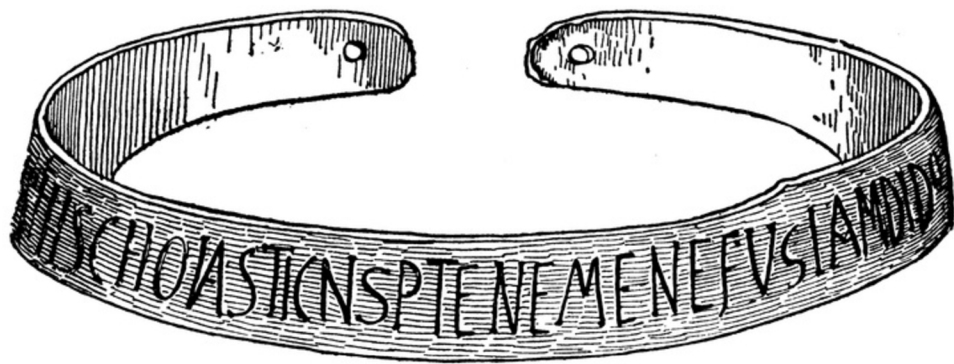


Slave Collars in Late Antiquity

Despite how large a part they played in ancient Roman society, enslaved people are very underrepresented in the material culture. One piece of physical evidence of the slave experience that emerges in late antiquity is slave collars.

Made of metal, these collars would have two small holes on either end of the band. When the collar was placed around someone's neck those holes would be overlapped and a rivet hammered through them, permanently sealing it onto the wearer.

There would either be an inscribed tag hanging from the collar or the collar itself would be inscribed.



Why?

Given the amount of slaves that were in Rome in this period, there are very few surviving examples of these slave collars, meaning not all slaves would have been wearing them. So what was their purpose?

In 315CE, the practice of tattooing the faces of criminals was outlawed by Constantine. It has been proposed that this ban was applied to fugitive slaves too and that these collars may have come into use as an alternative to the Roman practice of tattooing runaway slaves on the forehead.

The collars therefore were likely used as punishment after an escape attempt. They would also help slave owners retrieve their escaped slaves and make any escape attempts more difficult to achieve.



"I have run away; hold me. When you have brought me back to my master Zoninus, you will receive a gold coin."

Inscriptions

Almost every surviving slave collar has an inscription that requests the person reading it to stop the person wearing it from running away. Around half also ask that the reader return the enslaved person to their owner, providing a name and address so that they can do so.

Christian symbols, such as palm leaves and crosses, were common additions to the collars. This is reflective of the wider Christianisation of Rome occurring in this period.

Unlike the neck shackles used to chain slaves to each other or to a fixed object these collars did not physically restrain the wearer.

The collars were not tight enough to have restricted the wearer's breathing, they would however have likely rubbed up against the neck of the wearer constantly as they moved, causing discomfort and potentially leading to sores, cuts, and infection risk.

- 45 surviving examples
- All dated to 4th + 5th centuries CE
- Most collars made of bronze
- Most tags made of bronze, two made of bone
- Mostly found in Rome and central Italy
- Predominantly urban context
- Several collars found in funerary contexts



Slaves in the ancient world were often made to bear physical representations of their belonging to another person, whether that was scars from whippings, tattoos, brands, or these collars. While some people may have been relieved of their collars, for others they were a lifelong punishment and they went to their graves still wearing them.

Ultimately, slave collars served to express the control a master had over his slaves. However, their existence also attests to the fact that there were threats to that control and resistance from enslaved people.

Bibliography:

- British Museum (2024) tag. Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1975-0902-6, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1975-0902-6.
 Harper, K. (2011) Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 Kamen, D. (2010) 'A Corpus of Inscriptions: Representing Slave Marks in Antiquity', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 55, pp. 95–110.
 Museo Nazionale Romano–Terme di Diocleziano (2024) A Slave's Collar, Google Arts & Culture. Available at: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/a-slave-s-collar/fAEq1Q5jdQnujw>.
 Trimble, J. (2016) 'The Zoninus Collar and the Archaeology of Roman Slavery', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 120(3), pp. 447–472.
 Webster, H. (1913) *Ancient History*. Boston, MA: D.C. Heath & Co. https://etc.usf.edu/clipart/80200/80292/80292_collar.htm