

Gracchus and the Slave Army: A Subplot in Livy's Third Decade  
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In the aftermath of Cannae, faced with the need to enroll more soldiers in the army, the Romans respond to a shortage of free men with an experiment: they arm eight thousand slaves, who express a willingness to fight. Under the leadership of Gracchus, these volunteers win a brilliant victory over the Carthaginians at Beneventum, a victory which wins them their freedom; eventually, however, after Gracchus dies, the slave army disbands. Taken together, the different episodes which make up the story of the slave army explore two distinct themes: one, the psychology of slaves, and two, the role of Gracchus as a strong leader.

Livy's description of the slave army reveals that personal freedom, not loyalty to Rome, motivates the slaves to fight. At the beginning of the battle at Beneventum, Gracchus offers each slave his freedom, provided that he brings back the head of a fallen Carthaginian soldier to prove his courage in battle. Although this at first appears to be a sure means of evoking fierceness from the soldiers, nevertheless the strategy Gracchus uses turns out to impede the Romans' progress in battle. The problem is that the soldiers are so enthusiastic about capturing enemy heads that they disperse their energies; by focusing on dismembering corpses, they lose the opportunity of fighting their enemy. Livy's image of slave-soldiers unable to carry weapons because they are carrying heads illustrates that the slaves' desire for freedom causes them to forget the larger goal of the battle.

Livy highlights the leadership of Gracchus in the Beneventum episode, by having Gracchus give three orders that result in a Roman victory. After the motivation of freedom in return for heads proves detrimental, Gracchus promises the soldiers freedom if they will drop their heads and fight. Later, at a critical point in the battle, he promises that only total defeat of the enemy will win the slaves their freedom. In all cases, the soldiers obey their commander's order to fight bravely, demonstrating that Gracchus is a capable leader, one who can balance his soldiers' wishes with the good of Rome. The slave-soldiers, in turn, respond to Gracchus with affection and loyalty. However, their abandonment of the Roman cause shows that, despite their freedom, the former slaves have not developed a love of their country. This paper argues that Livy uses the story of the slave army to emphasize the failure of the attempt to make citizens out of slaves. The slaves are only capable of understanding freedom in personal terms; they cannot relate their personal freedom to the freedom of Rome. Their loyalty to Gracchus proves to be no substitute for loyalty to their country.