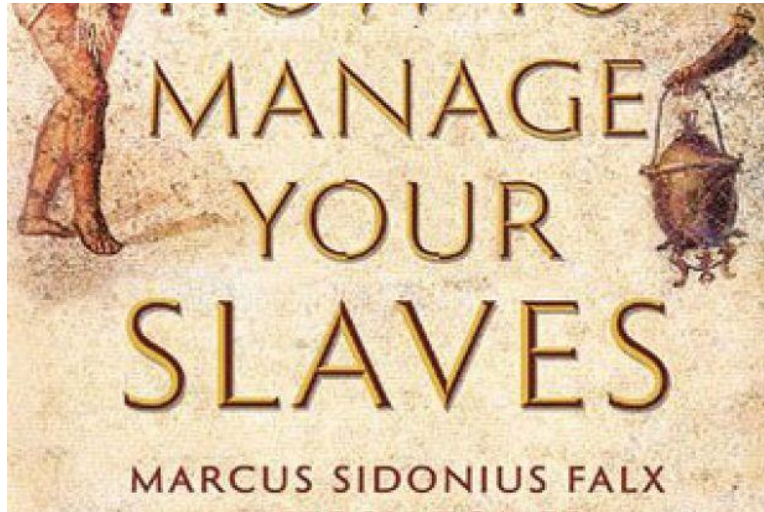


# How to Manage Your Slaves, by Marcus Sidonius Falx, with Jerry Toner

A light-hearted approach to a harrowing subject is illuminating and packs a punch, finds Tom Palaima

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No one will pick up *How to Manage Your Slaves* because they feel a need for the advice its true author Jerry Toner presents here as the avuncular views of one Marcus Sidonius Falx, a fictitious Roman of noble birth holding forth, most likely during Edward Gibbon's "golden age" of the Antonine emperors, on the right and wrong ways to acquire, own, use and live with slaves.

The topics that Toner has Falx meander through in 12 chapters – including "Be the master", "How to buy a slave", "Christians and their slaves", "When only torture will do" – are derived from wisdom-dispensing or philosophically musing letters, moral essays and practical handbooks of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, written by the likes of Pliny the Younger, Seneca the Younger, Dio Chrysostom and Columella. The sources extend back through Cato the Elder to include bits of still earlier Greek Stoic and Aristotelian thought. Toner offers a short informative commentary after each chapter. The contents of these reference-packed sections should have been included in the closing index.

By adding in a few data from ancient historical sources and inscriptions and from modern studies of the economic and social aspects of Greek and Roman slavery, Toner has put together an intellectual potpourri that will offend no one because its fragrance is slight and evanescent. As Mary Beard remarks in her foreword, Falx "is trying to help everyone share the benefits of his wisdom". This is, unfortunately, also a good formula for pleasing no one.

Although slavery as a social institution was ended in English-speaking countries through formal political acts in 1807, 1833 and 1865, conditions akin to slavery (Jim Crowism, apartheid, human trafficking, sex trafficking, de facto segregation in housing and employment, racially biased incarceration) are still with us. Douglas Blackmon's soul-shaking 2008 study *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* and the investigative journalism of Nicholas Kristof convey the horrors of what we now call human rights abuses.

But for Greek and Roman antiquity, few voices of actual or virtual slaves survive, and no educated free Greek or Roman citizen, to my knowledge, ever went "down and out" in Rome and Athens or lived as a slave on a Roman latifundium or in a major urban centre. The absence of the perspectives that might have been provided by an ancient George Orwell or John Howard Griffin in itself tells us how wide, deep and threatening the chasm between "slave" and "free" was in Marcus Sidonius Falx's culture. One word the Greeks used for slaves, *andrapoda*, is modelled on the word for livestock and literally means "human in their feet only".

The voice of Toner's fictitious slave owner conveys how natural, ingrained and all-controlling the prejudice used to justify slavery is. But Toner's book is written for light education and satirical amusement, and makes even gut-wrenching subjects suitable for dinner conversations. In the commentary to the chapter "Sex and slaves", he briefly discusses the impact on slaves of submitting to sexual abuse over long periods. Saying "modern studies find that victims of such abuse are left demoralized, deferential and unassertive" and such abuse "will have had a detrimental impact upon their psychological well-being" is truly saying the least that can be said.

Readers with a strong will to imagine what life must have been like on the receiving end of the practices of masters like Falx and worse types can make *How to Manage Your Slaves* complement more serious general works of social history, such as Robert Knapp's 2011 book *Invisible Romans*, that are also more sympathetic to the plight of the poor, powerless and pitifully unlucky.

## **How to Manage Your Slaves**

By Marcus Sidonius Falx, with Jerry Toner

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