

Food, status, and the *peculium* of agricultural slaves

Ulrike Roth

How much could a slave own? What did his possessions consist of? And what were a slave's possessions for? In Roman Italy, some owned monies enough to engage in business, others even owned their own slaves, or owned both. The imperial slave Musicus, administrator of the treasury of the province of Lugdunensis on behalf of his master, the emperor Tiberius, was commemorated upon his death by 16 slaves of his own, some of whom were engaged in business activities themselves.¹ Nemesianus, bookkeeper of one of the procurators of the province of Dacia, built a temple entirely out of his own monies.² Suetonius reports an unnamed slave who had 'bought' himself the job of a cash *dispensator* for the spectacular sum of one million sesterces.³ Another such cash *dispensator*, a slave called Rotundus, was said to have owned a silver bowl weighing 500 gm that required the establishment of a brand new workshop for its production; Rotundus' own slaves were reported to own another 8 silver bowls of half that weight again.⁴

It is irrelevant whether one wants to believe in the historical authenticity of the above stories: they could only be told because it was not impossible for a Roman slave to accumulate such wealth. Less lavish cases too can easily be found. The slaves in the town house of the politician Cato come to mind: part of their monies was spent on purchasing younger slaves in order to train them and sell them at a higher price as skilled slaves.⁵ The returns would have been nowhere near the levels experienced by the imperial slaves mentioned above; yet these too are a good example of economic activity initiated by slaves, aimed at the accumulation of property.

However, no matter at what level slaves engaged in business, whether on their own initiative or as their master's agent, in order to increase their private property they required, at least in principle, their masters' permission to own property. Such property is usually referred to as their *peculium*, a term which is generally applied to possessions allowed to anyone who was under someone else's *potestas*, be they free or slave.⁶ An overall concern with private property held by anyone under another's *potestas* can be discerned from the significance given to it in the legal sources. The *Digest*, the collection commissioned by Justinian, reserves a whole chapter for the question of *peculium*, and one for the legacy of *peculium*.⁷ According to the Late Republican jurist Tubero, *peculium* was defined as the slave's property, kept in an account separate from the master's, with his or her explicit permission.⁸ While the *peculium* belonged legally to the master, it was *de facto* the property of the slave. It was not restricted to a certain type of property, but could consist of both land and movables, including other slaves.⁹ Moreover, the slave was allowed to increase the *peculium* through his or her own economic agency,¹⁰ which could, as we saw above, lead to enviable affluence and prosperity. *Peculium* was a legal concept that was socially sanctioned.

1 CIL VI 5197.

2 AE 1913. 50.

3 Suet., *Otho* 5.2.

4 Plin., *NH* 33.145.

5 Plut., *Cato* 21.7.

6 See W. W. Buckland, *The Roman law of slavery* (Cambridge 1908) 196-98, and W. v. Uxkull, "Peculium," in *RE* 19.1 (1937) 13-16. For a treatment of the development of the concept of *peculium* in Roman times, see I. Žeber, *A study of the peculium of a slave in pre-Classical and Classical Roman law* (Wrocław 1981) chapt. 3.

7 *Dig.* 15.1 and 33.8; cf. also 40.7.

8 *Dig.* 15.1.5.4; cf. also 15.1.4.2. The same holds true for *vicarii*: *Dig.* 15.1.4.6.

9 *Dig.* 15.1.7.4.

10 *Dig.* 15.1.27, 15.1.39, 15.1.40, 15.1.49.