastern and western. In 476 A.C., under the strike of Germanic invasion, the Western Roman Empire finally collapsed, and Europe gradually stepped into the Medieval.

This paper will mainly focus on two representative periods: the 1st century and the 4th-century A.C. The former period was when Roman slavery prospered, while Germanic slavery showed immaturity and inefficiency. The comparison of the disparities between these two regionally-close slaveries and the analysis of the factors that had contributed to these divergences need to be explored. While in the later period, the corrupted Roman slavery interacted with the rising Germanic slavery. The factors that created the crisis in Rome and the reasons why Germanic slavery advanced rapidly will be discussed, supporting the central thesis that technological progress and the rise in productivity promote social transformation.

## 2. Context

### 2.1 Slaveries in the 1st Century of the Roman Empire and Germanic Society

#### 2.1.1 Analysis of the reliability of Tacitus's *Agricola* and *Germania*

The 1st century is often described as the Tacitus's Era because most primary resources at that time were Tacitus's works, including *Agricola* and *Germania*, *Annals*, *Histories*, etc. P.C. Tacitus (around 55A.C.-120A.C.), one of the greatest Roman historians, was born in a noble family in Rome and

received a good education. After marrying the daughter of Agricola, he benefitted from the connection with the contemporary Britain consulship Agricola and later became a senatorial elite.

His motives for writing *Agricola* and *Germania* might be concluded as the followings. First, to reveal the potential danger in Roman society by comparing the rotten traditions of the Roman empire to the plain, rustic Germanic traditions. Second, to criticize tyranny and expressed his preference for the Republic Era in which the senate possessed the executive power of Rome, not an emperor. As a senatorial elite, his writing inevitably showed nostalgia for autocratic monarchy and represented the senator's voice.

In *Agricola* and *Germania*, Tacitus recorded the career of Agricola in Britain and described the Germanic groups' geography, economy, and slavery. He had never traveled to Germany, resulting in certain inaccuracies and limitations in his work. First, specific geographical details about Germany are not accurate. For instance, he considered the Earth plain ground rather than a sphere. Also, he moralized the historical description of Germanic society on a large scale, lacking a sense of historical precision [1].

This paper cites other primary and secondary resources to elaborate and collaborate with Tacitus's work, minimizing the negative influence of these minor inaccuracies and limitations.

### 2.1.2 Comparison of Slaves in Tacitus's Era

Slavery was a core mode of production in the Roman Empire. Slaves contributed their labor and yielded great productivity, showing great social value. In the golden age of the Roman Empire, 40 percent of the Italian population was slaves. In Rome, slaves were similar to the peasants in feudal Chinese dynasties and merchants in Capitalism Western countries because they all had a large population and accelerated the economic production in their societies.

One significant similarity between the living standards of slaves in Rome and Germany is that slaves all had low social status and could be killed by their owners legitimately. Here is one selection from *Germania* by Tacitus. "They (the slaveholders) often kill one (slave), however, not in a spirit of stern discipline, but a fit of passion, as they an enemy- except that the deed is unpunished" [2]. Though the laws in Germanic society were relatively loose and the punishment was not as cruel as in Rome, they still did not protect slaves' rights over their freedom and death. This is common around the world; for example, the laws of the Qin Dynasty in China claimed that slaves did not have the right to accuse their masters of killing them. If slaves bothered to accuse, they would be charged as criminals and receive punishment [3]. The same inequity occurs in Roman slaves, according to Gaius. "Slaves are in the protests of their masters...the master has the power of life and death over his slaves" [4].

One difference lies between the sources of slaves. In Roman society, slaves mainly come in four ways. Prisoners of wars took up a large proportion of Roman slaves. From the Second Punic War to the Civil War between Julius Caesar and Pompey, it was recorded that over five hundred thousand captives were sold as slaves. Second, Romans traded with neighboring nations for slaves. The Gaul sometimes sold orphans in their tribes for bottles of wine. Mediterranean pirates enslaved conquered people and sold them to Rome, too. Third, a more familiar source is domestic slaves or *Verna* in Latin. Many slaves in pasture did have sexual partners and a family, though masters involuntarily directed them. In addition, Romans also enslaved criminals and debtors as a punishment. In *Germania*, slaves also came from prisoners of war on a large scale. Germanic people enslaved captives mainly from other Germanic tribes since they often had conflicts with each other. Apart from this, many Germanic slaves came from domestic slaves. Since slaves in *Germania* were treated as tenants and were able to have houses and families, their offspring added up to the population of slaves. Sometimes, freemen would become slaves when they bet on their liberty and lost in gambling. This seldom happened in Rome since Roman laws forbade debtors to compensate with their liberty.

Another distinguishable difference is that in the Roman empire, slaves not only took up construction labor and agriculture production as they did in Germanic groups, but they were also the primary sources of armies considering that the massive expansion of Rome killed thousands of soldiers. What is more, slaves also worked in mines, where the condition for slaves was extremely harsh. In the Roman mines of the Iberian Peninsula, there were over four hundred million slaves. On

the contrary, Germanic people considered fighting a chance to earn honor, so elites were the vanguards on the battlefields, not slaves. Germanic society had relatively unclear labor division, unlike in Rome, where slaves were explicitly classified as handcraft, estate or entertaining slaves, etc. [5].

The third difference is that Romans and Germanic people viewed the roles of slaves differently. Romans considered slaves absolute personal possessions who were obliged to hand in all the harvest and labor. Their prices depended on the level of education they received, their health condition, and their ability in specific fields. They were not allowed to have private possessions. On the other hand, Germanic people treated slaves as tenants. According to the description in *Germania*, “the master imposes a fixed amount of grain, cattle or clothing, as he would on a tenant.” They were allowed to have families and were seldom punished unreasonably by masters. This difference in slaves’ social values can also be traced back to people’s outlook on wealth. According to *Germania*, “it is numbered (of the flock) that please, numbers that constitute their only, their most dear form of wealth.” They did not view the slaves as the most critical representation of wealth and social status. However, they preferred to brag about the number of flocks, which brought them glory and honor [6]. While in Rome, where people saw slaves as the symbol of wealth and power. Slaves’ social status was closely connected to their masters. Usually, the rich would like to purchase well-educated slaves even at pretty high prices. In Pliny’s *Natural History*, “The highest price paid up till now for a man born in slavery.....was when Attius of Pesaurum was selling the grammarian Daphnis and the Princeps Senatus, Marcus Scaurus, offered 700,000 sesterces.” [7].

### 2.1.3 Factors Contributing to Disparities

One explanation is the differential development of technology and productivity. Rome, abundant minerals and warm lands allowed residents to apply iron-made implements in agricultural production with excellent efficiency and developed agriculture as early as the Republican era. In *Germania*, in addition to the scarcity of minerals, cold weather impeded the prosperity of farming. Metals like iron were scarce in *Germania*, and most spears were made from wood. Thus, Germanic people had to apply the traditional farming method named “splash and burn” and use branches to plow the soil, which was inefficient. Low production levels kept Germanic groups in a clan-dominated social structure, resulting in a comparatively immature and unclear class and labor division. Thus, slaves were not limited to a specific field of production or an unchangeable social class but had more freedom in productive economic activities [8].

Secondly, the two societies had divergent lifestyles. Tacitus pointed out in his *Germania* that after adopting agriculture, Germanic people still fancied hunting rather than farming. One nature of pastoralism is mobility. Germanic people seldom had sedentary possessions like houses and ceramics since a pastoral lifestyle does not need and can’t afford to take too many private possessions. They still did not have vital concepts of property. This might explain why they regarded slaves as tenants, not forcefully controlled tools.

Nevertheless, Romans, who continued farming and trading for centuries, strongly preferred stability, reflected in a more robust conception of ruling and possessing. Thus, they viewed slaves as property that provided labor and symbolized wealth. Also, Roman masters imposed strict control over the marriage and birth of domestic slaves because they expected more of the newborn slaves to work for them. With the increasing number of slaves, the wealth of the master’s family accumulated. If slaves fled, that would be a massive loss to the masters.

Apart from this, societies had divergent laws about slaves, affecting how masters treated their slaves. Roman laws had a long history, from *Table Twelve* in 450 B.C. to *Corpus Juris Civilis* in the 6th century. Many provisions in these laws conveyed the idea that slaves were closely related to their masters. In *Table Twelve*, it is stated that a slave was without rights, and only a person with rights could be a party to legal action [9]. This provision in the Republican era was still kept in the Roman Empire. Thus, damages caused by slaves should be compensated by their masters. Since masters did not want to receive penalties caused by the wrongdoings of slaves and their reputation could also be influenced, they often punished slaves for the sake of discipline. Also, due to mistrust, masters would

not allow slaves to move around freely outside the property if they made trouble. However, Germanic society did not have statutory laws until the Medieval. Masters seldom punish slaves without a proper reason except to maintain discipline. If slaves committed crimes, they would be sent to the council of the tribe to be adjudicated and punished. This was the same process to punish a freeman who broke the rules of the tribe. Germanic slaves received punishment that was separated and irrelevant to their masters. Thus, Germanic slaveowners did not have to cast complete control over their slaves since slaves' wrongdoings did not harm their masters' wealth and reputation.

## **2.2 Slavery in the 1st century of the Roman Empire and Germanic society**

### **2.2.1 Slavery Crisis in Rome**

In 395 A.C., the Roman Empire was divided into the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, whose capitals were Constantinople and Rome, respectively. Before 476 A.C., when the Western Roman Empire and its slavery collapsed, a series of social problems were aroused by the slavery crisis.

On the one hand, the slavery crisis led to the economic crisis in the Roman Empire.

The economy established the foundation for social operation and development. When economic contraction occurs in a society, normal social functioning will be negatively influenced, magnifying the errors and problems in the political structure, military organization, and cultural identities. These aftermaths caused by the turbulence of the economy will intensify the social contradiction among different social classes. Fundamentally, the disorder of the economy appeared in the late Roman Empire because Roman slavery could not yield enough productivity to support social development. This production relation required a radical change in the 4th-century-Rome, where slavery collapsed, and the villenage as a replacement coexisted with it. Many factors, including labor shortage, low production enthusiasm, low labor quality, and increasingly high tax rates, led to the crisis in slavery. This section will mainly focus on how the four factors negatively influenced slavery and how this slavery crisis led to the economic crisis.

First, the labor shortage resulting from diseases and warfare was a catalyst in the collapse of slavery in Rome. On the one hand, overspread epidemics that resulted from environmental destruction, a dense population in cities, and a lack of medical knowledge killed many Romans. Slaves whose living environments were already harsh and dirty were infected on a large scale, resulting in sheer population declines after the spread of diseases [10]. Furthermore, since slaves were the main components of Roman armies, frequent wars against barbarians invasions and slave revolts killed millions of slaves. War and disease decreased the slave population and led to a labor shortage. In Roman Empire, the production level was still pretty low, so the decrease in labor meant less food. Many fields were left barren since not enough slaves were engaged in agricultural production and the ruling classes who had already become the parasitic class were involuntary to farm. This led to famines in large areas of the empire, obscuring the development of commerce and resulting in currency inflation.

Second, the increasing financial expenses worsened slaves' living status and weakened their production enthusiasm, resulting in a shrinking economy. In the late time of the empire, frequent warfare, expanding bureaucratic system, and pursuit of extravagance increased the general expenses of the Roman treasury. Increasing tax rates, expanding the scope of taxation, and raising new taxes were considered the best solutions to cover the cost above. As a result, tenants and slaves had to hand in a lot more taxes and grains, causing them to become even poorer. Thus, their production enthusiasm was weakened on a large scale, and the production rate decreased sharply. Also, being irritated by the excessive exploitation, many slaves rebelled, which cost more money to suppress. The increase in expenses and decrease in agricultural production accelerated the economic crisis.

Third, the labor quality of slaves was low, which restricted the development and potential of the economy. Slaves did not have rights and freedom in Rome, so all the education they received was profit-oriented, like learning about specific production skills. Colonus, who initially did have partial freedom, lost their rights and became similar to slaves because the government wanted to rebuild the collapsed slavery and issued several laws. Masters and the government strictly scrutinized them, and

they just accomplished tasks assigned by the officials. Without freedom in production, they would want to pursue higher education to improve their labor quality and competitiveness. This created a deformed market in the empire, with low-qualified producers who could not support future economic advances [11].

Apart from the economic crisis, the cultural crisis was caused by the slavery crisis and the failed cultural identity creation.

Although the Roman Empire controlled massive land and people through military expansion, the empire was maintained merely through continuous conquest but had never successfully overcome huge disparities between regions and assimilated the conquered nations. Many barbarians, whose habitats were annexed to the Roman Empire, were seen as slaves and did not build a strong cultural bond with the Romans, resulting in an isolation of cultural identity.

First, ethnic groups were prejudiced against each other, resulting in a severe social contradiction. For example, the Syrian elites were described by Cicero as useless innate slaves though they were proficient in Greek. However, the Syrian elites stroke back this cultural discrimination from ethnicity and blood lineage, arguing that Greco-Roman culture originated from barbarian cultures. Conquered slaves did not have a sense of spiritual belonging to Rome, while Romans had a sense of superiority in their culture. Rome took them as additional and marginalized ethnicity who provided labor for the upper class [12].

Second, slaves did not receive Romanized education, so they could not form inner belongingness to Rome. Little did Romans care about the general education of slaves, and they did not allow slaves to attend schools since studying was a privilege in the ancient world. They ignored that slaves were humans who needed moral cultivation and value concern. Child slaves received most of their education from their parents and other slaves, who taught them to inherit the traditions of their ethnic group and hate the Roman masters. This opinion strived in their hearts, isolating slaves from Roman culture.

Moreover, the rise of Christianity and the inner contradictions of Roman Polytheism intensify cultural differences with Rome. Roman Polytheism dominated the spiritual world of Romans for a long time, while each region had minor differences in traditions and gods. However, polytheism was seen to be divine, and slaves could not be a follower. Thus, the Syrians, for example, created Christianity and spread it widely among foreign slaves against Roman polytheism. These religious differences led to wars and aggravated cultural division.

Conquered slaves, including these Syrians, still possessed their ethnicity and religion as a unique nation or tribe but did not smoothly blend into Roman society. This disparity in culture and beliefs intensified when the empire ceased its rapid expansion and encountered troubles inside, ultimately leading to rebellions. Some Germanic slaves even provided help to the invading Germanic troops during the Germanic Migration, accelerating the collapse of the Western Roman Empire.

### **2.2.2 The Advancement of Slavery in Germanic Society**

As a freezing climate in the 4th century degraded prairies, the powerful Huns were forced to migrate westward, resulting in the Germanic Migration. However, the outside threat was only a catalyst, and the dominant reason was the Germanic people's pursuit of land and wealth, which was driven by the advancement of productivity and slavery.

The reasons that promoted the development of Germanic slavery include two significant parts: technology and production relation. First, technological advancements, including the widespread use of iron implements, improved the production efficiency of farming land, which resulted from the frequent commercial interaction with Romans. This technological development generated spared labor and urged the masters to seek new production relationships to fully utilize labor work to produce maximized profits. However, considering that turning forests into fields was expensive, Germanic people invaded Rome for its fertile lands [13].

Production relations transformed and boosted productivity by replacing blood lineage with regional relationships. Back in Tacitus's Era, the land was shared by a village tied with blood bonds because, at that time, individuals could not survive with rudimentary technology. Individuals could

plow land more effectively with increased productivity, so private ownership called the March Community appeared. In these newly occurred communities, the land was dominated by individual masters. Thus, the work of slaves became fixed and specified: one slave might be responsible for fruit cultivation, another for milk production, etc. This Romanized slavery produced excellent efficiency and more food to support the increase in population. [14].

### **2.3 Impact on the Transformation of Production Relationship**

Throughout the migration of Germanic people, cities and fertile lands were seriously damaged. However, the combination of the two kinds of slavery profoundly influenced the transition of Western Europe from slavery to serfdom.

The serfdom in Medieval Europe drew lessons from the comparatively moderate affiliation of Germanic slavery. In the 4th century, Germanic slaves owned houses and were treated like tenants, who were obliged to hand in a fixed amount of grain as rent for the land. Meanwhile, the slavery in Roman Empire was experiencing a transition from strict slavery to a combination of slavery and villenage since the living status of slaves worsened day by day, and the Roman ruling classes endeavored to find replacements to compensate slaves who died in wars and revolts. More profoundly, the Roman empire encountered significant technological progress in the 3rd century, but pre-existing slavery limited much of the slave's production freedom and productivity. The change to villenage was an unsuccessful experiment in establishing a more mature production relationship. The Germanic invasion bought moderate affiliation to the villenage, and together, they developed into serfdom [15].

### **2.4 Analysis of the Development of the Two Slaveryes**

As discussed earlier, slavery in the Roman Empire showed significant disparities from Germanic slavery in the 1st century, and the reasons behind it have been explored. After 3-century development, both slaveryes obtained huge advancements and had fierce conflicts. From the analysis of the factors that contributed to these differences in the 1st century and the reasons that promoted the development of the two slaveryes in the 4th century, scholars will notice the unneglectable effect of technological renovation on society.

Technological progress leads to a rise in the production level of society, generating more labor and efficiency and resulting in the transformation of production relationships. The optimization and transformations of the organization of labor work free even more benefits and allow the labor to be fully used. In ancient societies like Rome and Germania, this urged people to reclaim barren lands and produce more grains, which supported the increase in population. To satisfy the needs of this enormous population, society requires more means of production: land and wealth. Once this demand exceeds the capacity of a particular natural environment, natural resources will be inadequately damaged, and different nations, countries, and societies will have fierce conflicts with each other. This competition for resources stimulated each of them to pursue technological and product development to become more competitive and robust. During this process, different societies and systems influence and interact with each other, pushing forward the progress of human society.

## **3. Conclusion**

In the 1st century, due to the differences in geographical conditions, lifestyles, and laws, the slaves of the Roman Empire and Germanic society were divergent in sources, labor division, and identities evaluated by the ruling classes. In the 4th century, after long-term productivity progress and transformation in production relationships, Roman slavery partially converted to villenage, while Germanic slavery was Romanized. The development of these two slaveryes aroused competition for means of production. The Germanic invasion brought the two slaveryes into close interaction and combination, profoundly influencing the future of Western Europe.

From the analysis above, it is concluded that the development of society depends fundamentally on technological advancement that causes productivity to progress. Technological advancement

powers the transformation of production relationships and promotes the changes in the social class division, which ultimately promotes the conversion of social structure.

Additionally, there are some limitations in this essay. Due to the scarcity of historical sources that focus on the detailed description of slaves' living status in the 4th-5th century, the third part discusses each slavery separately as an entirety, but no comparative analysis. Also, some analyses of Germanic slavery in the 4th century can be more specific and deep, like changes in slaves' social status and laws compared to the 1st century, if more evidence can be revealed.

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