

Adapted from the Khan Academy.

The origins of serfdom in Rome

Slavery was foundational to the Roman economy: enslaved people tilled the fields, cleaned homes, quarried—extracted—rocks and salt, and sometimes served as accountants for wealthy Romans. Enormous estates grew valuable crops like olives and grapes; these estates required many enslaved people to run.

The nearly fifty-year [Imperial Crisis](#) in the third century CE led to civil war, economic collapse, and a breakdown of trade across the Roman Empire. This meant a temporary end to long-distance trade of wine and olive oil. As imperial expansion slowed, fewer prisoners of war and kidnapped children were enslaved, and the elites who ran estate farms had to search elsewhere for low-cost labor. Without a centralized economy to lean on, the estates had to become self-sufficient, producing food and crafts without outside aid.

As city economies crumbled, lower-class plebeians from the city immigrated to the countryside and entered into a new kind of labor agreement with the landholders. Neither entirely enslaved nor truly free, these former city-dwellers were called *coloni*. *Coloni* were sharecropper farmers. They didn't own their land; they rented it from a landowner in exchange for a portion of the harvest produced in their fields. As this labor system emerged, Roman emperors created laws that bound the *coloni* to the land and made their status hereditary—it passed from parent to child. *Coloni* could marry, but they couldn't marry non-*coloni*. They could not leave the land to which they were assigned. They could not file suit against their landlords. This system, and these restrictions, would eventually become known as serfdom. Similar systems emerged independently throughout several different societies.

Serfdom in Western Europe

As Germanic peoples overtook the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century and beyond, many imperial institutions began to crumble. Competing powers and interests destroyed traditional trade routes between parts of the Roman Empire. Elites, whether through skill in combat or other political power, controlled the land and the people who lived on it. The Roman estate farms did not disappear, but the land changed hands and purposes. Landowners switched from growing grapes and olives for export to producing grain and animals for survival.

WESTERN EUROPE AND THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

Based on the serfdom reading, answer the processing questions below. Then, compare and contrast Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire either through a double bubble map or a Venn diagram.

Section 1: What factors led to Roman plebeians moving from the city to the countryside?

Section 2: Although serfs could technically own property, what were some restrictions on this rule?

Section 3: What was the relationship between serfs and lords, broadly? Why did lords need serfs?

Predict: like Islam in Africa and the Middle East, Christianity becomes the 'glue' that holds society together in Western Europe during this time. Why do you think that is?

What problems might arise as a result of the Catholic Church being the dominant force?

Based on your readings from today, your knowledge, and your textbook, create a double bubble map or Venn diagram that compares and contrasts Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire during the time period 600-1450. You must have at least four bullet points in each section.