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Foreign Citizens:
Freedmen, Identity, and Cultural Belonging in the Early Empire

Hayley Steptoe

The beginning of the Roman empire saw its citizens' identities shaken and reformed. Under Augustus, Rome matured into the leading city of the Mediterranean, class lines between citizens hardened, and political authority consolidated at the very top of society, sapping the power of the senatorial class. Freed slaves, or *liberti*, who were both Romans and outsiders, had to position themselves within the new ideological scheme of what constituted Romanness. From the existing evidence, we can reconstruct two major parts of the discourse about freedmen's Roman identity during the early empire. In this essay, I argue that while the old Roman elites treated freedmen as tasteless, unnatural pretenders to power, the freedmen emphasized their cultural belongingness and societal value.

To reconstruct this discourse, we must first examine the social and legal status of freedmen, and how that status made them a natural subject for the debate over identity in the early empire. Freeborn Romans, freedmen, and slaves defined themselves and each other by how they stood in relation to each other. The greatest outrage to a freeborn Roman was an act that denied his individual power, dignity, and status as "free," such as being flogged.¹ Meanwhile, the subservience of slaves was tied in with their nature as "alien" and their lack of identity: they had no legal family status outside their position as

¹ Sandra Joshel, *Work, Identity, and Legal Status at Rome: A Study of the Occupational Inscriptions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 27.

their masters' property, and they lost their ethnic identities when they entered slavery.² Freedmen were in-between. While technically Roman citizens, with legal rights, they kept vestiges of their pasts as slaves. Their identity, nominally and culturally, was Roman, but they were "expected to show gratitude" to their ex-masters for freeing them,³ and they were often legally bound to continue to share the products of their labor with their patrons. It was not illegal for an ex-master to use "harsh words" or administer "a light beating" to his freedman.⁴

The time frame of the early empire is particularly useful for examining the cultural identity of freedmen because new legislation was redefining that identity. Augustus's manumission laws, the *leges Aelia Sentia* and *Fufia Caninia*, helped ensure that Rome was not swamped by a flood of foreign-born ex-slaves. They restricted the circumstances under which a master could free a slave, and the total number that he or she could free. For instance, the slave must be at least 30 years old, except in special situations, such as if the master wished to adopt the slave as his heir, assuming he had no other heir. The actual process of manumission would have to be done by the book, often with the consent of a council of senators and equestrians or local justices.⁵ Otherwise, the slave would not become a full citizen, but rather a Junian Latin, one who had some rights of citizenship but could not create or inherit from wills. Not only did Augustus's laws restrict the numbers of freedmen in Rome, but they also made sure that they were assimilable. To be good freedmen citizens, they had to have first been good slaves. Slaves who had been found guilty of crimes, whose masters had imprisoned them, or who

² Joshel, 29.

³ Joshel, 33.

⁴ Joshel, 34.

⁵ Thomas Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (London: Routledge, 1981), 24.

had served as gladiators were never allowed to become citizens or even Junian Latins. These ex-slaves had the status of subjects of the empire, the lowest type of freedom available, which gave them the same rights and status as those of Rome's conquered enemies.⁶ They were not even allowed to come within 100 miles of the city of Rome, under penalty of re-enslavement.⁷ These laws show that Augustus intended citizen freedmen to assimilate into Roman culture rather than overwhelm it, and that the legal status of freedmen was formulated with the debate over Romanness in mind.

However, not everyone wanted to welcome these new citizens with open arms, and chief among the dissenting Romans were the elites. As a highly socially mobile segment of society during a period of tightening class lines, freedmen faced an uphill struggle against aristocratic resentment and elite ideas that depicted powerful, wealthy freedmen as uncouth, foreign upstarts.

The advent of empire took power from the hands of the elite and refocused it in those of Augustus. In the resulting system, boundaries between classes were tightened, particularly those restricting entry into the senatorial class. That way, the nominal dignity of the elites could be maintained, even as their actual political power was restricted. For example, Augustus created laws to prevent senators from marrying outside their class, and he pared down the Senate to get rid of "unworthy" members who opposed him politically, couching their dismissal in terms of their being "a low-born and ill-assorted rabble" that even included freedmen.⁸ According to Phyllis Culham, "Augustus' establishment of the principate and his subsequent administrative and legislative

⁶ Wiedemann, 24.

⁷ Emma Dench, *Romulus' Asylum: Roman Identities from the Age of Alexander to the Age of Hadrian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 141.

⁸ Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 35, trans. J.C. Rolfe, in Ronald Mellor, *Augustus and the Creation of the Roman Empire: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006), 104.

measures... ‘crystallized’ status, in modern sociological terms; first, by sharpening status distinctions and rendering them visible, and second, by attempting to create a situation in which different indicators of status (wealth, noble birth, political rank) rendered more closely matching results.” Culham’s argument focuses on the ways that Augustan class restrictions played out in the lives of elite women, but her points drive at a wider pattern of tightened requirements for elite class identity.⁹ The restrictions revolved around making the “political elite [appear] worthy of respect,” not bestowing particular powers upon those few people.¹⁰

The most remarkably socially mobile group during this period, with low legal standing but the potential for high levels of wealth and power, was the freedmen. And of those freedmen, the best example for the status dissonance between birth and social achievement can be found in the imperial household, the *familia Caesaris*. As such, P. R.C. Weaver states, the imperial freedmen were “one of the most notably ‘unstable’ elements in imperial society.”¹¹ These freedmen became integrated into the bureaucracy, filling skilled and essential positions, through an administrative *cursus* that gave many of them not just vast amounts of money, but also the ear of the emperor himself. This new bureaucracy, comprised not only of trusted freedmen but also of promising equestrians, acted as a check on the powers of the senatorial class. “By reorganizing a second order within the upper class, dependent on himself for professional advancement and

⁹ Phyllis Culham, “Did Roman Women Have an Empire?” M. Golden and P. Toohey, eds., *Inventing Ancient Culture: Historicism, Periodization and the Ancient World* (London: Routledge, 1996), 196.

¹⁰ Culham, 197.

¹¹ P.R.C. Weaver, “Social Mobility in the Early Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Imperial Freedmen and Slaves.” *Past and Present* 37 (1967): 3-20, 5.

patronage,” Weaver says, “the emperor was creating a source of power on which he could rely in the institutional tug-of-war between himself and the senatorial aristocracy.”¹²

Although the *familia Caesaris* comprised only a small fraction of all freedmen, this did not stop elites from chafing under the weight of a slave-born bureaucracy with more real power than they themselves had, and then directing that resentment towards wealthy freedmen in general. Tacitus saw the imperial freedmen as “one of the most hateful and degrading aspects of the Principate.”¹³ He wrote, without a trace of irony:

Freedmen are not of much higher status than slaves, they seldom have much influence in the household, and never in the state, with the exception of course of those peoples who are under a monarchical form of government. In these cases freedmen rise above both those of free and those of aristocratic birth. But amongst other peoples, the lower status of freedmen is a sure sign of freedom.¹⁴

His is just one of several elite literary voices expressing a similar distaste of ex-slaves, particularly in positions of wealth or power that, under a “free” government (that is to say, a republic), would be reserved for the aristocracy.

Elites complained about upstart freedmen not only in histories of the imperial household, but in fiction as well. In fact, the most famous, obvious example of a freedman under the early empire is not a real person at all. It is the character of Trimalchio from Petronius’ *Satyricon*, an uncouth, tasteless braggart whose money has allowed him to rise within the ranks of society, but who is only a laughable pretender to true *Romanitas*, or Romanness. Scholars have been prone to seeing Trimalchio as an exemplar for actual freedmen, a view that is problematic given Petronius’ agenda. Lauren Petersen has criticized this trend, calling a dependence on elite sources for information on

¹² Weaver, 16.

¹³ Weaver, 14.

¹⁴ *Germania* 25, quoted in Weaver, 14.

liberti “Trimalchio Vision.”¹⁵ In reality, the *Satyricon* sheds more light on how Petronius and other elites viewed wealthy freedmen than on how these freedmen actually behaved: we can use it as evidence for the aristocrats’ part of the discourse on freedmen, but it has the same bias as Tacitus’ accounts.

Petronius emphasizes how all of Trimalchio’s attempts to seem like the ultimate Roman are exaggerated to the point of hilarity and end in failure. In doing so, his message is that no matter how rich a freedman may become, he will still be a foreigner, unworthy of the status and power previously afforded only to members of the senatorial class. By making Trimalchio use a tacky overreliance on Roman mythology to tell his rags-to-riches, slave-to-free story, Petronius shows us just how silly it is to think that Mercury and the Three Fates would have blessed this character (*Satyricon* 29).¹⁶

Trimalchio tries to express his inclusion in Roman high society through the use of a senatorially-striped napkin and faux gold rings, which don’t fool anyone and indeed cause his dinner guests to laugh (32). His lack of credentials as a deserving member of the Roman elite is perhaps most strongly exposed by his subservience to his wife:

“She’s on top of the world, somehow or other—she’s Trimalchio’s all or nothing. Anyway, if it was high noon and she told him it was midnight, he’d believe her...That whore takes care of everything, she’s everywhere—you wouldn’t believe it...you can see where all this gold comes from” (37).

The rise of freedmen like Trimalchio, says Petronius, comes at the expense of fine, upstanding native Romans who have lost their rightly deserved fortunes. One of the guests at the dinner talks about such a Roman, saying, “I bet he’s mortgaged his own hair. There’s no better man than him, but some asshole freedmen took over everything” (38).

¹⁵ Lauren Petersen, *The Freedman in Roman Art and Art History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10.

¹⁶ Trans. Sarah Ruden, *Petronius: Satyricon* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 19.

Elites like Tacitus and Petronius were, in a sense, writing about freedmen only nominally. Aristocrats saw their recent loss of political power embodied and exemplified by *liberti*, so they used this swath of Roman society to symbolize this loss, rather than writing about *liberti* as real people. Nevertheless, the nature of discourse is that a writer's agenda and intentions do not necessarily influence a reader's interpretation. Although elites wrote about freedmen as scapegoats and symbols of their disenfranchisement, the argument that freedmen were un-Roman entered the discourse through their writings. However, the cranky elites were not the only ones who got a say in whether freedmen were Roman enough. The freedmen were by no means silent.

The way in which these freedmen portrayed their own *Romanitas* is completely different from the elite viewpoint. We cannot rely on our "Trimalchio Vision" to discern their side of the debate. Moreover, freedmen did not publish any literary works—at least none that survive—as odes to or arguments for their own belongingness in their adoptive society. Sandra Joshel and Lauren Petersen have found a way to listen to the voices of the *liberti* even so. These scholars use evidence from their memorials and tombs to extrapolate the self-image they projected into Roman society. This evidence shows how, by identifying themselves as citizens through their occupations or by acting as priests of Augustus, freedmen integrated themselves into Roman society and claimed their identity as citizens.

In *Work, Identity, and Legal Status at Rome*, Sandra Joshel examines epitaphs that reference their owners' occupation. She finds that it was far more common for slaves and freedmen to list their occupational title along with their name than it was for the freeborn. By looking at who actually did that listing, and finding that the masters rarely dedicated

these occupational epitaphs, she concludes that “the large proportion of slaves who used occupational title reflects the perspective of the slave, not the master.”¹⁷ This presents a question: why would slaves and ex-slaves want to identify with their work, the very instrument of their oppression? To understand this, Joshel turns to Hegel’s famous master-slave argument. “Through work,” says Hegel, “the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is.”¹⁸ The particularity of the work, such as “door-keeper” or “jeweler,” gave the slaves the only identities they were allowed in this system, since their families and personal histories were unacknowledged by Roman law and culture. The good freedman, likewise, is “equated with the good worker” in these epitaphs,¹⁹ especially since freedmen often continued to work for their former masters. Also, by using an occupational title, a freedman could state his new value for Roman society and draw attention away from those qualities that marginalized him as an outsider and foreigner.

Particularly influential, wealthy *liberti* often gained visible positions as community leaders and agents of Augustus through membership in the emperor’s priesthood. These priests, the *Augustales*, were usually wealthy freedmen,²⁰ and this was such a common position that it found its way into the Trimalchio stereotype itself. Indeed, it was an ideal vehicle for freedmen in cities other than Rome to be seen as not simply Romans, but as exemplars of those values that typically marked the elite. Their position, at once religious and municipal, was “not subordinate to the ruling elite” in the cities they served, but they were selected for membership by the town council.²¹ Like the ordinary

¹⁷ Joshel, 50.

¹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1807] 1977), 118, quoted in Joshel, 54.

¹⁹ Joshel, 57.

²⁰ Petersen, 58.

²¹ Petersen, 59.

working-class freedmen Joshel examines, the *Augustales* declared their Roman identity on their sepulchral inscriptions and monuments.²² The marker of their belongingness was not their work, but rather, the gifts they dedicated to their cities in their role as *Augustales*.²³ Priests such as Calventius Quietus and Munatius Faustus in Pompeii integrated their tombs “with other tombs of office-holding individuals,” and “claimed their place in Pompeian politics legitimately.”²⁴ Faustus, in particular, has two funerary monuments, which proclaim the public honors he received for his generosity to the city. This generosity showed that a socially mobile freedman could give back to his adoptive empire the same way the freeborn elite could.

Within the city of Rome itself, this official function for freedmen was mirrored in the position of the *vico magistri*, managers of neighborhoods. Like the *Augustales*, the *magistri* had religious duties cementing the cult of Augustus within local worship,²⁵ but they also managed water supply and fire protection and served as administrative units.²⁶ Again, a majority of these were freedmen. These officers may have been less wealthy than the *Augustales*, since the gifts they bestowed upon their neighborhoods were not opulent, and the imperial freedmen did not become *magistri*.²⁷ Nevertheless, the office was another opportunity for ex-slaves to assert their usefulness, generosity, piety, and belongingness to the city which had just granted them citizenship.

The evidence from tombs of workers, imperial priests, and neighborhood officials does not directly contradict the elite bias against freedmen. Although they proclaim their

²² Petersen, 61.

²³ Petersen, 62.

²⁴ Petersen, 69.

²⁵ John Bert Lott, *The Neighborhoods of Augustan Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101.

²⁶ Lott, 100.

²⁷ Lott, 97.

freedmen owners' cultural belonging and societal value, they do not enter into dialogue with the elite viewpoint, meeting argument with argument. The occupational inscriptions, for example, were not designed to refute the elements of the Trimalchio stereotype. It is difficult to conclude that the tombs of freedmen were built with such arguments in mind. However, there is one surviving poem that does enter into dialogue with elite literary works like the *Satyricon*, and that is *Silvae* 2.1 by Statius. Written soon after the *Satyricon*, this poem confronts the idea that a freed slave cannot be truly Roman. Instead, it presents the argument that *Romanitas* comes from cultural competence, which a *libertus* can attain, rather than free birth, which he cannot. The poem is a eulogy for the adopted son of a wealthy man, Atedius Melior, who was a friend of Statius. This boy, Glaucias, was born a slave in Melior's household, but was freed at a young age and raised as if he had been Melior's own. Throughout the poem, Statius goes to exhaustive lengths to prove to the audience that their relationship was as close and as natural as that of a biological father and son, and that Glaucias would have been a fitting heir to his wealthy Roman father.

The two most relevant ways in which Statius proves this point are through the use of mythological figures and through emphasizing how well Glaucias measured up to Roman values. There are several points at which Statius lets loose with a flood of mythological references to show how similar Glaucias is to, for example, Achilles (line 88), Palaemon (180), and even Romulus (100).²⁸ By invoking these characters so often, Statius makes Glaucias as firmly a part of elite Greco-Roman culture as the canonical heroes he cites. (After all, Cicero claimed that elite Roman literature was just like its Greek counterpart, but with a certain "urbanity" to it which he could not pin down

²⁸ Trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, *Statius: Silvae* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

further.)²⁹ The entire poem is filled with extreme pathos, showing that although Melior and Glaucias were not blood relatives, they were every bit as much the model of a good Roman father and son as anyone else. Although Glaucias was a slave at birth, he showed promise in cultural studies that marked him as an educated Roman, such as declamation: “[when he declaimed] the old Maeonian and Troy’s labors or the adventures of laggard Ulysses, even his papa, even his teachers fell amazed at his intuition” (117-119).

Although Statius himself was not a freedman, neither was he a true Roman. He was born in Naples to a non-elite family, probably not even an equestrian one.³⁰ His works “provide a new view of cultural identity in which virtue, rather than high birth, is central to nobility...[they promote] relatively obscure people on the basis of virtue, learning, and wealth, rather than on birth.”³¹ Therefore, it is a natural part of Statius’ program that Glaucias be considered Roman, despite his birth as a slave. This program was designed to contradict previous elite opinions about the importance of birth. Since Statius was a favorite poet of the emperor Domitian, Statius must have been writing for an audience that had already read literature like the *Satyricon*. Therefore, *Silvae* 2.1 and the *Satyricon* are our clearest example of the discourse between those who said freedmen were alien to Rome and those who argued for their belonging.

When we examine the way the question of freedmen’s *Romanitas* played out in the minds of elite Romans and of wealthy and working-class freedmen, we discover a clear cultural debate over the identity of these people. Elites like Petronius and Tacitus, who resented their loss of power and saw it going into the hands of people who were

²⁹ Dench, 299.

³⁰ Carole E. Newlands, *Statius’ Silvae and the Poetics of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 30.

³¹ Newlands, 29.

neither properly Roman nor properly free, worked against freedmen who claimed their value as and right to be Roman citizens. Although this essay has only examined the discourse over the first hundred years of empire, further research could show whether this dynamic continued as the mechanisms of power between emperor and elites altered, or as Rome's changing relationship with its subjects affected how conquered peoples assimilated into its society. We may one day discover, too, archaeological evidence that shows how non-elite Romans viewed freedmen, or how non-wealthy freedmen viewed themselves, which would allow us to see this discourse with greater accuracy: the current evidence draws heavily from the viewpoints of those who could afford to create works of literature or inscribe large monuments. Nevertheless, for all our unanswered questions, we can see this conflict between alienation and belonging as one of the ways by which Romans navigated the changes in their government, in their city, and in their world.

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